

## The Eternal Tramp: Chaplin's Imitation and Resonance in Raj Kapoor's Cinema

Ranjamrittika Bhowmik

In 2013, Indian Cinema completed hundred years. Raj Kapoor (14 December 1924 – 2 June 1988), one of the forefathers of Indian Cinema, projected himself as the Indian Charlie Chaplin (16 April 1889– 25 December 1977), the “little man” who was at odds with a world in which he survived by his wits and could hide the pain in his heart behind a smiling face. He imitated Chaplin's gestures, facial expressions, and movements and created a screen persona that was a reflection of both himself and of the average Indian that he sought to construct.

*Awara* (The Tramp) the best example was a film that made a strong social commentary on the economic disparities that existed in India. The film became an overnight sensation in India and abroad. It was also nominated for the Palme d'Or at the [Cannes Film Festival](#) in 1953. In 2012, *Awara* was included in the 20 new entries to [All-Time 100 greatest films](#) by *TIME*.”

Both Charlie Chaplin and Raj Kapoor while trying to depict the plight of the penniless had the magical power of making people laugh. Raj Kapoor's magnum opus, *Mera Naam Joker* can be seen as a reworking of Chaplin's *Limelight*: both are passionately emotional films about clowns whose hearts break as they suffer to make audiences laugh.

Charlie Chaplin's comedies displayed a magnetic universalism. It should be kept in mind that Chaplin's comedies arose out of a distinctive cultural discourse in Western Society. The carefree years preceding World War I, the lingering influence of Victorian morality, the arrival of immigrants from Europe in the opening decades of the previous century, the First World War and its impact on society and consciousness, the influence of technology, and the rise of dictatorial regimes all formed a part of that cultural discourse. Hence, once can say that in Chaplin's films, an intermingling between universalism and culture-specificity took place, one giving a definition to the other.

This paper will seek to explore how Raj Kapoor, one of the greatest actor-directors of India drew upon the universal elements of Chaplin's oeuvre and designed the culture specific ones according to the Indian tradition and psyche. The reception of Charlie Chaplin by Raj Kapoor forms a very significant moment in the history of Indian cinema, from diverse perspectives. Raj Kapoor, on more than one occasion had publicly declared that he had wanted to make films for the masses, which would appeal to them holistically. However, it remained a fact that both Chaplin and Kapoor achieved phenomenal popularity; the former achieved the status of the greatest comedian of global cinema and the latter went on to become a sensation among popular audiences not only in India but also in Southeast Asia, Soviet Russia, the Caribbean and East Africa.

Chaplin's comedies and Raj Kapoor's cinema are both united by the former's immortal creation, the tramp. The tramp is central to an understanding of the works of men, their art and philosophy. Charlie Chaplin had said,

“One of the happy consequences of electing myself to this post of the average man is that the public has unconsciously confirmed me as a kind of unofficial representative. The average man naturally finds great delight in seeing himself on screen. Dashing and romantic heroes may provide him with momentary thrill, but they sooner or later fill his soul with despair. Their ways are far from his ways. He will never come vaulting tempestuously into romantic situations dressed immaculately in evening clothes, silencing men with a proud glance while fair women almost swoon at the gallant spectacle he makes...Here is a man like himself, only more pathetic and miserable with ludicrously impossible clothes, in every sense a social misfit and failure, at whom it is impossible to look without laughter and pity. And yet this impossible person without the build, the air or any of the usual equipment of the hero seems through sheer blundering and circumstances to get on very well indeed...It is a gratifying picture of the common man coming at last into his own.”

Raj Kapoor was a major romantic figure in Indian Cinema and when he was asked what made him give up his popular romantic image in favour of the 'deglamorized' tramp, his reply echoed the sentiments of Chaplin.

