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"I wish I had kept on looking back then": The issue of epistolary communication in the film *The Lunchbox* (2013)

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Abstract

The article examines the way in which a thread of communication is formed between two people from seemingly the same cultural background, but who differ in terms of age, gender, religion, and personal experiences. The analysis is done on the basis of the movie titled *The Lunchbox* (2013). Firstly, the article provides introductory information about the film. Next, culture-specific and historical information is presented so as to correctly establish the characteristics of the main protagonists. Then, the issue of the formation of epistolary communication is examined on the basis of objects from the film. Finally, the article proceeds to an analysis of the conversation-through-letters by exploring the personalities of the protagonists through the concepts of sentimentalism and individuality. The analysis aims to show that even in modern-day representations, the mode of epistolary contact is still popular and can also lead to new reinventions within the field of postcolonialism.

Keywords

epistolary communication, modern India, post-colonialism, sentimentalism, *The Lunchbox* (2013)

"Gdybym tylko nadal mógł tak patrzeć": problematyka komunikacji epistolarnej w filmie *Smak curry* (2013)

Abstrakt

Artykuł bada, w jaki sposób zostaje uformowana nić porozumienia między dwiema osobami pochodzącymi z na pozór tego samego środowiska kulturowego, ale różniących się wiekiem, płcią, wyznaniem oraz osobistymi doświadczeniami. Analiza jest przeprowadzona w oparciu o film pod tytułem *Smak curry* (2013). Artykuł przedkłada wstępne informacje o filmie, a następnie prezentuje informacje kulturowe oraz historyczne, tak by móc poprawnie określić cechy głównych bohaterów. Kolejna część poświęcona jest problemom kształtowania komunikacji epistolarnej na podstawie przedmiotów ukazanych w filmie. Na koniec artykuł przechodzi do analizy konwersacji-przez-listy w celu zbadania osobowości głównych bohaterów w perspektywie koncepcji sentymentalizmu i indywidualności. Celem analizy jest ukazanie, iż nawet w dzisiejszych reprezentacjach aspekt komunikacji epistolarnej jest nadal popularny oraz może również prowadzić do nowych kreacji w dziedzinie postkolonializmu.

Słowa kluczowe

komunikacja epistolarna, Indie dzisiejsze, postkolonializm, sentymentalizm, Smak curry (2013)

1. Introduction

The Lunchbox is a 2013, independently financed Indian motion picture which focuses on the issues of solitude, romance, and exchange of thoughts through letters in the modern world. Therefore, the topic which this paper addresses is concerned with the issue of epistolary communication in the film *The Lunchbox*. In particular, the article analyses how the inhabitants of contemporary Mumbai, who are living in the same cultural environment, communicate with each other. In other

words, the issue of the popularity of epistolary communication in contemporary culture is explored.

As the first feature film of director Ritesh Batra, *The Lunch-box* marks another entry in a rising trend of international coproductions with artistic potential. Starring Irrfan Khan and Nimrat Kaur in the leading roles, the movie was a commercial success in India and overseas at the time of its release, and it was also considered for India's entry for the 86th Academy Awards Best Foreign Film Category. "The morning premiere got us a standing ovation. [...] There were requests for more screenings [...] and people shouting out dialogues on the street. It was hard to believe that my little film set in Mumbai had resonated with so many people across the world," Batra recalled about the unexpectedly favourable reception of the film (Bhattacharya 2013).

With regard to the film's plot, *The Lunchbox* tells the story of Mr Saajan Fernandes, a widower who is trying to get by at his accounting job, and Ila, a housewife who is hopelessly attempting to attract the attention of her busy husband. On one occasion, Ila even prepares a special meal which she sends via the food delivery system of Mumbai's "dabbawalas" in order to surprise her spouse. Unfortunately, a mix-up happens en route and the lunchbox ends up on Mr Fernandes' desk. Ila discovers that the meals are not reaching her husband and writes a letter to the unknown receiver of her dishes. Mr Fernandes responds and, in consequence, a long-lasting corre-

¹ Probably not as popular as the trend of *Heritage films* in the 1990s, international co-productions primarily serve to attract the Western viewers with interesting and exotic stories (often based on works of literature), ethnically-mixed cast and English dialogues. The examples of such films are *The Namesake* (2006), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012), and *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (2014) (Kuhn and Westwell 2012: 20).

