

## The Enigma of Self-Formation in Shyam Benegal's *Bhumika*

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**Abstract:** Unlike non-human objects, human beings, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, are a combination of being and nothingness. They do not bear any predetermined meaning and therefore, in search of the answer of the question "Who am I?", continue to play roles to make their existence meaningful. This unique feature of 'nothingness' bestows the independence of an artist on individuals, to fashion their own personae as they choose. That is why self-formation is an uncertain process. However, the freedom of 'self' becomes threatened when an individual appears preoccupied with the notion of authenticity/sincerity, which Sartre identifies as 'bad faith'. It is a form of self-denial that represses the endless possibilities of an individual and his/her free will. The concerned paper explores Shyam Benegal's feature film "Bhumika" (1977) and probes into the enigma of self-formation that derives from the conflict between playing roles as freedom of choice and the desire to acquire a pre-existing identity to achieve social recognition. The reading addresses such aspects as the problem of authenticity in role-play, how the 'self' becomes deceived by bad faith, external restrictions on self-formation and its resistance, freedom of choice as an illusion, and so on.

**Keywords:** Authenticity as bad faith, Freedom of Choice, Repression and resistance, Role-play, Self-formation.

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### I. Introduction

In a narrative cinema the actors play roles to pretend as diegetic characters, and the spectators are intrigued to believe in the deception. That is to say, role-play occurs in film at the expense of the actor's originality or by temporarily losing his/her 'authentic' self. However, deceiving the 'self' is inherent in the aspect of playing roles in real life as well. Joseph S. Catalano notes in *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness"* that human beings, as argued by Sartre, have the sensibility to perceive the world and conceive it in their consciousness as a meaningful whole, however, they themselves lack definite meaning or specific essence of their being. A table bears a concrete definition, but an individual cannot be defined in that way. Compelled by this urge to form meaning, we continue to play roles and strive to shape our personae. In doing so we intend to deny our innate nothingness, and thereby, deceive ourselves.

Instead of implying incompleteness, elaborates Catalano, the Sartrean notion of 'nothingness' refers to 'nonbeing'. Nonbeing is the fundamental quality that shapes the idea of 'being': "...nonbeing is what-is-not, just as being is what-is." (Catalano, 60). An individual becomes someone only in terms of what other roles the person could have chosen in a particular moment, instead of the role s/he visibly plays. That is why Catalano asserts, quoting Sartre, "...we have to consider man as "a being which is what-it-is-not and not what-it-is" (Ibid., 84). His observation reveals that shaping persona is essentially arbitrary, depending on mere chances. There is no such persona which is authentic. That is why Sartre argues, sincerity or authenticity during role-play is not a state but an obligation. Fixation of identity is only an illusion and at the same time detrimental to our innate freedom. Therefore, the notion of authentic identity is a bad faith. Catalano Separates 'bad faith' from 'good faith' in connection to evidence:

When I am in good faith, I first "decide" what is reasonable evidence to believe... We are in bad faith, however, when we first decide to believe and then decide not to require too much evidence for our belief.

- Ibid., 87

Hence, according to Sartrean notion, bad faith is an instance of self-denial. Catalano further elaborates that to deny something we consciously admit it as fact in the first place. Then, the image of that fact is to be replaced by an alternative possibility, and therefore, the alternative fact is to be believed as the temporal reality. Sartre explains his argument through an instance of flirting. Here he imagines, as Catalano notes, a woman goes

out with her lover and eventually the man holds her hand as a gesture of imminent sexual advances. Perhaps at that moment she is uncertain about her response, for, on one hand, she is unable to ignore her primitive libidinal desire as well as his, on the other side, she is aware of the conventional role of a maiden that she is supposed to perform. As a solution to this dilemma, she immediately contemplates an alternative possibility. Therefore, her consciousness believes that the action of holding hand is a friendly gesture from the end of her lover, which could have been a suggestion of libidinal desire as well, and that they are having an intense intellectual conversation. Thus, she deceives herself by denying the apparent fact and recognising a possibility as the temporal truth. In an almost similar manner, motherhood can be a free choice of an individual who is probably a working single woman. However, once the individual becomes preoccupied to earn recognition as either a sincere mother or a dedicated worker, denying the fact that they are mere roles that she has opted to play, she deceives herself and subsequently loses the freedom of her 'self'. Thus, she is in bad faith.

