

cinema



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Joy Mukherjee: A suave leading man

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Joy Mukherjee, who died last week in a Mumbai hospital, had once pulled a rickshaw. This is my earliest recollection of him. The scene was from the Hindi film, *Love in Simla*. Perched on the two-wheel contraption was actress Sadhana, and she seemed all thrilled about this ride on the undulating roads of the then extraordinarily pretty Simla.

It was 1960, and Joy pulled without puffing and panting, and, better still, sang, *Haseenon Ki Sawari Hai* (actually rendered by Mohamed Rafi). What a novel way of wooing a girl.

Directed by R K Nayyar and produced by Sashadhar Mukherjee and his Filmalaya Studio, the movie was Joy's (who was the producer's son) debut screen appearance. A classic story of an ugly duckling emerging as a sweet swan, *Love in Simla* was Sadhana's first Hindi feature.

The film had songs that were mesmeric, and the story was ahead of its time. Joy's Dev is a rich businessman, who goes to Simla to wed Sonia's/Sadhana cousin. But eventually Dev falls in love with Sonia, who, angry at the way she is treated by her cousin and aunt, takes up a challenge to draw Dev into her arms. But, not before she metamorphosis into a lovely lass, replete with the famous 'Sadhana hair style' that became a rage with girls.

Joy was no actor, really, and was often seen as the poor cousin of Shammii Kapoor. Along with Biswajeet, Joy tried copying the singing- and -dancing Kapoor. However, Joy was far more handsome than Shammii, undoubtedly more chocolatey. Maybe a modern-day John Abraham or Salman Khan, minus the biceps. In the 1960s, women did not care about muscled men. They hankered after arresting faces and romantic dispositions. Joy had both. And he gave these in abundance, all soaked in syrupy songs that came along with memorable lyrics, foot-tapping music and master singers.

Joy, however, could not get Sadhana's pulse pounding. It was Nayyar who could, and the two married and remained together till his death in the mid-1990s.

Joy moved on to woo heroines like Asha Parekh and Saira Banu on screen. Pairing with Asha in *Phir Wohi Dil Laya Hoon* in 1963 and *Love in Tokyo* in 1966, he brought sheer joy to his fans, not through any great story or script, but by his ability to look charming even in the most vexing of situations. What made him an even greater hero were the songs he lip-synched to in an age that was truly the golden period of Hindi cinema music.

Dil Tham Chale Hum Aaj Kidhar in Love in Simla, Hai Nigah Mein Jindagi Ki Raah Mein in Phir Wohi Dil Laya Hoon, Bahut Shukriya Badi Meherbani in Ek Musafir Ek Hasina, Bade Miyan Diwane in Shagird (where he wooed Saira, competing with I S Johar!) were some lilting numbers. In fact, *Shagird* in 1967 was such a roaring box-office success that it took Joy to the very peak. The movie's tracks (*Dil Vil Pyaar Vyar* and *Woh Hain Zara Khafa Khafa*) pushed the sale of the 78 RPM records to hundreds.

Shagird in some way seemed to be Joy's end of the road. Later films like *Bahu Beti*, *Humsaya* and *Inspector* could not offer anything more of Joy. In 1977, he tried stepping behind the camera with *Chhaila Babu* (starring Rajesh Khanna and Zeenat Aman). It did somewhat well, but Joy's luck appeared to have been eclipsed, and his desperate attempt to grab the limelight as a villain in *Phoolan Devi* in 1985 pulled him to a disastrous low.

Years later in the early 1990s, I met Joy in Mumbai as part of a series on fading stars I was doing for *The Hindu*. Although married to an interior designer, Joy seemed terribly joyless. And when he told me that he was taking the public buses to travel in the city, I could clearly see the pain writ all over his face. Related to Ashok Kumar, Kishore Kumar, Tanuja, Nutan and Kajol, Joy had somewhere frittered away his fortune to end up in such a shabby state. The man looked so different from the seductively dashing image of Joy I had carried in my mind's eye.

The story of *Kahaani*

Sujoy Ghosh's *Kahaani* (The Story) angered Bengalis even before its formal opening last week. For one, the scene in the underground Kolkata's Metro platform where an attempt is made to push a character on the tracks with a train speeding into the station has irked the citizen, proud as he is of one the city's very few modern marvels. It is terrible publicity, he says.

The other holy cow that Ghosh has tinkered with is Rabindranath Tagore's patriotic and highly loved song, written in 1905, *Ekla Chalo Re*. Played in the film's background, the lyrics push the listener to walk on his journey, even alone. It is supposed to have inspired Mahatma Gandhi, and *Kahaani* uses it to highlight its message. Nothing wrong with this, but what is, is that it has been sung by Amitabh Bachchan, who despite his stint in Kolkata, despite his Bengali wife and director, mispronounces the words!

Well, away from these, *Ekla Chalo Re* encourages Vidya Balan's Vidya Bagchi to fly down from London in search of her husband missing in Kolkata. Ghosh, who has made a few eminently forgettable movies like *Jhankaar Beats* and *Aladin*, gives us a thriller this time in *Kahaani*. Resting the script on Balan's acting ability (she is good, though her best is still *Parineeta* and *Ishqiya*), he spins a story out of a story out of a story — the sometimes handheld photography being as irksome as the plot with a sleuth too many and cops galore. Often, they place snags not signs on the viewer's vision. At the end of the film, some links seemed to lead nowhere or not quite well-explained — a habit with some helmers who feel that this is the way to sound and seem intelligent.

Shot entirely in Kolkata, Ghosh captures some of the unique moods and mannerisms of the city and its folks. The Howrah Bridge, all lit up to remind us of its glorious history, the Victoria Memorial, built as a salute to the British Empire, the frozen-in-time tramcar that ambles along as an icon of leisure, the rickety taxis, the red-bricked police stations, the seedy guest houses and the more social than spiritual Durga Puja are unmistakably Kolkata and enslave us to nostalgia, though there is a tendency to gloss up the imagery. Typically Bengali attitudes are seen, puffing away at a cigarette being one.

With directors like Woody Allen now using cities in a very powerful way to narrate their tales (*Midnight in Paris*, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and *Matchpoint*), Ghosh has probably taken the cue from them. But what he really needed to have done was to have put a little more effort into his script, and this is important in a narrative of this kind. He had, though, a set of good performers. Apart from Balan (playing a pregnant woman and resembling Frances McDormand in *Fargo*), we have the promising Parambrata Chatterjee, playing the cop in attendance to Miss Bagchi, and the interesting-to-watch Saswata Chatterjee, the life insurance agent by day and killer by night in a city where most people have two names, "dak naam" (or, pet name) and bhalo naam (official name), and perhaps twin identities. This is conveyed right in the beginning, pushing us into the whodunit.

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* Vidya Balan in the movie *Kahaani*.