



Middle Eastern Mythology and Indian Identity

Airlift: A study

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The film *Airlift* is the story of a journey, journey towards **Self-Identity**. It is about choosing identity too. It is also about **Semitic mythology** interwoven into Indian celluloid, an unusual combination. *Airlift*, a 2016 film, starts at a very interesting juncture of Middle East politics. It is set in Middle East, using the international politics to interweave the Indian characters and their reactions to it, and eventually their evolution. Perhaps, for the first time, a Bollywood cinema starring a major star delves into the fate of overseas Indians caught in international politics. Thus, this film is as much about Middle East, as much about the Indians living for their livelihood. For a change, the backdrop changes from snow-clad Switzerland or New Zealand and deals with Asian land and Asian people. It is a first, in that respect. In order to talk about the film, we need first to understand the time and the space where the film's story takes place. Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait in the year 1990, thus began a stand-off of seven months. It eventually led to the first Gulf War. During the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the **largest civilian airlift** took place during the tenure of I.K. Gujral as foreign minister when Air India, Indian airlines and Indian Air Force joined hands to evacuate more than one lakh Indians caught in the strife-torn Kuwait. It was the largest civilian airlift in history. (The Berlin Airlift was remarkable, but the largest civilian evacuation in history is done by India.)¹ 'Whenever we talk of airlifts, the only thing that people talk of is the Berlin Airlift (during the cold war, of course, the aircrafts were primitive and the situation was different back then, yet airlifting one lakh people, as we did in Iraq, is unheard of retired Air Vice Marshall Manmohan Bahadur.

Mr **Ranjit Katyal**, played by Akshay Kumar, is a successful and somewhat unscrupulous businessman settled cosily in Kuwait with his wife Amrita and daughter Simran. He has deep contempt for India and its ways, though he himself is of Indian origin. Interestingly, he identifies himself as a Kuwaiti, maintaining close relations with the wealthy and the mighty of the Kuwaiti society. The film opens with Ranjit's conversation with his driver Nair where he repeatedly makes rather unsavoury remarks about India which is in contrast with Nair's nostalgia for his birth country. This sets the tone for the question of Ranjit's **self-identity**. After the Iraqi invasion, when confronted with Iraqi soldiers on the road, Ranjit shouts his desperate instruction to Nair not to speak Arabic. This reveals as practical a nature of Ranjit as his pliable nature for survival, for whom identity is a mere coin, not an intrinsic part. When the rowdy Iraqi soldiers get into Ranjit's car after the killing of Nair, we see the rosary with the Sikh emblem on the car dashboard. The car belongs to the owner, so it points to the identity of Ranjit rather than the driver. Before his reunion with Amrita, we get a **Close up shot** of Ranjit in his car as he emotionally crumples seeing the carnage in the street. He goes to meet Nair's wife, unmistakably Indian, both in her attire and her situation. We get

¹ Venkatramakrishnan Rohan, July 02, 2014



three shots, one **mid-shot**, two **close ups**. The **montage** shows Ranjit bringing the dead Nair's family to safety. Thus begins a selfish man's journey. The class barrier breaks. '**Toh Ranjit kalya kya cheez hai?**' Ranjit utters in extreme frustration after meeting his wife after the ordeal. Ranjit starts coming down from his condescending attitude.

Amrita confronts her husband when Ranjit decides to take responsibility of his entire staff and their families instead of trying to get out of Kuwait with only his family. Amrita asks, '**Why are you trying to become a messiah?**' We first get the film's **Messiah** metaphor in this scene. In the **Genesis** of Bible there was **Noah**. The great flood and Noah's ark are two of the most debated and sought after discourse in Biblical studies. There was a great flood in ancient times. Noah built a great ark and saved mankind. There was also **Exodus of Moses** who rescued Israelis from Egypt. 'But the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron and gave them a charge about the people of Israel...to bring the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt.'² We see both the reference to Noah and Moses, the Biblical saviour, in the character of Ranjit. Now, according to Semitic mythology, who is this **Messiah**? The Messiah is one who, apparently, belongs to the elite section of society. Later, he takes up the responsibility to guide **his** people to safety, moral and physical, both. Sometimes, Lord the God may intervene. But this role of **The Saviour** is primarily **voluntary**. He negotiates on behalf of his people to God and King, that is, who has authority. His very role as saviour makes him open to the allegations from the very people he proposes to lead. This leadership is often a result of a contingency, geographical, spiritual, or **political**. Surprisingly enough, in the very year that Airlift released, a Hollywood movie named **The Young Messiah** based on the life of a young **Christ**, also made its way.

Other Indians begin to gather in the office of Ranjit. His office gradually begins to take the shape of the stronghold of a ship with people sleeping in the corridors and other spaces. Ranjit is faced with the dilemma of arranging place and food for sixteen hundred people. Even for people whom he is not acquainted with. When suggested that those who do not work in his office be told to go away, we find Ranjit in a **Close up shot** where though showing bemused expression, he finds it easy to say no to the suggestion. At Kurien's supermarket, he drinks scotch with other fellow Indians. The others interpret the unveiling situation without much anxiety. They feel everything will be alright once America intervenes. Only Ranjit remains sceptical. On the question of dividing foods, he says, 'Let all of **us Indians** bring all the food at one place and stay together instead of dividing up the food.' 'When the Israelites saw it, they asked each other, what is it... this bread the lord has given you to eat.'³

He has finally said it. '**Us Indians!**'

'**When did you become an Indian?**'

² Exodux 3:16

³ Exodus16



The core question of the film is answered almost immediately by Ranjit, 'We have only one identity here, of an **Indian**. Not a Kuwaiti.' The words come out without heat, without passion. This utterance is based not on emotion. This is a pragmatic approach of a person who does not love to be stuck in a problematic situation for a long time. The **Close up shot** along with the dialogue states emphatically that if not an Indian, then **NOTHING!**' This is also an inclusive Indianness as Ranjit beckons Ibrahim to go with him towards togetherness. The message is simple: **Stand United**.

