

**RECLAMATION OF IDENTITIES THROUGH SCREEN: A STUDY OF  
ONIR'S *I AM***

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**Abstract**

Resistance is a phenomenon involving a struggle to change or a struggle against a change in the existing state of affairs or accepted norms and notions. The contemporary society is a network of issues that are simultaneously raised and contested. This resilience has got a number of manifestations – print media, telemedia or web or so on. Our paper deals with four such issues--- resistance to the essentialised notions of 'SEX' as merely being a biological phenomenon of reproduction, resistance to the psychological terrors of the past, resisting the normative sexual orientation and resisting the child abuse--- all of these issues have been beautifully brought out through the various techniques in the documentary '*I Am*'. It is a cry for asserting ones plight and existence without being complemented in the traditional normative fashion. It is a stance of such people as Afia, Megha, Abhimanyu, and Omar against the social, political and legislative forces that try to de-existentialise them. It's a plight against the politics of the essentializing enterprise. Man is born free as an individual, social and political roles are determined afterwards. If Afia wants to be a mother of her biological child without having assistance with her husband who divorces her or if Abhimanyu does not carry out his last responsibilities towards his dying step father because he has sexually abused him in his childhood why is the society not accepting them in their rightful place. There are a number of other issues which try to essentialise

the role of an individual in the society thereby killing his individuality and restricting his proper growth. This paper is an attempt to analyse the voices of resistance in Onir's *'I Am'*, it tries reclaiming those identities which are somewhere lost in the societal web of norms and customs, it shows how those identities actually manifest themselves, thereby carving themselves out from the canvas which the teeming society has got itself painted upon.

**Keywords:** Resistance, identity, Social and Political Roles, Celluloid.

*“I believe that I Am will help us grow as humans.”*

JUHI CHAWALA

(Co-Producer: *I Am*)

A film helping people “*grow as humans*” is not a baffling concept or maybe it is for some. When Juhi said this in an interview she was well aware of the consequences the film is going to bear upon its audience. But what seizes attention is the ‘*why*’ to undertake such an endeavour as this. The contemporary worldview is a network of issues that are simultaneously raised and contested. This counts for a dominant tendency to which the majority conforms and its resistance, powerful or weak, but mostly unnoticed or, if ever noticed, unexpressed in the lack of proper media. Onir with a keen discerning eye and Juhi with her experience join together in a venture to destabilise the dormant angst and anxiety through the media having the maximum access. Their venture tries reclaiming the identities through celluloid. This paper will seek to explain the modes that the screen uses to represent the voices of resistance and resilience, and will show how identities emerge when provided with a freedom to express themselves; through the documentary directed by Onir that bagged lots of awards and accolades worldwide.

First of all let us draw your attention towards the various lyrics and images that have been incorporated in the course of the four different stories intersecting each other at one or the other point. The movie starts with the emblem ‘*Anti-Clock Films*’. The name of the production house is itself full of the notion of *resistance*: moving against the *times*. The “*Anti*” of the “*Anti-Clock Films*” gives us a beforehand impression of the revolutionary spirit and subject matter of the movie. It prepares the audience to think on the issues projected in the movie. And only after a brief span of a minute or so we come to read on screen the famous quote of Sri Rabindra Nath Tagore:

Where the mind is without fear  
And the head is held high  
...into that heaven of freedom  
My Father, let my country awake.

*Gitanjali (1912)*

So “*fear*” and “*freedom*” are two contrasting zones: the former where most of us live and the latter where all of us want to live. This freedom can be achieved only through a resistance and dispelling of fear. So what is this “*Fear*” all about? We will return to this

question a while later. The next image is that of a barbed wire marking the boundary of something and symbolising the limits of the ambit which most of us are compelled to perform within. Then follows another image of a tree trunk, grey and not natural (brownish) in colour entrapped in a net of barbed wires all around it. The tree here stands for “nature” and “natural tendencies” and the barbed wire stands for “human agencies” entrapping those natural tendencies and imposing the ways and course of development that they prefer “normal”. As such the growth of human beings is paralyzed and bears the wounds throughout the life.

