

# Ila's Quest for Happiness: Use of Romantic Journey Motif in The Lunchbox

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The theme of journey being a signature mark of Romanticism has quietly been used in films. Journey to some exotic locale has always been considered as an added advantage to the fundamental narrative of a film. But in some cases the development of film itself is guided by the theme of journey. The debut feature film by Ritesh Batra, *The Lunchbox* bears Ila's thorough planning to undertake a journey to Bhutan as she finds in her daughter's school-book that Bhutan has been placed in the first position in the world concerning the Domestic Happiness Quotient, determined by UNESCO. It is a desperate attempt on her part to get involved in a quest for happiness by selling out all the jewellery she had. She was even ready to sell her 'mangal-sutra' a symbol

of marriage. It brings out the desperation behind her quest for happiness. *The Lunchbox* is having a kind of inherent romance which is not only apparent in the development of a virtual relationship between Mr. Saajan Fernandez, a widowed government official, on the verge of retirement and Ila, a young housewife, whose husband is involved in an extra-marital affair, but is also extended all over the city of Mumbai, observed through the gaze of a common man, travelling in local trains along with a huge number of lunchboxes (*dubbba*s) which travel long ways under the efficient guidance of the *dubbba*walas<sup>1</sup>. But an accidental lapse in spite of their expertise leads a *dubbba* to a wrong person, who gradually appropriates the position of the right one. The binary between right and wrong, projected in the repeatedly used speech within the film, “Sometimes a wrong train even leads to a right destination” unfolds an altogether different dimension.

Ila vigorously attempts to have an entry into her husband’s heart through his stomach with the help of the advices of the unseen Aunty who stays at the flat upstairs. This vain endeavour brings out her helplessness as her conjugal relationship is beyond her control. The crisis becomes all the more apparent as she discusses the matter with Saajan, accidentally who gets the lunchbox prepared for her husband. Batra has also presented an ailing father, suffering from cancer, a distressed mother and the memory of

a younger brother who had committed suicide, to project Ila's helplessness acutely.

Ila's helplessness reaches its ultimate height. But the recollection of that journey ultimately fails to bring back her marital life to the right track. The only request placed by her husband is not to send cauliflower curry every day, as it causes indigestion. Ila's husband refers to the lunchbox meant for Saajan but wrongly delivered to him. This wrong delivery acquires an added air of significance as it leads towards the failure of Ila's attempt to reach his heart. It is a wrong delivery by the dubbawala, but it reaches the right person, with whom Ila develops a companionship through the notes, written on napkins placed within the dubba. It brings back the flavour of epistolary communication quite credibly in this age of online chats and electronic messaging. Ila's initial desire being to re-establish emotional communication with her husband takes a wrong turn but rightly establishes one with Saajan, who gradually comes out of the mask of harshness, he had always put on since his wife's death.

The exchange of notes with Ila gradually turns into an emotional bonding and Saajan's warmth for Shaikh increases to the level of guardianship both in public and in private life. Shaikh has a journey of his own and that too consists of the binary between elopement and marriage. However, the marriage of Shaikh was finally arranged with due approval of the father of the bride. This journey is juxtaposed with the

journey of Saajan from the solitary balcony of his Bandra Cottage to the small flat of Sheikh, sharing the warmth of the success of their conjugal relationship and watching the photographs of Shaikh's marriage. The immediate reaction of this sharing brings out the binary between his previous stance as a wronged one having a smoke in the lonesome balcony with a peeping glance at the neighbouring dining table and the smile as a guardian of Shaikh in the photograph.

The theme of journey initially connects the wrong train and the right destination through a speech by Shaikh while standing in a crowded local train. He, here brings in a fictitious mother although he is an orphan. Being asked about it, he clarifies to Saajan that this construction of a fictitious mother brings him a sense of pleasure. Again we can trace a genuine feeling emerging with a factually wrong statement. Hence it adds a lot to the right-wrong binary. Saajan approves the feelings of Shaikh on the next day during lunch and offers Shaikh a large share of his meal prepared by Ila. The expression of Shaikh's fictitious mother can be traced in the final letter of Ila to Saajan only with the difference that it was not told to her and she had read it somewhere. The last letter, Ila writes to Saajan brings out the final form of journey in Batra's film as she confirms her journey to Bhutan along with her daughter. She arranged it by selling all her ornaments, including 'mangal-sutra'. She is completely devoid of any specific hope for future and is entirely dependent on the

information found in her daughter's school-book that the gross domestic happiness is the highest in Bhutan.