“Because it had a greater identity with the common man. The element of hero worship is totally alien to the kind of sense of belonging I aspire to. Everybody can't be a Don Juan. While they see me in this image, they say: This man is like us. That sense of identification has greater influence and acceptance and belonging. I found that the image helped in my work and thinking. India has a vast population of subjugated common men. In Shri 420 there is an argument over my right to sleep on the footpath. I say, this belongs to the Sarkar, who is both your revered guardian and mine.

When I tell him my name, he says to the Kelawali(banana seller), “Listen I told you the poor man's 'Raj' will come some day.” Sentences like this greatly appealed to the people.

These concepts grew within me and made me play the deglamorized roles. People accepted it beautifully. They belong to me and I belong to them. I was one of them. If I was happy, they were happy, if I was unhappy, they were unhappy...It was that kind of a relationship that I established with my audience.”

This kind of a relationship and dialogue with the audience in a country like India, which was at that time suffering from the perils of post-independence social and political aftermath, was needed and was welcomed. Kapoor himself says:

“I created an appreciation of Raj Kapoor's films by being the common man and dealing with the problems of the majority of the people...I try to communicate with them in the simplest manner possible. This has been my yardstick.”

Comedy, like all other forms of artistic communication, draws provisions from, reflects upon and shapes the society it inhabits. Chaplin's comic art, its structures of signification, cultural meaning systems can similarly be understood in relation to the society that gave rise to it. The tramp was born at a time when the ethics of business, industrialization and the disparity between the Haves and Have Nots reigned supreme. While business flourished, there was much resentment among the downtrodden and the underprivileged, whose living conditions were rapidly declining. Chaplin's films sought to give creative expression to this conflict.

It must be stated that Raj Kapoor had admired many a Hollywood director. He was completely taken aback by the Orson Welles had used light and shade in Citizen Kane. His early films, Aag, Barsaat and awara were very much influenced by Vittorio De Sica in Miracle in Milan and Bicycle Thief; and by Roberto Rossellini and Cesare Zavattini, the pioneers of Italian neo-realism. (1) In 1952, the year after Awarā released, an international film festival was held in Bombay, and some of these filmmakers came to Bombay. Kapoor had a long chat with Zavattini, who had written the screenplay for De Sica. These filmmakers, the Italians, in particular, had urged him to shoot outdoors. "The light is so wonderful here in India, why shoot inside the studio."

However it was one man who towered above all the others in influencing Raj Kapoor, and that was none other than Charlie Chaplin. Kapoor would go on to say,

"There is no comparison between the great Sir Charles Chaplin and Raj Kapoor. I am like a lamp in front of the sun. His was an art that will remain forever, as long as human beings exist on earth and flowers bloom. When I was young I was an ardent fan of Charlie Chaplin. I had seen his City Lights, Modern Times, Gold Rush and Limelight. What inspired me in his work was the "little man", and when I began my career, I saw the "little man" all around in our country- the down trodden, the man beaten for no fault of his.

What drew me to Chaplin's films was Chaplin himself-the hobo, the bum, the common man. I was not drawn to him so much because of his get up, but because of the simplicity of the "little man" and his human emotions. There was so much of Chaplin that affected me- the thought process behind all his beliefs. I think this hobo was one of the greatest characters ever conceived."

Raj Kapoor's tramp, named Raj or Raju, much in the manner of Charlie Chaplin's Charlie, was created in the middle of the period generally referred to as the Nehru Years, 1945-1965. The tramp was clearly shown in films like Awarā(1951), Shri 420(1955), Jagte Raho(1956) and Jis Desh me Ganga Beheti Hain(1960). Traces of the Chapinisque tramp could also be seen in Kapoor's character in a film like Anari(1959) which was directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee. The years of Jawaharlal Nehru's reign as India's Prime Minister, witnessed the bursting of post-independence optimism as well as its fading away. It was Nehru's vision to create a modern India that combined the traditional values of the land with the spirit of modern science, the essence of tradition and modernity. Indeed, if taken as a whole, Raj Kapoor's oeuvre constitutes a harmony between the two discourses of tradition and modernity.

