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**EXPLORING ASPECTS OF FORCED MOBILITY: RE-VISITING THE FILMS
OF BIMAL ROY AND SALLY EL HOSAINI**

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Abstract:

*Mobility or the ability to move has both positive as well as negative connotations. If on the one hand, mobility suggests freedom, agency and adaptability, it can also imply displacement, instability and hardship. Human beings as well as animals have been on the move since time immemorial. Search for greener pastures, desire for change and the necessity for survival have been some of the main causes of this tendency to move. However, in the last two centuries factors such as climate change, poverty, geopolitical events across the globe and the ruthless forces of capitalism and industrialization have led to the forced mobility and massive displacement of people all over the world. This paper seeks to problematize the physical, psychological and symbolic implications of forced mobility on the economic migrant and the political refugee by engaging in a comparative study of Bimal Roy's classic film on the exploitation of peasants, *Do Bigha Zameen* and Sally El Hosaini's film on Syrian refugees, *The Swimmers*. Located far apart from each other both temporally and spatially as well as in the cultural topography, the two films employ mobility as tropes of advancement, agency as well as entrapment.*

Keywords: *Mobility, Migrant, Refugee, Agency, Loss, Immobility, etc.*

Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen*, released in 1953, is one of the gems of Indian cinema. Influenced by Italian Neorealism, Roy paints a bleak picture of the plight of the Indian farmer who finds himself trapped between the oppressive forces of feudalism and industrialization. "The film makes a point that both these systems are comparable in their exploitative nature: they go hand-in-hand in amassing wealth for the few with poverty for the multitudes" (Tyagi & Jain, 459). Shambhu Mahato, is the unfortunate farmer who happens to own a plot of two bighas (two-thirds of an acre) which the Zamindar is determined to seize in order to construct a mill in the village. However, despite his impoverished condition and inferior status, Shambhu is not a passive victim. He fights hard in order to keep his land, but is eventually outsmarted by the Zamindar who takes full advantage of his lack of knowledge about law. Shambhu is now faced with two choices; to pay back his debt to the Zamindar or to agree to the auctioning-off of his land. Since he is given a period of three months within which he has to pay the loan amount, he makes a decision to migrate to the city of Kolkata in order to make



enough money to save his plot of land. Thus begins Shambhu's journey as a migrant. The song "Dharti Kahe Pukar Ke" sets the scene for Shambhu's departure. The lyrics "Apninishaanichhod ja kuchtohnishaanichhod ja, ...tuphiraayenaay" (Leave behind a token of remembrance, ...who knows you may or may not come this way again) poignantly convey the pain of departing and the uncertainty of the near future for both Shambhu and his wife Parvati.

Shambhu is the economic migrant who has been forced to leave behind his pregnant wife and father and embark upon a journey to an unknown place. He is a figure of dispossession and disempowerment. He is in danger of losing the land which he considers to be an integral part of his existence as a farmer: "Zameen chale jane pe hi toh kisan ka satyanash ho jatahaiHujur". (Sir, once the land is lost a farmer is ruined)As Shambhu starts his train journey towards Kolkata he discovers that his son Kanhaiya is also on the same train, and this adds to his feelings of fear and anxiety. For the migrant, "the moment of departure marks the beginning of a rupture, the first of a series of interruptions to the known and the customary, the initial stages of a loss of well-being". (Bromley, 105) Shambhu's feelings of apprehension which are produced by his displacement are justified once he reaches Kolkata. Intimidated by the fast pace and vastness of the city, the father and son feel completely lost. The way Shambhu is dismissed each time he approaches people for work is a telling comment on the sad plight of the migrant worker. Robbed of whatever little belongings they still possess, Shambhu and Kanhaiya finally manage to get accommodation and begin to start earning their livelihoods. Shambhu takes up work as a rickshaw puller while Kanhaiya becomes a shoeshine boy. Whatever little money they make from their menial jobs goes into their savings.

In what is one of the most dehumanizing and heartbreaking scenes in the film, Shambhu meets with a terrible accident while racing with a fellow rickshaw puller. A rich passenger makes him chase another rickshaw offering to give him more money if he catches up with the other rickshaw. Finding it a good opportunity to make money, the cash-strapped Shambhu is reduced to racing like a horse and he runs faster every time the rider quotes a higher amount. Roy uses an intensified musical score and rapidly moving camera angles to convey Shambhu's desperation and misery. Already malnourished and of poor health from skipping meals and from intense labour, he collapses even as one of the wheels of his rickshaw comes loose. This incident has tragic implications for Shambhu and his already impoverished family. He refuses to let his son use any of the money to buy nutritious food for him despite the doctor's advice that he needs to eat well in order to recover. Moreover, he insists on going to work though he can barely walk. Worried for his father's health, Kanhaiya writes a letter to his mother telling her about Shambhu's accident and asking her to join them so that she can take care of him. However, after reaching Kolkata, Parvati falls into the clutches of a villain who tries to rape her and take away her money. While fleeing from him she comes under the wheels of a car. And it is Shambhu the rickshaw puller who is called to take the unknown lady to the hospital. In a highly melodramatic scene, Shambhu discovers to his horror and deep anguish, that the injured lady is none other than his beloved wife. The money that he had taken such pains to save, has to be spent on his wife's treatment. Thus, all his efforts of saving his land come to naught.