This journey is contrasted with Saajan's journey to Nasik after retirement. He, however, ultimately fails to undertake this journey and we are not sure what happens to Ila. She previously had a journey along with her daughter in quest for Saajan to his office and finds Shaikh in his place. Hence the aim of her journey remains unfulfilled and the film ends with Saajan's journey with the *dubbawalas* in a local train in search of Ila. Batra here clarifies the wrong delivery by the dubbawalas. It was caused by a wrongly placed address. So it remains covered with mist if Saajan becomes able to reach the right destination, Ila through that track he chose almost by the end of the film. It was then not only limited within the binary of track and destination. Time became immensely important as he had to reach Ila before her journey to Bhutan. Ila's prolonged wait for Saajan in a restaurant is the actual starting point of this journey. In spite of sitting in another corner, Saajan fails to face her as she is much younger and his age is no match with hers. He previously returns to the bathroom before coming out of his cottage for having a second look of himself and the smell he finds in the bathroom resembles that of his grandfather, experienced by him in childhood. This realisation of his age arouses a question of right and wrong and he fails in bridging the gap of a few yards in that restaurant.

Sajaan's psychological journey turns him into a 'nomad' to 'nowhere'(Ghose 138). I am failing to restrict myself from quoting Babbit in this context, "Actual vagabondage seemed to be an aid to the imagination in its escape from verisimilitude. One should note especially Rousseau's account of his early wandering from Lyons to Paris ..." (Babbit 75). The way Sajaan fails to travel the few yards of distance, he had with Ila in the restaurant does clearly establish my argument regarding his identification with 'nowhere' as is quite commonly traced among the romantics. In this context I would like to refer to a few lines by Nietzsche, "Where is my home? Thus ask I and seek and have sought: this have I found not. Oh, eternal Everywhere! Oh, eternal Nowhere! Oh, eternal Vain! 'The Shadow'"(Tille 242). And Baudelaire,

"And man, drunk of a shade that flies,

His punishment forever bears

For never learning to sit quiet" (MacIntyre  
133).

Sajaan thus bears one of the fundamental trends of romanticism, in my opinion best expressed, through the phrase, "nomad to nowhere" suggesting a plexus of meaning-ranging from 'lost travellers' to the longing for the beyond (Ghose 138). Maud Bodkin, treading in the footsteps of Jung, has studied this archetypal image under the aspect of 'the

night journey' as a symbolic projection of the mental states that Jung calls 'progression and regression' (Bodkin 36-38). This sequence constitutes the rebirth archetype, also manifest in dreams and in the vegetation god. While analyzing the "Ancient Mariner" (1798) especially the rebirth archetype in it Bodkin finds a kind of resemblance among voyage, dream and myth. But film-narratives need not be myths nor dreams, although they often provide us with a pattern of a literary theme. The problems of myth and dream lie outside the domain of film studies, and for the function of myth in the primitive community we should better go the philosopher, rather the cultural anthropologist. My concern, however, is with the theme of the romantic voyage in quest for happiness in *The Lunchbox*. I therefore propose to examine it as a longing for the beyond both in case of Saajan and Ila.

The longing for the beyond is an old theme, not unknown to the wandering minstrels like the Sufis, Troubadours and the Bauls<sup>2</sup> whom the love of God had rendered 'homeless'. The history of romantic literature rings with this nostalgic tremor on the trajectories of mysticism. The notion of a mystic communion with the infinite is not the romantic's second nature, but her first. Blake asserts, "I assert for my Self that I do not behold the outward Creation and that to me it is a hindrance and not Action ... I Question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question

a Window concerning a Sight. I took through it and not with it".  
(Keynes 617)

Hence this romantic motif is actually hinting at a journey within the Self, just as the journey of Saajan in *The Lunchbox*. The letters he sent with the lunchbox bring out the "Window concerning a Sight", exhibiting a definite inclination towards a mystic communion with the infinite romantic ideal. It gradually attains a corporeal frame and it is only observed by Saajan from a distance as he finds himself incapable to cover it by a further journey. This incapability can be clarified in further detail by the age difference between him and Ila. Saajan's failure to proceed a few yards in the restaurant is actually caused by the event in the bathroom as it made him realise his age. Batra, here brings out a kind of communion, rather confrontation, between a temporal journey and a spatial one, a journey of realisation of age and a journey of few yards in the restaurant. Interchanges between the Self and the Other are attributed with an added level of significance through a kind of mutual reception between the vision of the interior and that of the exterior.