² However, the Film Federation of India chose to select a different motion picture instead. The Gujarati drama film called *The Good Road* (2013) was selected as the Indian entry for the Oscars in spite of the fact that it was *The Lunchbox* which had wider audience recognition (http://news.biharprabha.com).

spondence ensues. The unexpected communication through the lunchbox irreversibly changes the two characters.

2. The dabbawala network: Lunchbox delivery system

In an interview, Batra stated that he gained the inspiration to write the screenplay while making a documentary about the so-called "dabbawalas". The director accompanied "those who carry boxes," as we might call them (Roncaglia 2013: 13), and he listened to the stories of people who work in one of the most culture-specific professions (Bhushan 2013). A "dabbawala" is a person in India, most commonly in Mumbai, who is a part of a delivery system that collects hot food in lunch boxes from the residences of workers in the late morning, delivers the lunches to the workplace, and returns the empty boxes that afternoon (Roncaglia 2013: xi–xii). "We never make mistakes. People from Harvard came to study our system. They say there are no errors [...] The King of England in person came to observe our system," a dabbawala firmly asserts the credibility of his craft in the film (*The Lunchbox* 01:29:12–01:29:45).

As strange as it may sound, this system works solely in India and it originated in colonial times (Roncaglia 2013: 16). Allegedly, Indian office workers simply prefer to eat homecooked food rather than rely on restaurants or local takeaways. Consequently, the dabbawalas serve as the middlemen between husbands and their housewives in a constantly active metropolis, "[conjuring] up the feeling of home for those away from home" (Roncaglia 2013: xii). They travel either by bicycles or railway trains and the usage of a highly complicated system of codes ensures a flawless delivery. "It was interesting to see how much they knew about the people for whom they deliver food everyday [...] who likes what kind of food or what sort of relationship they have with their families," Batra said when explaining his motivation to write the script (Bhushan 2013). Needless to say, the movie breaks the premise of perfect dabbawala service by creating a what-if scenario. A mistake in delivering the box turns the Mumbai reality upside down as it connects two complete strangers: Saajan and Ila.

3. Mumbai citizens and their relations

Apart from the uncommon phenomenon of the dabbawala network, the movie presents us with the idiosyncratic environment of Mumbai. Once known as the gateway of India, as described by E. M. Forster (Raghavan 2017), it is now a city with a population numbered in multi-millions, a wide social diversity and a rich history.

Mumbai serves as a refuge for people such as Mr Saajan Fernandes. As it was already mentioned, Mr Fernandes is a middle-aged widower, who lives in painful solitude after the loss of his wife. He works diligently during the days, yet spends his nights smoking continuously. Additionally, he is a reclusive, almost Scrooge-like character. For instance, when the ball of a group of children at play accidentally falls into his courtyard, he is not even willing to return it. In terms of religious affiliation, it is revealed that he is a Christian, as he visits the Catholic graveyard where his wife is buried. Even his atypical surname, Fernandes,³ serves to indicate a connection with the dim and distant past, when Mumbai was ruled by the Portuguese in the 17th century (Pagden 1998: 38).

For readers unfamiliar with the role of religion in the Portuguese colonisation efforts of India, Francis Xavier was primarily responsible for laying the foundations for Christianity in the country. Nevertheless, the mission of cultivating religion was not initially aimed at the native inhabitants. As it is stated by an Indian historian Teotonio R. de Souza: "aside from the zealous and self-sacrificing missionaries and the few chosen authorities from the middle range of nobility [...], the great majority of those who were dispatched as 'discoverers' were the riff-raff of Portuguese society, picked up from Portuguese jails" (de

³ Literally: Son of Fernando (https://surnames.behindthename.com).