Kapoor's tramp (Raju) borrowed certain features from Chaplin's tramp: the hat, the cane, the gait, the ill-fitting clothes and shoes, all creating a sense of incongruity. Kapoor, above all borrowed from Chaplin, was the image of the tramp as the representative of the downtrodden, the marginalized who would act as a foil to the rich and comfortable. Chaplin's extraordinary characteristic is to fuse comedy and pathos in way that would leave the audience spellbound. Raj Kapoor embraced this method in his own unique way, which he believed had a greater power of appeal to the audience than pure comedy. Like Charlie, Raju is an outsider, an uprooted individual who was constantly in search of the warmth of belonging somewhere. He is an entity who is misunderstood and victimized, yet tries to draw out the best from life and in this effort, he becomes an emblem of the underprivileged in India's clustered cities with teeming population, especially in the post independence, post-partition era. These common features between the two tramps and the use of pantomime, which few

characters had used until then epitomizes some of the ways in which Charlie Chaplin inspired Raj Kapoor.

The very title- *Awara*- which means the vagabond or tramp- had strong echoes of Chaplin, as did the character Raju, which Kapoor played in a very Indian version, with his trousers rolled up, wearing torn shoes and a hat, which he often doffed at everyone who passed by.(2) Raju sang the words,

“ *Awara hoon*(I am a vagabond) I have no home, no family, but I sing the song of your love, I am the victim of destiny and of your love.” The whole nation sang with him, and echoed his emotions profusely.

Kapoor saw the film as representing the innocence of the Republic, which was born just a year before the film was released, and learning to cope with a new and difficult world. In his words,

“ *Awara* came at a time when films were of a totally different nature. We still had remnants of British imperial dominance and we wanted a new social order. I tried to create a balance between entertainment and what I had to say to people. *Awara* had everything. It had the theme of class distinction. It had the greatest juvenile romantic story wrapped in the poverty that the post-independence era had inherited. It bloomed like a lotus in the mud and it went to people as something they had never seen before. Could this ever happen, to a young man in such circumstances? With a song on his lips and a flower, he went through all the ordeals that socio-economic disruptions could bring out. The change that people wanted they saw in the spirit of the young man, who was the vagabond, the ‘*Awara*.’”

It was Marxist writer, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, who had written the original *Awara* story, which was adopted for the screen by himself and V.P. Sathe. Herein lay a paradox and a very sharp contrast with Hollywood. When Abbas proposed the idea to Raj Kapoor, Hollywood was in the middle of its “McCarthy witch-hunt against communism, which created a scare that took it some time to recover from.(3) *Awara* is about Raju, a judge's estranged son brought up in the slums as a criminal, who falls in love with a rich lawyer. He holds the judge and society itself responsible for dehumanizing Raju. The film was a hit in India, the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, Iran and Turkey. The tramp was accused of trying to murder the wealthy and famous judge, but was defended in the court by the judge's ward, a young lawyer, Rita. She turned out to be his childhood sweetheart and the role was played by the twenty-three year old Nargis who went on to become the most famous actress of her times in Indian cinema. The tramp's epic love story was nearly three hours long and consisted of Utopian musical numbers alternated with scenes that contrasted the lives of the rich and the poor. Chaplin had achieved this in his silent form but what makes Indian Cinema of this period so complex and interesting is how Italian neo-realism further influence an already potent mix of social and cinematic ideas.(4) Raj Kapoor, under the influence of neo-realism, also produced *Boot Polish*, a film about orphaned children, a wicked aunt and a smuggler with a heart of gold. *Awara* and *Shree 420* both marked a strong distrust of materialism and stood up for the plight of the poor and overlooked. It showed the Marxist undertones of the films, V.P. Sathe comments on the film can be quoted, “First there was an old order, i.e. the feudal order; then the new order, i.e. the capitalist order. We wanted there to be a third one, and Raj Kapoor was to present this new order.”