This mutual reception unfolds an important side of the Romantic longing for the Infinite. Rabindranath calls it the 'infinite longing' and makes a Bergsonian metaphysics out of this in *The Religion of Man* (1931). In the text he defines human life as "the ceaseless adventure to the Endless Further" (Tagore 379). This is so much more true of his poems



and songs; for there, the note recurs as an intuitive element without the uneasy rhetoric of the metaphysics. Chateaubriand strikes the same note in his *Rene*: “Alas! I am seeking I know not what, but the urge to seek does not leave me. Is it my fault if I come up against limits everywhere and if the finite is worthless to me?” (Furst 328)

The final confession of Saajan towards the end of the movie does definitely bring out almost similar expressions. In this context references may also be made to Novalis's mysterious inner journey,

“We dream of journeys through the universe: is not the whole universe within us ... It is inwards that the mysterious path leads. Within ourselves, or nowhere, is eternity to be found with its worlds, both past and future. The outer world is a world of shadows, it throws its shadow into the realm of light”. (Furst 328)

Though it is not the conventional view, A. W. Schlegel links this notion of having journey within the Self in Christianity, “In Christianity everything has been reversed: the contemplation of the infinite has destroyed the finite; life has become a world of shadows and of darkness, and only yonder does the eternal day of true being dawn”. (Furst 117)

Schlegel's idea of life can explain the case of Saajan Fernandez perfectly. In this context it is necessary to examine

the Romantic's "eternal urge and unceasing exertion" a little more closely. According to T. E. Hulme the root of all romanticisms lies in the idea or image of man as an "infinite reservoir of possibilities". He maintains: "The view which regards man as a well, a reservoir full of possibilities, I call the romantic, the one which regards him as a very finite and fixed creature, I call classical" (Read 117). Less patient than Hulme, Babbit dismisses Bergson's thesis that "life is a perpetual gushing forth of novelties" as a dangerous half-truth (Babbit 75). The source of restlessness and melancholy, while a mystery to the victim, has been traced to the romantic's exclusive preoccupation with his self.

Evidently, a good deal of classicist objections against certain Romantic motifs, e.g. voyage, is a Christian strategy for non-Christian purposes. But the strategy itself may not be Christian enough. The Schlegels are known to have equated the Romantic with Christian, and the subsequent history of ideas, running through Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard to the modern existential philosophers, have tilted heavily on Romanticism. In fact, Christianity as it is popularly practised has never denied the space of mystery and longing for the beyond in its scheme. What is in question, therefore, is not the pertinence of the longing, but its character. Not exactly in the manner of a mystic, the romantics are also amorous of the beyond; but they play secular variations on ancient devotional patterns. C. M. Bowra brings out the distinction thus, "the fact

is that the Romantics are concerned with a mystery which belongs not to faith but to the imagination” (Bowra 282). The perennial longing of the Romantics for journey operates on multiple levels. It is a longing for a liveable world, which “the soul remembers from its actual childhood ” or from that vision of the Golden Age, “so deeply rooted in our ineradicable instinct for bliss” (Bowra 282).

On another level, the longing for a happy world is a reflection on failure or frustration in the present life; one regrets only out of absence, even out of *ennui*. It leads back to the freedom of our origin. It opens the road to salvation, either into the future, or backwards, into the past through the imagination. Thomas Mann has stated that the Romantic vision may also be considered as an outcome of incomplete membership of any social group. Tonio Kroger’s restlessness is a case in point, and so perhaps is Rabindranath’s description of himself as an outcast (Tagore 118). In a lesser artist, however, longing degenerates into regression and a flight from responsibility just in the way Saajan avoids the responsibility in the initial part of the movie. At this juncture, we find Batra coming up with another dimension of the theme of journey with the character of Shaikh, most attractively played by Nawazuddin Siddiqui. Shaikh being poised to take over the official charge from Saajan, is initially being avoided and cracked harsh jokes on. His change is to some extent sudden and is apparent towards the end of the movie.

Romantic journey motif is not without its ontology. To describe it merely as “a system of multiple longings” smacks of an unjustified simplification. A. O. Lovejoy has shown how Kant gives a metaphysical ballast to the notion of the ‘Ideal capable’ in his ethical system. By implication, the notion of Lovejoy sanctions a passion for infinity. The whole enterprise is related to what James Murdock describes as the rationale of post Kantian philosophy (Feidelson 93-94). This has become so much a part of modern sensibility that “complete absence of nostalgia in a modern artist”, says D.W. Harding, “is suspect, suggesting complacent fellowship with the main commercial group ... or too little questioning and teasing of the tradition” (Harding 12). In this context I would like to relate it to the idea of the Christian saints, who have always related the idea of the beyond to the quest for immortality and spiritual grace. Translated into secular terms, the quest survives as a search for utopia either in time or in space. One of the consequences of such secularization is that a static vision of eternity becomes involved in a powerful drive towards perfection in history. This implies an absolute faith in future. This faith is taken to mean more of a metaphor of secular grace than a valid promise. One of the favourite variations of this metaphor with the Romantics is their ambivalent tendency towards the “prophetic past” or “remembering forwards” the land of heart’s desire (Harding 12).