## II. The Forbidden Courtesan And Her Struggle For Free 'Self'

The identity of a social being is the product of role-play and the bad faith of authenticity. As claimed by Catalano, "...most of us play roles assigned to us by society, and society expects us to stay within the limits of that role." (Ibid., 85). The ambivalence of the self-fashioning of social being is a recurrent thematic element in Shyam Benegal's (1934) feature film *Bhumika* (1977) or *The Role*. The film is based on *Sangtye Aika*, an autobiography of the Marathi and Hindi film actor Hansa Wadkar (1923 – 1971). In her book *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema Before Independence*, Meera Kosambi notes that Wadkar sketches her journey in the autobiography as "a tattered life, underlined with exploitation, physical and emotional abuse, and aggravated by self-destructive obstinacy"<sup>1</sup>, where, en route, she lost her original identity as Ratan Salgaonkar. The shadow is evident in the portrayal of Usha (Smita Patil), the protagonist of *Bhumika*. The impoverished woman engages in the struggle of survival from a very tender age. She eventually begins her career as a film actor and grows to become the celebrated figure Urvashi in the then Bombay film industry. However, in her onscreen journey, the protagonist strives to form a distinct identity which would exclusively define 'Usha', her original self, going beyond her fictive identity 'Urvashi'.

Usha's journey in search of a new identity, in *Bhumika*, is sketched in a non-linear pattern of narration, which frequents to unveil her past memories. The flashback reveals that the conflicts and dilemmas of Usha, as well as that of the other female figures of her family, derive from the dichotomy of individual's originality and social recognition. The dearth of recognition substantially influences the formation of the 'selves' of the three generations of women: Usha, Shantabai (Sulabha Deshpande), i.e., her *ayi* or mother, and her *ajji* or grandmother (Kusum Deshpande). In the depiction of Usha's cultural root Benegal echoes the background of Hansa Wadkar. In this context Vivek Sachdeva notes in *Shyam Benegal's India: Alternative Images*:

Hansa's father belonged to the community of *Kalavantis*, courtesans who were accomplished in music and her mother belonged to the community of *Devdasi*. Marriage in courtesan families in those times was rare, but Wadkar's grandfather was the first person to marry.

- Sachdeva, 51

In *Bhumika* as well, the protagonist belongs to the community of *Devdasi*. In the course of the narrative, we come to know that it is only Usha's mother from their entire community who got the 'opportunity' to marry a brahmin man. Regarding her study of women performers in connection to theatre, Meera Kosambi observes that to retain the moral codes of patriarchal society, our cultural convention has categorized women in two broad kinds: one is the 'respectable obedient women' who are conscious of their modesty and prefers to stay secured inside the domestic space to avoid undesirable, or rather, improper masculine gaze; then there is the other category of women performers who 'entertain' the male gaze and exposes themselves in public. Kosambi remarks that the category of women performers had been traditionally demarcated as the province of the courtesans and thereby secluded from the mainstream society as if they were invisible. Contextually, she further notes that it is not only the aspect of exposure that created the difference in respectability, but there was also the tradition of categorization in Indian Classical music that determined the proper conducts of women. She asserts: "An average woman could sing devotional songs and women's songs — but only at women's informal gatherings. Classical music remained the preserve of courtesans. . . Thus, the women trained in Classical music belonged to the hereditary courtesan community and were automatically excluded from the class of respectable women, irrespective of their actual conduct" (Kosambi, 253). Likewise, in *Bhumika*, the ancestral house of Usha and her family in Pandharpur is introduced as the space of Indian Classical music and Usha's grandmother represents the culture of courtesan. During the episode of Usha's childhood, her grandmother plays the role of

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<sup>1</sup> Kosambi, 362

the *guru* who teaches little Usha (Baby Rukhsana) the *bandish* of “*Mandar bajo*”: a Classical raaga. Regarding this particular selection of song, Shyam Benegal shares his thoughts in an interview to William van der Heide, and says:

For the grandmother's voice I used a Kirana Gharana singer. But the raga she sings is a popular raga with the Jaipur Gharana singers. This music conveys the sort of security a child feels in the embrace of the mother. . . This was important because this woman is completely insecure. She's seeking that kind of giving warmth, where there is no taking, the sort of warmth she never finds in any of her relationships.

- Heide, 90

Hence, the song resonates the courtesan's burden of social alienation, or, lack of recognition. Eventually the song becomes Usha's cultural inheritance from her grandmother, and it continues to recur throughout the film as a signifier of absence of belongingness.