Ravi S. Vasudevan states,

“Awara (Raj Kapoor, 1951) was represented and discussed in popular journalism, through advertising and in cartoons, popular idioms and allusions points to a number of key issues. Commentators appeared to look away from narrative content per se to a focus on typage, the nature of the hero’s persona, and, in an implicit rather than overt sense, they reflected on the forms of cinema outside the Hollywood mode. Gurata draws attention to how a literary intellectual described Raj Kapoor’s little man as a melancholic entity who yet resists despair. This description captures rather well dimensions of the Kapoor personality, and indicates the imprint of social justice narratives in the post-war period that refused a clear-cut happy ending.”

The film, Shree 420(1955) opened with the song “Mera Juta hain Japani”

Mera Juta hain Japani,

Ye patloon Englistani,

Sar pe lal topi Russi,

Phir bhi dil hail Hindustani

My Shoes are Japanese,

My pants were made in England

On my head’s a red Russian cap,

But my heart is still Indian!

Kapoor sings these words in the role of Raju, a migrant tramp, as he leaves the countryside for the modern day metropolis of Bombay. Raju’s wardrobe may be composed of borrowed elements but he has remained Indian at heart. It must be noted that beyond imitative costume and expressions of the Chaplinisque tramp, Kapoor draws attention to the ‘alien’ character reflecting upon his sense of cultural syncretism. Whereas in Jagte Raho(1956) the tramp was totally indianized in terms of clothing and backdrop. The film centers on the trials of a poor villager (Kapoor as the tramp) who comes to a city in search of a better life. However, the naive man soon becomes trapped in a web of middle-class greed and corruption. His symbolic search for water is the ultimate expression of the helpless. In Jis Desh Mein Ganga beheti Hai, Raju is an absolute simpleton, who is not used to the ways and being of urban society. However, his sincerity is the hallmark of his character and appeals to the audience thus.

Chaplin’s tramp finds temporary employment; in Chaplin’s years with the Mutual his tramp was a foreman, a floorwalker, a carpenter, a pawnshop clerk, a waiter, and a cop.(5) Raju, on the other hand, is usually unemployed and is a social outcast struggling with the various odds that life places before him and is eluded by the dream to seek a better life and employment, which is also echoed in Chaplin’s films like Modern Times. In Awara, he is a thief who is keen to reform himself only if the society allowed him to do so, in Shri 420, he is shown as an educated and honest man who was seeking employment, who is led astray into immoral means by his inability to secure a job to support him. The new nation-state of India had failed to provide for millions of people who were filled with poverty and had to struggle amply to make ends meet to obtain a day’s meal. Like Chaplin, Kapoor’s films offer a strong socio-

political commentary, as on this issue as portrayed through his characterization of the tramp.

Charlie was the master of most situations and handled them with great capability and confidence. As Huff (1972) remarks, "Super Waiter, Super Boxer, Super Policeman, Super tight-rope walker. ...Chaplin's best efforts have been gained through super expert professional dexterity." The police usually found him uncatchable because of his ingenuity. On various occasions, Charlie emerged as the loser in love, but even this is illusory, as for example, in the *Circus* (1928).

Raju is also successful in what he does, but gradually the dexterity and self-assuredness that characterized Raju in Kapoor's early films give way to a kind of naïve innocence. He remains successful, not on account of his cleverness and agility, but because of his deep rooted sincerity and because of the help and support he receives from the women whose love and loyalty are never in question.(6) This is true of all of Kapoor's tramp films with the possible exception of *Mera Naam Joker*.(1970)

Chaplin's tramp establishes the early twentieth-century view of the city, as a dirty, dangerous and corrupt place. Much of the humour in Chaplin's films arises from the quick wit and ingenuity of the tramp to face manifold challenges, these range from social masquerade (*The Idle Class*) to street fighting (*Easy Street*), extinguishing a fire( *The Fireman*). In films like *Shri 420*, Kapoor too, has tried bringing out the moral and metaphysical dimensions of urban corruption. Raju, the tramp also views the city as a meeting ground for various anxieties and ambivalences. For example, in *Shree 420* the darker sides of the city life is introduced to Raju by a beggar who tells him that only way to earn a living is by dishonesty, there is no room for the hardworking, educated and honest. He also tells him that in the city when a person falls, others laugh, but that laughter vanishes when they themselves fall. All of the above words are demonstrated by Chaplinisque scenes filled with commotion, epic 'falls' and comic clashes.