The idyll, by definition, cannot have a definite locus in history. Nevertheless, Schiller gives it the status of a genre when he considers idyll as one of the three major categories of sentimental poetry, the other two being satire and elegy (Murdock 168). The dream of Arcadia plays an overriding role in Romantic nature poetry. Although Arcadia lacks any precise locus, it is conceived as stasis. Longing determines its lineaments, and rational planning about its future would be a vulgarity. It has also a population, a special type, tending towards the higher man.

A more complex structure of secular grace involving the concept of the New Hero as part of the utopia is quite significant. Saajan in *The Lunchbox* attempts to fit himself in this position. In this context the myth of grace works as a stage of the movement of an imperfect spirit towards perfection. To triumph over the shortcomings of the city of man, which is to replace Augustine's City of God, Romantics speculate upon the possibility of an immortal being (Murdock 168). But this possibility requires a tremendous faith in history. Eternity must become absorbed in a temporal, natural and historical sequence. The advent of the saviour would be one natural corollary of the utopian vision. But the saviour must enter history and act in it for a new world. The long and painful historical process of her advent is more important in the scheme than longing for an alienated unmediated vision. The romantics deal with the issue with a reverse emphasis

which is apparent in Yeats's depiction of the "Second Coming" (1920) in terms of magic and mythology. Yet "The Second Coming" lacks historical advantage as it unfolds a prominent futuristic proposition. Yeats predicts a sequence of events in the natural world and this world of history. In his later poems, especially in most of the poems of *The Tower* (1928) Yeats's dealings with the historical time have been far from happy. He sees complexity, turbulence and change as the entelechy of history; and these are the very categories which, he feels, either magic or pure imagination manage to elude. The prophetic authority of "The Second Coming", therefore, stems from a mixture of private myth and romantic longing.

William Barrett finds a parallel of Nietzsche's Superman in Faust of the second part of Goethe's poem (Barrett 190). Nietzsche's Superman has more of a coherent system when placed within the German or Prussian cultural context and is not ahistorical. In this scheme of things, we find the concept of a striving individual dwelling on the mountain-top of the spirit alternates with an ancient and vaguely pagan ideal of a joyous, guiltless, free human being in possession of instincts. But at the same time it bears an inherent contradiction and the source of the contradiction lies in the Romantic longing for journey beyond harsh reality. The vision of secular immortality in the Romantic imagination assumes qualities of remoteness, inaccessibility and unreality that have characterized the quest for happiness and spiritual

grace from the beginning. The search turns into longing and expectation. This Romantic faith in utopia or in the Superman is evidently a form of journey across unfamiliar terrain to an uncertain destination. Confronted by history as happenings, the Romantics shift their emphasis suitably upon the expectation of a secular perfection. Saajan behaves in the same way and attempts to fabricate his expectations from life with similar perfection bearing profound influence of the newly formed family of Shaikh, the junior colleague.

The Romantics are more at home in the world of imagination which Coleridge defines as the highest form of self consciousness. It is not “a kind of being, but a kind of knowing, and that too the highest and farthest that exists for us” (Watson 155). This is man’s experience of life as an individual rather than as a member of society. The experience - known to all Romantics - also implies a journey for exploration. Odysseus, Oedipus and Faust are, at heart, wanderers. Paradise lost, the Romantics are no longer at home among the “structure of the already known” (Watson 155). Each is marked by a strong responsibility for making it new. The Romantic artist recreates and rationalizes his sense of displacement in the image of the voyage. Commenting on the dream scene in the fifth book of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1805), W. H. Auden recognizes the Romantic wanderer as double-natured hero. He is half-*Bedouin*, that is, “Ishmael, the exile, the wandering Jew, the Flying Dutchman”

and half- Don Quixote, “the dedicated man, the knight of faith who would restore the age of Gold” (Auden 18). Essentially a romantic figure, the voyager or quester has his counterparts also in myths and classical literature, the patterns of which are quite vividly apparent in Saajan’s journey.