In antagonism to the grandmother's role, Usha's mother, Shantabai, appears to play the conventional role of the sincere 'decent woman' who has resigned from the space of women performers. In doing so, she aspires to achieve the recognition of respectability in the patriarchal society. Unlike her mother, she has selected the domestic space where she intends to belong. As her daughter's moral guardian, she visibly disapproves Usha's training in classical music. Instead of that, she rather wants to engage Usha in household chores, like her, and thereby represents the notion of 'true womanhood', which is described by Estelle B. Freedman in *Feminism, Sexuality, and Politics* as a behavioural practice of proper feminine conduct that is to be passed on to the next generation. Eventually, the ambiguity of Shantabai's persona derives from her illusion of authenticity. For Shantabai, the mangalsutra is a symbol of her permanent departure from her mother's cultural identity as 'immoral woman performer'<sup>2</sup>, however, her sincerity in playing the role of decent woman is problematized at 17 minute 30 second. The sequence features Usha's mother and their family friend Keshab Dalvi (Amol Palekar) from the perspective of Usha. At this point the tracking camera comes close to the objects of the spectacle to emphasize their physical proximity, especially the moment when Keshab holds Shantabai's arm, in medium close-up shot. The visual rendition of the diegetic moment highlights the probability of an on-growing affair between them, and, though it has not been clearly mentioned, it is suggested in the course of the episode that probably it is Keshab who took the advantage of impoverished Shantabai. Here, Keshab's proximity with Shanta functions as a reminder of the disrepute which is culturally imposed on Shantabai and the community of women performers at large. The suggestion becomes prominent when he gives the proposal of marriage to Usha in front of her mother. In doing so he intends to possess both the bodies of the mother and the daughter, and thereby, demeans both of them. Therefore, it can be argued that Shantabai is in bad faith by believing that she has permanently escaped from the insecurities of such a community whose identity is not socially acknowledged, by having the opportunity to marry a brahmin man. Due to this bad faith, subsequently, she unquestionably accepts her alcoholic husband's authoritative agency, despite his physical abuse. That is why, when at the end of the sequence of domestic violence her husband falls down out of breath by severely beating her, enacting the iconic feminine role of ideal wife she carefully carries her husband to the bed. It is important to note in this context that at that moment she overlooks the sexual implication of the private moment which occurred between her and Keshab just a few moments ago. Her denial of the fact almost identically resembles the lady's stance in Sartre's example of flirting as an instance of bad faith. Shantabai rather visibly considers Keshab's approach as that of a true friend who they have by their side during the time of dire need. Owing to this bad faith, she apparently remains indifferent towards the possibility of Usha getting married to Keshab. Besides that, the bad faith keeps her unhesitant to take favours from him: a stance which is later questioned by her daughter.

Shantabai recognizes Keshab as a repressive agent and an opportunist only after the sudden demise of her husband, when Keshab suggests that Usha should try her luck in cinema. She resists the proposal by being preoccupied with the anguish about Usha's future as well as her's. Anguish, from Sartre's perspective, comes from constant threat, which is, unlike fear, not connected with any external object but us. In *Bhumika*, Shantabai is tormented by the anguish of losing her identity as a respectable woman. Her sense of insecurity increases in the absence of Usha's father, and reaches climax when Usha enters in the domain of cinema. The relation between young Usha and her mother deteriorates, during the second half of the flashback, regarding the issue of marriage. The scene of Usha enjoying the company of Keshab visibly disturbs Shantabai and she declares her

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<sup>2</sup> Shantabai forbids her daughter from doing *riyaz/practice*, at 15 minute 26 second, and scolds her saying “*Gaana gate rahegi to apne aiji jaysi zindegi bitayegi. Mangalsutra nasib nehi hoga.*” (“If you keep practising, you will spend your remaining life like your grandmother, unmarried”).