At one level, the incongruities that are characteristic of both Chaplin's and Kapoor's style have a similar purpose of generating humour. However if we observe closely, their approach towards this incongruity is different. Raj Kapoor relies strongly on verbal incongruity as a means of producing humour in a way that Chaplin does not. Moreover, the narrative style of both the artists' portrayal is also different. Chaplin, heavily relies on pantomime, and adapts a stylized narrative form and Kapoor on the other hand, adopts a characteristically Indian form of narrative presentation. Another, crucial point of interest is that the sense of incongruity and the resultant humour as the essence of the film, in Raj Kapoor's case lead to a larger romantic experience, in keeping with the Indian audience. (7) Thus to say, romance and humour are connected to a far greater extent in his films than in Chaplin's films. Kapoor, was after all working within the Indian romantic-musical tradition of film-making.

Pantomime, comedy and pathos, which characterize both Chaplin's cinema and the image of the tramp, are inextricably linked in the imagination of the audience. For example, in the *Pawnshop*, Charlie mimes his hunger and that of his children when he is fired from his job and gain's his boss's sympathy. Although Kapoor makes use of pantomime occasionally, he is more interested, keeping with the Indian theatrical tradition, in making use of song and dance. Charlie controls the sentimentality likely to arise out of excessive pathos by breaking into a joke at a critical point. Whereas,

Kapoor's tramp seeks an outlet by engaging in song and dance and by trying to forget the pathos momentarily. Therefore one could say, despite Kapoor's fascination with pantomime, he replaces it in his films with verbal humour, song and dance.

It must be noted, that Kapoor was overwhelmingly melodramatic in comparison to Chaplin's style of melodrama. This was a distinguishing trait of Kapoor's mode of entertainment, suitable to the Indian theatrical tradition where existed a dominance of emotions, gestures and catharsis. Also there is no considerable measure of violence associated with Kapoor's tramp in contrast to Chaplin's tramp, where there are occasional traces of violence. In Chaplin's films, women are supportive to the protagonist, serving to give depth and definition to his personality, whereas in Kapoor's films women are largely a morally cleansing force assisting the protagonist in acquiring the strength of character and purpose and illuminating his moral vision. (8)

In *Mera Naam Joker* (My Name is Clown), Raj Kapoor's tribute to the tramp comes to a creative culmination, where he plays the role of an aged Joker, who had started his life on the stage and wants to end the same on the stage itself, while entertaining his audience. He believes in hiding his tears behind his smile and his main motivation is to make others laugh. This is strongly reminiscent of Chaplin's role of Calvero in *Limelight*, where he plays the role of a retired comedian, who strives to find happiness in suffering and live life to the fullest and inspire his fellow humans to do so.

Dev Anand, another fellow Indian actor of Kapoor had described how they went to see Chaplin in Montreux. As Oona played on the piano, they talked for three hours, with Raj sitting on the ground in Chaplin's backyard, almost literally at his feet. They had come by bus and, as they boarded the bus to leave, Anand says,

"Raj kept looking back at the receding figure of Chaplin, which got smaller and smaller. Raj raise his hand and shouted, 'Hey, little fellow, bye, bye. We love you.'"

Thus, we see how the image of the eternal tramp resonated in the works of Raj Kapoor, the great Indian showman, who perpetually believed like Sir Charles Chaplin that "The show must go on..."

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