Souza 2008: 26). In consequence, an overwhelming majority of the Portuguese settlers formed relationships with native women and accepted Indian customs (de Souza 2008: 26). Needless to say, such practices angered the missionaries, who described their fellow countrymen as disreputable and uncontrolled in their attitude. Xavier knew that he had to bring the colonisers to the righteous path of proper self-conduct. Therefore, he began teaching Portuguese children first. Next, he attended the sick and dying in hospitals. Later, he attempted to convert high-caste Brahmins, yet they remained steadfast in their Hindu beliefs (de Souza 2008: 30). Ultimately, Francis Xavier had more luck with the lower-caste natives, who formed the base of the Indian Catholics in Goa.⁴ Nevertheless, Xavier grew increasingly displeased with the racist attitude of other missionaries and the maltreatment of Christian converts so he suggested to the King of Portugal in 1546 the establishment of the Inquisition in Goa (de Souza 2008: 27).

The movie does not indicate at any point that Mr Fernandes is being persecuted for his religious beliefs. Instead of focusing on a modern social issue, his spiritual allegiance serves more as a subtle reference to the colonial past of Goa, which used to be a plain for multicultural exchange. Christianity as a religion conforms with the character of Mr. Fernandes as his attitude is all about the past and sentimentalism. Perhaps the best reflection of his longing for things long gone can be the following quote:

Dear Ila, your grandmother's recipe was very good. Even better than my favourite, eggplant. Yesterday even I found something from many years ago. I found old TV shows that my wife used to record. You must have been a child when they played on TV or not even born yet. My wife used to love them. I don't know why I wanted to see them. I watched them for hours. I went through

⁴ Nowadays, Goan Catholics are suffering ethnic cleansing as they are culturally perceived as "agents" of the Portuguese colonisers. For instance, they are denied job opportunities or political posts in the local councils. (Eremita 2015).

them show by show, episode by episode. And then finally after staying up all night, I realised what it was that I was looking for. Every Sunday when she watched the shows, I was outside repairing my bicycle, or just smoking, and I would glance through the window every now and then just for a second. And I would see her reflection on the TV screen, laughing, laughing at the same jokes over and over... each time as if she was hearing it for the very first time. I wish I had kept on looking back then... (*The Lunchbox* 00:45:59–00:47:13)

In view of the quoted passage, we can infer that Saajan Fernandes is very much an analogue figure. That is to say, he is not only overwhelmed by an immense feeling of nostalgia, but he also relies on outdated means to continuously conjure up that emotional state. Some researchers would argue that Saajan's sentimentalism is the primary factor responsible for the clouding of his moral judgement (Schroeter 2006: 338). According to the sentimentalist school of thought, sentimentalism and free will are two contrasting phenomena. Sentimentalism relies strictly on feeling and, in consequence, it results in subjectivity, egoism, and passivity (Schroeter 2006: 340). In other words, human beings are so emotionally tied to the past that they are unable to move forward in their lives, instead they are forced to accommodate the subjective desire of longing. In turn, free will is connected to objectivity, thus, it enables an individual to be creative and pursue his own goals. Surprisingly, Saajan embodies both phenomena as sentimentalism is the driving force of his free will. In other words, the protagonist desires a change in his life through helping Ila.

Ila, on the other hand, is a young housewife and a mother who seeks to renew her relationship with her husband. She is in her mid-30s and practises Hinduism. Even though she is married, her world is limited only to her apartment. When her husband is out and her daughter is at school, the only activities she can enjoy are cooking and conversations with her aunty who never appears on screen. This is her everyday reality until the first lunchbox is returned: empty, not consumed

by her husband. Initially, she and Saajan exchange recipes, personal anecdotes and pieces of advice, but eventually their epistolary conversation becomes more intimate. It is she who opens herself up and confesses that, most probably, her husband is cheating on her. Gradually, she dreams of escaping with her daughter to Bhutan and, with the progress of time, this becomes Mr Fernandes' dream as well. Ila's unwavering romanticism is reflected when she writes: "I read somewhere that sometimes, the wrong train can lead you to the right station" (*The Lunchbox* 01:36:58–01:37:04).