The realms of a Romantic voyager is either the ocean or the desert, both of which suggest wilderness, the place where there is no community, just or unjust, and no historical change, for better or for worse. Whether on land or sea, the journey defines the mode of the existence of the voyager. Batra presents Saajan’s mode of existence through his journey of life and does it quite consistently throughout the movie. The voyage that initiates man’s adventure in reality, or his escape from it, suggests a plenum of significance. Noah was a voyager, and irresponsible Jonah enlarged the possibilities of travel. Explorers too, leaving home for various reasons, found the rough seas congenial. Ship and sea allow varieties of meaning that tradition had confirmed. The perpetual motion of the sea, its vast spatial dimension and the depth make it a natural symbol of primitive potentiality and destruction. It is both a mystery and danger and voyaging on it is our strange necessity: “From fairy tales, where the third son sets out to do what his elders failed at, and the quest for the Grail to the detective story which too is in a way a quest for ‘innocence’, we encounter life as voyage on every level” (Tagore 377).



A perfect analysis of Saajan's journey of life necessarily requires a clarified distinction between the Romantic voyage and its mythical and classical counterparts. W. H. Auden examines it at length in *The Enchanted Flood*. In early times, he says, voyaging - neither voluntary nor pleasant- seemed a necessary evil:

“Neither Odysseus nor Jason goes to sea for the sake of the voyage; the former is trying to get home ... the later is trying to capture the Golden Fleece, which is in a distant country, to bring back to his own. If it were nearer and voyage were necessary, he would be much relieved” (19).

The journey on land, adopted by the Christians as a way of presenting the ups and downs of spiritual life is found in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Dante projects human life as a quest for happiness and spiritual grace. If we have to develop a link between this classic attitude and the Romantic, Shakespeare comes quite handy. G. Wilson Knight has studied these antithetical patterns in *The Shakespearian Tempest* (1932). In the last plays particularly, the sea voyage plays an important role. The wandering on the sea is not yet voluntarily entered upon as a pleasure. It becomes now a purgatorial suffering that must be accepted or endured. In *The Winter's Tale* (1623), Camillo advises the young lovers, Flozel

and Perdita, to seek for a settled life through the help of Leontes rather than to elope:

“A course more promising  
Than a wild dedication of yourselves  
To unpath’d waters, undreamed shores, most certain  
To miseries enough”. (Act IV, Scene V)

This link between Romantic journey motif and the Classic depiction of ethics and value- system unfolds the theme of journey in *The Lunchbox* with utmost perfection. The voyage answers a variety of needs. Emerson speaks of the advance of the mind “into the recess of being, to some new frontier as yet unvisited by the elder voyagers” (Feidelson 16). To some, like Captain Nemo in Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), finds in the sea a particular voyage, an elaborate synecdoche for life in general, since going to sea permits exploration of self and reality. To the romantic voyagers, the shore life is always trivial, and as Baudelaire says:

“... the true travelers are those who go  
Just to be going: like balloons, their hearts  
Cannot escape their buoyant doom, and though

They don't know why, they always say; Let's start!"  
(MacIntyre 317).

At the end of *The Lunchbox* when we find Saajan travelling to Nasik following the rejection of the opportunity to settle down with all possible attainments concerning it, we can clearly understand that he is a romantic voyager in true sense and the theme of journey in *The Lunchbox* is definitely aimed at an utopian happiness. Batra has always added foils to intensify it. We find Shaikh settled down happily and Ila waiting for Saajan in the restaurant, but the journey of Saajan's life rejects all possibilities to stop and rest, but has always said, "Let's start".

**Notes:**

1. The dabbawalas constitute a lunchbox delivery and return system that delivers hot lunches from homes and restaurants to people at work in India, especially in Mumbai. The lunchboxes are picked up in the late morning, delivered predominantly using bicycles and railway trains, and returned empty in the afternoon. They are also used by meal suppliers in Mumbai, who pay them to ferry lunchboxes with ready-cooked meals from central kitchens to customers and back. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dabbawala>)

2. The Bauls are a group of mystic minstrels from Bengal, which includes the country of Bangladesh and the Indian State of West Bengal. Bauls constitute both

a syncretic religious sect and a musical tradition. Bauls are a very heterogeneous group, with many sects, but their membership mainly consists of Vaishnava Hindus and Sufi Muslims. They can often be identified by their distinctive clothes and musical instruments. Not much is known of their origin. Lalon Fokir is regarded as the most important poet-practitioner of the Baul tradition. Baul music had a great influence on Rabindranath Tagore's poetry and on his music. Although Bauls comprise only a small fraction of the Bengali population, their influence on the culture of Bengal is considerable. In 2005, the Baul tradition was included in the list of "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baul>)

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