disapproval to her daughter. During the episode of the concerned conversation (41:25), though she particularly specifies that Keshab is an aged man and belongs to different caste for which she is against the marriage, Shantabai is particularly against his scheme of dragging her daughter in the public domain of performance, as it is revealed in the long shot taken at 39 minute 35 second. In this shot Keshab comes to meet Usha with two magazines where Urvashi is featured. The shot begins with Usha opening the door. Then, Keshab comes in and hands her the magazines, and both of them gradually enter in aji's room, talking about the feature. The entire action takes place in the background and midground of the frame, whereas, the foreground displays the close-up of anxious Shantabai as a pervading signifier of her anguish. It is to be noted here that Usha goes against her mother by deciding to marry Keshab, not as a mere compulsion to give her unborn child a name but as a free will. The sense of freedom predominates in the frame where Usha is featured as a bride (55:34). Here, in a single frame the director produces two parallel spaces. In the domestic space Usha's mother is left alone, whereas in the classical space Usha, in the attire of new bride, begins to sing "*Mandar bajo*" with her grandmother to celebrate the moment. Thus, Usha victoriously dominates the frame as the courtesan who has chosen to play the role of the domestic woman. At this point it might be argued that freedom of choice is in itself a bad faith because it is already predetermined by the normative social codes, as evident in case of Usha. Usha had only two possibilities to choose: either to perform as the icon of the erotic body in the masculine public sphere, or, to play the conventional role of obedient woman in the domestic sphere. However, problem arises because, though she intends to play the role of the domestic woman, she denies to become obedient. That is why when she decides to resign from the public domain of cinema for fashioning her individual 'self' according to her own terms, her decision is not approved by the repressive patriarchal agent: Keshab Dalvi, now her husband. His disapproval signifies the impossibility of the courtesan's intrusion in socially acknowledged domain. To emphasise her disillusionment, Benegal uses the Hindi song "*Ek bangla bane nyara*" sung by K. L. Saigal from the film *President* (1937). In *Bhumika* the song is played in radio in the onscreen conjugal space (57:25). The melody dominates the sequence as an antithesis to the Classical bandish of the erstwhile frame where Usha was temporarily celebrating the freedom of her 'self'. The song depicts the picture of a happy family life that the courtesan desires, and therefore, pervades the scene as the acoustic metaphor of her failure. Thus, Usha's originality is externally curtailed by the repressive agent, who, on one hand, insists her to continue her career almost as an earning labour, and on the other hand, fixes her as a guilty object by questioning her moral ethics and thereby emphasizes the uncertainty of her being a true respectable woman.

Unable to accept the authoritative agency of the patriarchal agent, unlike her mother, Usha is prone to escape from the state of confinement. In fact, 'escape' has been a thematic element in *Bhumika* that visually signifies Usha's defiance towards external repressions. The retrospective recollection of Usha's childhood begins at 10 minute 40 second, with the iconic sequence of escape. Here, as the scene reveals, little Usha desperately tries to escape from her mother to save her favourite rooster from being killed. The composition portrays Shantabai as a dominative agent who intends to manipulate her daughter's self-formation, as well as the image of the captive bird refers to Usha's vulnerability. The scene of escape symbolically reappears at 16 minute 17 second, when the little girl is playfully chased by Keshab Dalvi, another repressive agent. Eventually, in this sequence, Usha falls down on the stairs and is caught by him. The chasing sequence and the moment of capture foreshadow Keshab as an obstacle to Usha's freedom. In a similar manner, Keshab's repression triggers young Usha's escape from the domestic space of misfit couple, and she takes refuge in a hotel suit. The hotel room reverberates her inner loneliness. Here, an optical paradox is rendered when her mirror reflection in the real space overlaps with her image in the reel space. In the following series of cinematic spectacles (01:02:25) Urvashi successfully wins in the '*agni pariksha*' or the trial of chastity as the glorified icon of ideal Indian woman, whereas, in the domestic space Usha fails to save her marriage. The reel space, therefore, is implemented in *Bhumika* as Usha's alternative imaginary domain of fantasy, where she pretends to play the role of her desire, temporarily forgetting her failure in the real space. In that sense, the reel space, too, appears a space of escape.

However, the phenomenon of fantasy significantly continues to influence the depiction of the real space as well, as it is evident in the portrayal of Usha's relationship with the film director Sunil Verma (Naseeruddin Shah) and the businessman Vinayak Kale (Amrish Puri). The narrative of *Bhumika* is principally set inside the cultural space of building, except a few intervals when, following the protagonist, the camera comes outside in open natural space. The shift first occurs during Usha's recollection of her childhood memories. At this time, we observe that Usha's place of refuge is the garden, i.e., the natural space: the space of freedom of possibilities and natural growth, which produces a visual paradox with the cultural space that curtails the freedom of the 'self' in terms of norms and restrictions. The natural space reappears (01:28:03) during the brief episode of infatuation between Usha and Sunil Verma, and visually highlights the apparent Romantic worldview of Sunil who frequently speaks of individual's independence and natural growth. His thoughts eventually intrigue Usha to imagine that she can obtain the independence of fashioning her 'self' with him,

unlike her husband. In the course of this episode, Usha particularly becomes smitten by his idea of committing suicide not as an impulsive reaction of despair but a sublime decision to complete the procedure of self-formation, which provokes her to fantasize a death pact as a gesture of eternal love. However, the moment their mutual desire drags them inside the confinement of four walls (01:39:28), which is the antithetical cultural space that restrains individual's freedom, Sunil's deception is exposed. Once again, Usha is left alone, disillusioned.