What is more, we should also mention the third, supporting, character of the story, Shaikh. He is the office apprentice of Mr Fernandes, very outgoing in his manner, yet extremely naive. For instance, when he asks his mentor if it was true that he once kicked a cat on the street, Fernandes responds: "It wasn't a cat. It was actually a blind man. He was asking for directions, so I pushed him and a bus ran over him" (The Lunchbox 00:40:22-00:40:29). This was obviously an exaggerated joke, yet Shaikh dreads Saajan's inaccessibility. Fortunately, the two develop a father-son relationship. Shaikh's character is important for the fact that he eloped with his fiancée when her parents refused to bless their engagement. Thus, he symbolises the fulfilment of love, something which is not available for Saajan. Additionally, Shaikh is the only character who encounters both Mr Fernandes and Ila in the story. That is to say, Ila eventually tracks down the office where her lunchboxes were going, but Mr Fernandes is nowhere to be seen. Shaikh explains that his mentor has just retired.

4. Epistolary communication: objects

As previously mentioned, there is a great variety of objects which play pivotal roles in the epistolary communication between the characters. At this point, it is important to recall that The Lunchbox was made as an international co-production because, as Ritesh Batra stated, the film had "the potential to travel" (Bhushan 2013). In other words, the culture-specific content could easily be understood by Western audiences. Interestingly, a film critic Trisha Gupta claims that the issue of the movie's "translatability" is its primary disadvantage (Gupta 2013). The "Tiffinbox", as she ironically writes: "tick[s] all the boxes that might appeal to festival audiences: quaint Asian urbanism [...], Indian home-cooking, romance. It provides local colour, without being demandingly untranslatable" (Gupta 2013). As a result, the story of Saajan and Ila becomes less exotic than a genuine Indian production. Nevertheless, The Lunchbox manages to convey a sense of outdatedness, a distinctly sentimental feeling of being in another time, through the following items:

- (1) Lunchbox: an object which establishes communication between the characters, yet it is not the purpose for which it was designed.
- (2) Letters: means through which the characters share their intimate thoughts. Gupta accurately notices the paradox of epistolary communication in a high-tech world of modernity (Gupta 2013). The lunchbox delivery mistake could be explained via cell phones, for instance.
- (3) Food: meals transported in the lunchbox which serve as an enhancement of the communication between Saajan and Ila. As Batra explained, with the progression of the characters' relationship, the dishes would get simpler (Virani 2014). In addition, meals may be regarded as an emotional bridge between the act of eating and the act of feeling. Nevertheless, in view of Batra's statement, this was not the director's creative intention.

- (4) VHS tapes: means of sentimentalism for Mr Fernandes in grief. Additionally, the tapes indicate not only Saajan's state of nostalgia, but also a longing for simpler times, for a quieter India, while watching a popular Indian TV show from the 1980s, *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*⁵.
- (5) Song: even though the musical score is barely present in the motion picture, at one point, the viewers can see Ila listening to a song called *Saajan*. She asks her aunt to play it after learning Mr Fernandes' name.⁶ In this way, the character is associated with a romantic hero of a Bollywood comedy from the 1990s.⁷
- (6) Cigarettes: an indication of spiritual enslavement. Mr Fernandes quits smoking upon learning from Ila that her father died of lung cancer.
- (7) Trains: means of transport symbolising the fate of the characters towards the end of the film, as conveyed in Ila's saying: "The wrong train can lead you to the right station."

5. Epistolary communication vs. epistemology

In view of the above objects, it is apparent that they serve to set up a different epistemological reality, the world as if from the 1990s, in which epistolary communication is still possible. In addition, the items indicate the change that occurs within the characters. For example, Mr. Fernandes transforms from a Scrooge-like person into a dreamer. In this manner, his character comes a full circle as he becomes a true individual through his sense of sentimentality. That is to say, he dreams of Bhutan, an imaginary utopia where he could be together with Ila. What is more, he even gives back the ball to the chil-

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⁵ One of the first sitcoms on Indian television written by Sharad Joshi and starring Shafi Inamdar and Swaroop Sampat. For more information about *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*, please refer to: http://www.hindustantimes.com/tv/what-made-yeh-jo-hai-zindagi-such-an-important-show/story-boYysrZZEnwgemlRVFVUFO.html>.

⁶ Saajan literally means "Beloved" or "Friend" (http://name meanings-dictionary.com).