Now turning on to the use and relevance of the songs in the movie let us begin from the very first song:

Yeh Baangur Jaisi Duniya Re Duniya Re Duniya  
Yeh Phasaye Urtti Muniya Re Muniya Re Muniya  
Jo Choone Chali Khula Aasmaan  
Kahin Bujh Na Jaey Na Jaey Na Jaey Bechaari Daastaan

The words chosen in the lyrics are very significant. It means that the whole world is like a fishing-net (*baangur*) that tries to bully and trap those who want to fly--- fly away from the restrictions imposed upon them by the social norms. If somebody really wants to touch the sky the societal norms make it difficult for him/her to sustain even her identity. Their wings and the desire to fly are broken in such a way that they are pushed to the territory we called the one of the *marginalized*; nobody would even talk to them or talk of them. Why? Their differences are taken to be aberrations; they are designated as abnormal. Next the song says:

Phirti Thi Hawaaon Mein, Par Lagte Thay Paaon Mein  
Zindagi Band Pinjron Mein Kiyun Aaj Rehti Hai  
Neendon Ke Sandooqon Mein Kabhi Sone Ke Sapne Thay  
Aaj Peetal Ke Tukrron Ko Mohtaaj Rehti Hai

See how pathetic is the condition of those who are in one way or the other different from the others. The song presents a striking contrast between the consciousness and the sub-conscious. An individual flying high in dreams with wings of desires to achieve what the society unduly denies them, when it comes to reality he finds himself caught in the confines of the so called hollow and futile social norms. The golden dreams and desires of the deep slumber, which such people love to be in, are rewarded with the denial of their likes even in the real world.

Winner of the National Award Onir's *I Am* shows resistance towards essentialism through celluloid. Resistance as the word suggests is a phenomenon which involves a struggle to change or a struggle against the change in the existing state of affairs or accepted notions and norms. Resistance and resilience have become the watch words of the present society and have a number of manifestations. Be it print media, telemedia or web, all of these are powerful modern tools for the presentation and manifestation of multiple voices contending against variegated issues, say, essentialism. This paper aims to discuss four different issues, each one a case of cries muted strategically and conveniently against the prevalent world order and code of conduct. Characters chosen are types rather than individuals, mouth pieces of the director who has tried to give a blow and jerk to the shackles of essential(*isms*).

The first issue under consideration is related to the first story i.e. *I am Afia*. This story presents resistance to essentialised notions of *sexual intercourse as being the only biological phenomenon of reproduction*. Afia is a single woman keen to have a baby of her own but her busy husband does not understand her desire to be mother, thereby trampling her dreams of motherhood when she wants it at any cost. He is rather of the opinion that they might well adopt

a child, that, he says, is quite natural these days and *popular* as well. She wants to be a mother, but is many a times asked, by family and friends, to be part of the ‘natural’ and the sanctioned social cycle. So if she wants to have a biological child of her own, she must either have to wait until her husband does favour to her or be content with not being a mother at all and this is what most of such ladies conform to, against their wishes. But she is shown to be resisting against fake norms. She decides to take the help of a sperm donor. The story of Afia is thought-provoking bringing to the fore the fact that independent women have no qualms when it comes to being a single parent. In India, people’s mentality is still against such steps and practices which Afia takes. It is the resistance held up by persons like Afia which shows a break from the essentialised notions. Not all are convinced with the thoughts and actions of Afia but at least we can say that such a resistant step by Afia is no doubt an attempt which shows a change in mentality of the people of the metropolitan cities. Afia decides to be a single mother abandoning her unfaithful husband because she has the courage to face the world with her own ideas and standpoints.

Afia no doubt raises a powerful voice in the movie through her actions but the celluloid representation has an added appeal intensified by the next song:

agar zindagi ho khud mein kahin  
phir kyun rahe kisi ki kami  
bojh ban ke rahe kyun subah kisi raat pe  
maanga nahi hai kabhi aasmaan  
haan magar ik jharokha khula to rakho  
jeet dam torr de na kahin kisi maat pe  
haan badal daalein rasmain sabhi isi baat pe  
isi baat pe... isi baat pe... isi baat pe...