If we were to analyse the different aspects of Shambhu's mobility, then it cannot be denied that his migration affords him some degree of agency. Instead of silently yielding to the demands of the Zamindar, he chooses to put up a resistance and take up the challenge of venturing out, in an attempt to save his land. Shambhu's mobility in turn, gives rise to the mobility of his wife, Parvati. Parvati who has been a housewife so far had been denied the opportunity to earn a livelihood. Even in the face of extreme financial hardship, Shambhu refuses to allow his wife to work saying "Hamaregharane ki kisi bahu ne aajtaknaukarikiyehai jo tukare?" (No daughter-in-law of our family has ever worked outside, so why should you?) However, when Shambhu stops sending money after his accident Parvati takes up a job as a construction labourer. On receiving the news of her husband's accident, she leaves for Kolkata immediately. For a woman who has led a sheltered life in a village, these are indeed brave steps and are signs of her mobility. However, it is another matter that her visit to Kolkata leads to tragic consequences. The rickshaw race scene is the climax of the film and it is indeed most ironic that a moment that is charged with intensified mobility should bring about the perpetual immobility of the protagonist and his family. Shambhu is running out of time to collect the required amount of money to pay his debt and his accident acts as a major impediment to his plans. Parvati's consequent arrival and her fateful accident further deliver a crushing blow to Shambhu's dreams of saving his land. Meanwhile, Shambhu's son Kanhaiya, who had been working as a shoeshine boy becomes a pickpocket in his desperate bid to earn money. Though later, he expresses great remorse over his actions, as a school dropout, Kanhaiya has slim chances of improving his future prospects or that of his parents. So, there is no moving forward for Shambhu and his family. Fate and adverse circumstances render them immobile as they are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and hopelessness from which there is no escape.

Let us now engage with the forced mobility of the political refugee as opposed to the economic migrant. To explore this angle this paper makes use of Sally El Hosaini's 2022 film, *The Swimmers*. The film is based on a true story of two Syrian refugee sisters, Sara and Yusra Mardini, trying to find asylum in Europe as they flee from war-torn Syria in 2015. Fully aware of the responsibilities involved in the narration of a true story, Hosaini presents us with a compelling refugee narrative of loss, displacement, hope and resilience. In an interview she states "When you are translating something that's a true story, you feel your responsibility to Yusra and Sara, but also a responsibility to tell a larger story." (n.p) So while the film focuses on the journey of its two protagonists, it widens the scope of its story to comment on the larger humanitarian crisis faced by millions of migrants even to this day. The two teenaged Mardini sisters decide to brave the perilous migration to Europe when conditions in Syria start to get disturbingly unsafe. The girls lose a friend Razan Haddad, who is the third friend to die in a period of one month. When their father and swimming coach, Essat, is reluctant to let them travel to Europe on their own, Sara asks her father "You know how many times we have come close to death?" And sure enough the very next day a bombing takes place while Yusra is in the swimming pool and a shell drops in the pool. Yusra survives but the incident makes her parents realize that the girls are better off outside Syria. After an emotional and tearful departure, the two sisters along with their male cousin Nizar set off on their journey to Europe.

The journey of the political migrant is "circuitous, risk- filled and endlessly protracted ...marked by subterfuge, menace and suffering" (Bromley, 31). After the sisters arrive in



Istanbul, they are huddled in an overcrowded and leaking dinghy boat that is supposed to take them across the Aegean Sea to the Greek island of Lesbos. Hosaini visualizes the vulnerability of the riders by taking a long shot to show an overhead view of the tiny boat being tossed upon the vast sea. Soon the boat starts filling up with water and the engine stops working. When one of the passengers desperately calls up the Greek coastguards to help them as they are in Greek waters, they are asked to go back as it is not their policy to help refugees. Hence the lives of refugees are “regarded as disposable.... are so stripped of value that when they are imperilled, injured or lost, their potential loss is no occasion to mourn” (Butler, 35). Sara realizes that the boat is overcrowded and jumps into the water, followed by Yusra and two more people who can swim. It is the heroic act of these four people that saves the lives of the others on the boat. Once the group reaches the island, they come across heaps of discarded life jackets. The camera pulls back to look down at the sea of life jackets to hint at the gravity of the migrant crisis and to show how many people risks their lives on a daily basis. The rest of the journey is no less treacherous. They have to walk along railway tracks, they are cheated of their money and Yusra survives a harrowing rape attempt. Finally, as they arrive in the German city of Berlin, they are incredulous that they have finally made it.