Again, it is her fantasy of reuniting with her root that inspires Usha to pretend as Vinayak's wife at the expense of her career. At 01 hour 21 minute 00 second, the camera features Usha lying on her bed in the hotel suit, miserably devastated by the failures of her previous relationships. Her blank look is interrupted by the voice of her grandmother singing "*Mandar bajo*". As the narrative informs us, the music comes from the opposite room of Usha's suit. With the intention to hear the song and cherish her memories, Usha knocks at the door, and there she meets Vinayak for the first time. Hence, it is the song "*Mandar bajo*", which bears Usha's cultural legacy and reverberates her loneliness and desire to signify something, connects her with Vinayak. Significantly, when Usha decides to begin a relation with him and comes to his place, the narrative shifts to the rural locale<sup>3</sup>, in antagonism to the former urban Bombay and its film industry. The rural locale appears to relocate Usha's ancestral classical space in Pandharpur: her cultural root, producing the illusion that as if she is reunited with her origin. Her entry is depicted as a moment of plenitude. It is taken in high angle long shot (01:51:20). The shot begins with the vacant lounge, i.e., the gateway of the indoor space. Gradually, Vinayak and Usha enter in the frame along with Vinayak's son (Master Abhitab). The three figures then move forward from the background to the foreground of the frame, and passing across the stairs they exit from the scene and enter in the domestic space. The image of the father, mother, and son intrigues us to anticipate that perhaps the desire of Usha, the forlorn courtesan, to play the role of a good wife and mother is finally fulfilled. At this phase of the narrative, the role of the domestic woman no more remains an individual's momentary choice of performance. It rather becomes the symbol of resistance of the courtesan to articulate "I" on the face of patriarchal double standard, and thereby form a particular meaning of her existence. However, problem begins from the very moment when Usha enters in the domestic space, because, since then, unknowingly, she becomes confined in that domain. Her freedom of choice is replaced by compulsion. The physical immobility of Vinayak's wife (Rekha Sabnis) is probably placed as an optical metaphor that foreshadows Usha's impending confinement. The role she plays in the domestic domain is predetermined by the erotic desire of the patriarchal agent to satisfy his gaze. It is evident in the sequence (01:54:12) where Usha redecorates herself in the ethnic outfit as wished by Vinayak. This transition is followed by a series of short sequences where Usha cultivates normative feminine nurturing qualities and thereby imagines herself as the lady of the house. However, very soon she is disillusioned and becomes aware of her lack of self-independence when Vinayak denies her the access to the external world. She is also subsequently disillusioned about her fantasy of reuniting with her cultural root. To intensify this aspect, the depiction of her state of confinement visually divides Vinayak's house in two antagonistic spheres. One sphere is the feminine domain: it is the room of Vinayak's wife where Usha takes refuge in. Indian classical music dominates this feminine space, as Vinayak's wife continues to hear '*khayal*' in radio. Thus, the domain relocates the Classical space of courtesan and thereby appears antithetical to Vinayak's masculine sphere, which is, on the other hand, connected with Western music. The contrast is emphasized by the tune of the musical jewellery box that Vinayak gifts Usha, and the presence of the piano in Vinayak's study. At the end of the episode, Usha, for one last time, escapes from this confinement owing to the intervention of her husband. Usha's fantasy collapses when the same high angle long shot, which previously depicted her entry, reoccurs to portray her exit. Her desire to belong somewhere and articulate the "I" remains unattainable.

### III. Conclusion

The theme of uncertainty prevails in *Bhumika* till the end of Usha's journey. In the closing sequence Usha returns to the hotel, where she meets her daughter. The course of incidents in this sequence reveals that Sushma (Kiran Vairale), Usha's now-adult-daughter, has finally departed from the forbidden space of women performers, and therefore, unlike her mother, appears to secure her place of belonging in society. On the other side, the search of Usha, the courtesan, for an independent 'self' ends as a regressive journey where she is left alone in the hotel suit, with a cd of her grandmother's song. The narrative comes to a close at a delicate moment when Usha is given two choices. Her daughter breaks the news of her pregnancy and invites her mother to stay in her domestic world: an offer that Usha almost immediately declines. Soon, Rajan proposes Usha, over telephone, for a grand come back in the film industry as Urvashi. His proposal remains unanswered, declaring

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding Vinayak Kale's rural locale, William van der Heide remarks in *Bollywood Babylon: Interviews with Shyam Benegal* that "That part of the film is set in Goa, a traditional world far removed from the metropolitan and urban environment" (Heide, 88).

the ambiguity of the identity of the courtesan. However, the unanswered phone call prompts us to presume that probably, instead of accepting the given roles, Usha would choose to endure loneliness as a free entity. The destination of her journey for a new identity remains uncertain.

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