There is the deep desire of shattering the practices all vain and illogical but still glorified. The director should be credited for raising such an issue and also for giving the issue such a perfect and unique solution thereby making the audience realise the power of one’s thought and determination. Resistance, thus, by Afia not only proves beneficial for Afia herself, but it also makes the audience realise the necessary and needful change in the society.

Next we move on to the story of the girl named Megha in the segment *I Am Megha*. Megha is originally a *Kashmiri Brahmin* now settled in Delhi after the assassination of her uncle Vikas by his very close friend Shahnawaz, a Kashmiri Muslim. Megha happens to be a very intimate friend of another Kashmiri Muslim girl Rubina, their families sharing all the sorrows and happiness together. But after the incident Megha makes her mind up against the Kashmiri Muslims that they are all *terrorists* and wants to sever all ties from the land by selling her property there. She goes to Kashmir and meets Rubina. There the argument and debate between them opens the anguish of the two to the audience. The one is trying to resist any attachment with the Kashmiri Muslims while the other is trying to resist the general worldview of all the Muslims being terrorists. The following conversation between the two is very catching and touching:

**Megha:** Kis baat se problem hai tumhe? Military tumhare saath bura salooq kar rahi hai, India tumhara haq cheen rahi hai ,ya fir koi bhulne nahi de raha ki tumhara bhai ek trained Mujahiddin tha? Kis baat se problem hai tumhe?

**Rubina:** Is jannat mein jine ki saja se. Main soch bhi nahi sakti ki agar ye sab nai hota to main kahan jaati...kya karti main? Tum humse bahut naraz

ho na magar ek baar socho agar tumhari jagah main nikal gayi hoti aur tum yahan rah jaati to?

So the plight of Rubina presented through the discourse of Megha makes it clear that to be Muslim does not always mean to be a terrorist. And it is not so that the Kashmiri Muslims, whom we think to have denied the rights and property of the so called Hindus, are enjoying their inhabitancy in Kashmir. Had it been so the problem of Kashmir would long have been solved. But it is not so. We are still at inhuman and illogical terms with the innocent, peace-loving Kashmiris, so much so that we neglect and do not understand the cheap motives of the political authorities who want Kashmir not for the benefit of the Kashmiris but for having another country to rule according to their own rules of governance. Megha designates the world outside Kashmir i.e. the world of the metropolis as the “*real world*” where she “*is actually glad*”. But she is not. So there is a resistance for changing the image or the mindset of the people.

The next story that follows is of Abhimanyu, a victim of child sexual abuse. Though he is a successful director residing in a metro city but even after many years, he is still haunted by memories of sexual abuse as a child. He is shown to be dealing with his dark memories and at the same time his struggle with his sexual identity is also highlighted. After eleven long years of child sexual abuse, Abhimanyu struggles to reclaim his own shattered identity. The wounds inflicted on him are more painful because they are given to him by a family member, his step father. Abhimanyu loses himself because of the victimisation and child abuse. His voice remains unheard and suppressed for a very long while, firstly because he is afraid of the consequences which his step father might arouse in front of his mother and himself, and secondly he fails to articulate himself because of the feeling of fear, and feeling of being misinterpreted. It is only after the death of his step father that Abhimanyu gathers courage to talk to his mother about the sexual abuse which he had undergone during his childhood.