Sara and Yusra have been professional swimmers training under their father. For Yusra and her father, the ultimate goal is to have Yusra swim in the Rio Olympics of 2016. Relentless in their will to succeed, despite the overwhelming ordeal they have undergone, the Mardini sisters locate a swimming club in Berlin and approach the coach Sven introducing themselves as swimmers. Yusra’s persistence and her swimming timings are able to convince Sven to have them swim for the club. Thus begins another journey for Yusra and Sara. As Yusra gears up for the Rio Olympics, Sara realizes that her calling is in helping refugees like herself to cross over to Europe. She tells Yusra “I need to be there. To help everyone.” While the two sisters seem to be moving forward in their respective paths, their cousin Nizar finds himself stuck in a rut which is the fate of most refugees. When he comes to visit his cousins at the Swimming Club, he is piqued by the glaring contrast in their present lives. He tells them “I can’t do anything here. I’m not allowed to work until I get my papers. There’s nothing here to come for, nothing, except waiting and paperwork.” The film ends on a positive note with Yusra winning a medal at the Rio Olympics. But the message that Hosaini wants to convey is that Yusra’s win is not just a personal win but a triumph of the entire refugee community, who are trying to find some measure of hope and stability in the face of immense loss, uncertainty and grave dangers. When Yusra, who initially had reservations about participating as a member of the Refugee Team, is troubled upon overhearing other participants suggest that she is here only because of her status as a refugee, her sister Sara tells her, “You should swim for all of us. You should swim for Baba because he didn’t. Swim for me because I couldn’t.... Swim for Razan Haddad. And for everyone who died trying to find a new life. You’re so much more than an Olympian.”

In *The Swimmers*, the mobility that the protagonists undergo, albeit forced, serves as tropes of agency, liberation and resilience. It allows them to map their personal journeys and in turn to create their own narratives. The displacement that the Mardini sisters are subjected to results in their deliverance from the perils associated with war and conflict. It transports them to a zone of safety despite the feelings of alienation, loss and uprootedness associated with forced mobility. In other words, it brings about the liberation of the protagonists. Even after



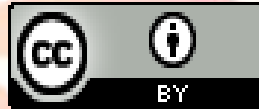
they have settled in the country of asylum, each sister is able to sustain the momentum of her journey forward in her own way. Swimming is a trope for advancement and the physical mobility associated with the sport is symbolic of the upward mobility that Yusra is able to achieve in terms of recognition, visibility and agency, after she wins a medal at the Rio Olympics of 2016. Appointed as a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador in 2017, she can use her fame and celebrity status to advocate for the cause of refugees, less fortunate than herself. Unlike her sister, Sara is only able to achieve horizontal mobility in that there is no change or upward movement in her social status. Her mobility is only marked by a territorial shift. However, her agential capacities are no less than that of her sister's. Sacrificing her swimming career in order to bring refugees like herself to safety, Sara's mobility is on the level of the altruistic and spiritual. She may have stagnated with respect to her own social mobility but she is able to bring mobility in the lives of many others. Her selflessness and complete disregard for her own safety make her a fearless hero. The moving scene in which Sara, followed by Yusra, jumps into the Aegean waters in order to ensure the safe passage of the others on the leaking dinghy boat, anticipates the altruism and agency of the Mardini sisters vis-à-vis their role as champions of refugees all across the globe.

As narratives of forced mobility, Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* and Sally El Hosaini's *The Swimmers* focus on the plight of the economic migrant and the political refugee respectively. Both the films show how it is hostile circumstances at home that give rise to migrancy. It is the economic persecution faced by Shambhu and the violence encountered by Hosaini's protagonists that lead to their displacement. While Sara and Yusra are fleeing to save their lives, Shambhu is forced to move out in order to save the land which he considers to be the very essence of his life as a farmer. The migrant journey at all levels- the physical, symbolical and emotional, is beset with hardships. Shambhu struggles with adversity in every step of the way until he finally loses his battle with fate in the face of crushing poverty. Starting with the ordeal of the hazardous physical journey from Syria to Europe, Sara and Yusra continue to encounter challenges as they grapple with obstacles that stand in the way of them achieving their goals. The two narratives end on contrasting notes. While the mobility of the Mardini sisters is a trope for agency and empowerment and the film ends on a positive note, Shambhu's mobility is a trope for entrapment on both the symbolic and psychological level and the film ends with a picture of utmost despair. Despite the physical distance from his village, he is psychologically tied to his land. Bereft of hope and stripped of agency as he is, Shambhu's movement from the village to the city and then back to the village only results in an essential immobility at the centre. Though Hosaini's film is a story of hope, courage and resilience centred on the journey of the two sisters, it does not ignore the broader humanitarian crisis faced by asylum seekers to this day. For instance, in the case of Nizar Mardini who seems to have reached a dead end as a result of bureaucratic red tape, mobility on one level leads to immobility at the level of the psychological and symbolical. Thus, both Roy and Hosaini have used the cinematic medium to explore the various nuances of mobility of underprivileged and uprooted people. When considered together the two films converge and diverge from each other in complicated ways. Both are marked by dispossession, danger and dislocation at a deeper level.



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