⁷ Saajan (1991): an Indian romantic drama film directed by Lawrence D'Souza and starring Sanjay Dutt, Madhuri Dixit and Salman Khan. (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102825/).

dren playing on the street. However, he also realises that he is too old to be with Ila.

Ila, on the other hand, gains confidence. She wants to liberate herself from the patriarchal system of oppression by escaping from her husband, to break away from the grim prospect of serving him until her death. In addition to this, she does not want to repeat the fate of her mother who was forced to battle lla's father's smoking addiction. Ila's mother found freedom only after the death of her spouse. Such a dismal state of affairs leads Ila to the conclusion that all she really wants is to be with Saajan Fernandes.

Consequently, the outcome is the epistemological clash between the characters. They resolve to *elope* together, thus they set up a meeting at a local café, but Fernandes never comes, or, more appropriately, never approaches Ila. Instead, he observes Ila from a distance and explains to her in a subsequent letter:

Life kept on going and lulled me with its motions. I kept rocking back and forth as it threw me left and it threw me right... And then, before I knew it... No one buys yesterday's lottery ticket, Ila. I came to the restaurant while you were waiting. There you were, fidgeting with your purse, drinking all that water... I wanted to come up to you and tell you all this in person, but I just watched you wait. You look beautiful. You're young. You have dreams. And for some time you have let me into your dreams. And I want to thank you for that. (*The Lunchbox* 01:20:48–01:21:51)

In view of the passage above, we might ask, what about Mr Fernandes' sincerity in his communication? He gives up the dream of being with Ila because of the enormous social gap between them. Nevertheless, he starts living anew. Initially he has the intention of leaving for Bhutan on his own, but eventually, he stays on in Mumbai and continues to work with Shaikh. Ila, however, still intends to escape. That is why she

⁸ To repeat the fate of Shaikh and his fiancée.

tracks down the office address, because she wanted to see Saajan just for once. She even writes an ambiguous letter to him towards the end of the film:

You're probably at Nasik. You had to get up this morning make a tea. And maybe a walk afterward. This morning I woke up, and I sold all my jewellery. My bracelets, my earrings, my wedding necklace. It is not much. But they told me: 1 rupee is worth 5 in Bhutan. So we should be okay for some time. And afterward... we'll see. When Yashvi [the daughter] returns, the luggage will be ready. We will take the train this afternoon. I might send you this letter and your new postman will bring it to you. Or maybe I will keep it, and read in a few years... I read somewhere that sometimes, the wrong train can lead you to the right station. We'll see... (*The Lunchbox* 01:36:02–01:37:07)

With regard to Mr Fernandes, he liberates himself from the constraints of constantly looking back at the past, the primary cause of his solitude. Yet, was he right about not leaving with Ila? As Raja Sen argues in his article, unlike *The Lunchbox*'s predecessors, such as *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) and *You've Got Mail* (1998), the epistolary communication between Saajan and Ila is "less conversational, more confessional" (Sen 2013). As we can see in the quoted passages, the heroes transgress the confines of surrounding reality by wholly opening themselves to one another. "[These] are letters written with the kind of comfortable candour one finds in the neighbouring seat of an airplane [...] candour that exists because the speakers are [not] likely to meet again and thus can speak their minds" (Sen 2013).

6. Conclusion

On the basis of *The Lunchbox*, it is evident that the mode of epistolary communication is still popular in contemporary representations. Nevertheless, its usage serves a different purpose. Rather than providing a stereotypical love story with a happy

ending, the process of writing letters is more about dealing with personal issues in the world of growing multiculturalism. Only by knowing ourselves can we accurately understand the surrounding reality. This is also the case with Saajan and Ila.

In the final scene, we see Saajan travelling with the dab-bawalas. By doing so, Mr. Fernandes hopes to find Ila during the process of returning the lunchbox. However, the same day, Ila, as she stated in her letter, sells her jewellery and intends to escape as soon as her daughter returns from school. Will Saajan find her before she leaves? Unfortunately, this is a question which the viewers have to answer on their own. In consequence, the epistolary sincerity is very much overshadowed, or even taken over, by the epistemological uncertainty of the story's finale.

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