Abhimanyu Singh has a past full of pain and stigma. His telling everything first to his girlfriend and then to his mother was a justification of why he refuses to be present at his father’s death and perform the rituals of the *son*. Here lies the step of resistance. He resists being the son of a man who made him a slut and shattered his individuality for his carnal pleasures. Though the story of Abhimanyu is painful and at times makes the audience feel uncomfortable but the story is worthy enough to make the audience realise about the harsh realities which are prevalent in the society. The story is so powerfully projected that it helps the audience to enter in the innocent mind of a child who even after growing up is still under the clutches of those haunting childhood memories. The child was abused by his step father just to get his childish desires and fancies like cycle, money for film school fulfilled. His essentialism is time and again bruised and hurt by his stepfather so much so that he fails to cope up with his sexuality at a grown up age also. Abhimanyu’s action is a voice of resistance which provides him freedom from the painful clutches of childhood memories. The resistance of the conscious present to the unconscious past has been expressed in the lyrical segment of the story where Abhimanyu is holding a guitar and singing his grief:

Bojhal si lamahon ki sham hai  
Khali si in aankhon mein  
Gum hui jo roshni thi un aankhon mein  
Parinde maayusi ke cchat pe roj aate hain  
Samandar ye udaasi ke hain dil ko bhigo jaate hain  
Toote hain jo khwab rehte the in aankhon mein....

The fourth and the last section of the movie, *I Am Omar*, reveals the nexus between the male sex workers and police to blackmail and abuse gay men. The backdrop of the story is the criminalisation prevalent in the homosexuality days. The homosexuality law was often used by the police to harass and extort money from gay men. Omar is a witness as well as a part of the story of how because of the fear of society and law, gay men were blackmailed. How the sexuality issue is made a profit motive by the cops and sex workers like Omar, is projected in the narrative. The story brings to the fore a shocking incident where sex workers (Omar) are hand-in-glove with the cops to extort money from hapless people (Jai). The story is more disturbing because it projects the hidden side of law against those who are sexually different. Jai raises his voice against such essentialism when he once again meets Omar and makes him realise his fault. There is resistance to essentialised notions of the men with a same-sex orientation and about how they are taken to be an aberration in the society. Jai's sexuality is not only mocked by Omar and the cop but his sexuality is made a source to get money. All this shows how Indian people react to the whole concept of sexuality.

The resistance here is not on the part of the characters but on the part of the director who finds it an issue important enough to be discussed. Just like an atom does not have only neutrons and protons but other subatomic particles in the absence of which the atom would annihilate into itself, the human civilization also does not consist of only men and women but also people who are born with a difference: either in sex (*bisexuals/hermaphrodites*) or in orientation (*homosexuals/gays/lesbians*) who cannot be altogether left at the margin. They have to be brought to the main stream and treated as equals to the so called *normals*.

All the four stories in one way or the other talk about some of the most sensitive issues in the country. All the stories affect the psyche and mentality of the audience regarding child sexual abuse, artificial insemination, homosexuality, and the ever burning issue of Kashmir, the politics behind Kashmiri pundits and Muslims residing in Kashmir. Onir has talked about each of these issues in a descent manner and not only his act is forcing the audience to think, but Onir's act has made the audience to change their mentality regarding all these serious issues. The movie is a voice raised against the concept of essentialism prevalent in the society. Though there are a number of sources as mentioned in the beginning like print media, telemedia, web etc., which raise the voice of resistance against essentialism but it is visual media which we think is the most effective and wide spreading, not only in presenting and portraying the voice of the suppressed and oppressed but also its impact is too much on the public. The movie basically reclaims identities; identities which are lost in mazes of societal norms and beliefs. The characters talked about in the movie, are capable enough to retrieve those identities which they are barred from exercising in society, and in the course of action in the film, it is through this retrieval that they show their resistance against essentialism.

In the present scenario, films should be perceived more in the context of the spectator's decoding of the text than from an emphasis on the film text or the machinery of the cinema itself. Film critics are constantly demanding autonomy for cinema from the clutches of literature. Each of the stories narrated in the movie *I Am* is a tale of betrayal on one level or the other. The four chapters in *I Am* are held together by protagonists desperate to start afresh and assert their individual identity. It is this desperation to assert one's individual identity that shows the voice of resistance against essentialism. This essentialism is forced upon individuals in a society and it is this essentialism which mars a person's growth as a free and independent individual. The stories

in the movie unfold leisurely and with a silent grace that makes it easy to root for its principal characters.

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