In the genre of patriotic movies too, this film is different. We can safely say that Akshay Kumar has increasingly emerged as the post-globalized India's **Mr Bharat**, an epithet almost exclusively preserved for Mr. Manoj Kumar till date. Manoj Kumar's patriotic heroes were **born** as patriotic. Akshay's patriotic overtures are over-the-top in other films. He is the ultimate poster boy of globalized patriot on celluloid. But this film has space for growth. This is a construction of patriotism into the fibres of a human being. This film deals with the question of identity as much as the fact that patriotism is, often, a matter of construction which in turn, depends on events unfolding in one's immediate environment. This also stresses that accepting one's **National Identity** is a positive connotation. The quest for **self-identity** is not new though in Bollywood. The iconic role in which this question was dealt with in a major way, was essayed by Dev Anand in Jewel Thief. Here, **self-identity** is intertwined with **land** and **nationhood** as is clear from the old man's reminiscences about his life in Lahore in pre-partition India.

Even as a film dealing with non resident Indians, in short, NRIs, this film deviates from the norm of using the locations of the attractive first world countries, the **Milayat** of every Indian's dream. No green mountains, no automated cars riding super-smooth roads, no white people acting as part of the **mise-en-scene**, thus adding glamour to the frame. This movie deals with Asian people, and here, Asian people deal with other Asian people. We see dark-skinned Iraqis as well as dark-skinned Indians throughout the span of the movie. The movie's plot also is set in the times of a predominantly Asian crisis.

When the Indians gather in the camp, we have a stunning **Close up shot** of Amrita. She covers her head with a green veil and the semitic imagery is strong, coupled with her shapely Middle Eastern facial features. She may well be a Biblical figure, like Ruth or Ziporah. This frame is one of the visuals which stand apart in the whole film. Her face stands out as she is part of the sequence yet alienated from the helplessness of her fellow Indians which is in sharp contrast to Ranjit's involvement in every frame. 'Tell the people of Israel to encamp.'⁴

All Ranjit's major decisions of taking action follow **Close up shots** of his face as he takes in the reality. The idea of setting up camp for all Indians, accepting Amrita's decision to live in the safety of their home, to go to the Indian embassy, to ask for number of Ministry of External Affairs of India, through these shots Ranjit is on his way to become something other than what his cushioned existence made him. Amrita greets him in the camp, '**Hello**

⁴ Exodus 14:1-31



stranger! The entire sequence is played out using **Two shots**. Through the words of his wife, the transformation of Ranjit becomes a fact. Amrita accuses him of playing the role of an Indian when Ranjit stresses that he wants to sort it out for his fellow Indians. Amrita asks the question so vital to understand this transformation: **What are you trying to become?**

The underlying themes of this what we may call, a leading question, are, one, Ranjit is trying to construct a new identity for himself. The other, Ranjit is becoming **The Saviour**. Not a mere well-providing husband anymore. In a powerful **referent** to the Messiah question, the Iraqi deputy in Kuwait asks Ranjit, **'Where will YOU go with all these people?'**

Time and again, throughout the film, the question of **IDENTITY** crops up. Without document, how does an Indian prove his identity? Who is an Indian, who is not? One could be a Bangladeshi, or Pakistani. On the question of nationality, Ranjit says to Ibrahim, 'When a person is hurt, he calls out to his mother.' He confirms his Indianhood, thus settling the question of his own identity. In this journey from Kuwait to Baghdad, Indian Ranjit emerges. Ranjit goes to Baghdad and meets the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Iraq, Tarik Aziz to negotiate about the Kuwaiti Indian's plight.' 'Let my people go.'⁵ In the meantime, his wife, Amrita, consolidates Ranjit's claim over **Messiah-ship** while giving a piece of her mind to Mr. George, a hostile inmate of the camp. In the true fashion of the construct of Messiah-ship, Mr George challenges Ranjit and his decisions. 'In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "...you have brought us out into this desert to starve all of us to death".'⁶ She says that some people has this **'manufacturing defect** that they can't be indifferent to others' trouble.' This is a clear allusion to the **Messiah Complex**. We see, in this film, the Iraqi invasion becomes a symbol for a situation as grave as the Great Flood and the Iraqi deputy hoisted upon the Kuwaities, is a reference to the devious Pharaoh. Even the motif of ship is used twice. Once, during the ship Tipu Sultan fiasco which was to rescue the Indians. Another ship, successfully evacuates four hundred Indians from Kuwait. Both these ships involved efforts of Ranjit for his fellow countrymen. Finally, the Indian the aeroplanes become the ark, and an affluent businessman grows in his role as messiah to the Indians in plight. It is a **dual journey** for Ranjit: one, a responsible human being. The other is an Indian. For Amrita, the journey is reverse though. She starts by telling Ranjit to become responsible. Later, faced with violence and conflict, her maternal instincts take over. So, the **MAN** strives towards character development as a human, whereas the **WOMAN** remains a woman while preserving of her family takes the front seat. The woman, of course, eventually stands by her man. But it happens, not by any evolution of character forced by political upheavals. Her instincts as a care-giver to the man rules when her man faces attack from the very people he tries to rescue. The **Sita** metaphor of Indian mythology mingles effortlessly with the Biblical face of Nimrat Kaur.

⁵Exodus5:1-35

⁶ Exodus16



The **Final Journey** begins. After some action and tense journey through the desert-night, the Indians cross the border safely. **Moses-like**, Ranjit confronts the evil Iraqi policemen hands on. After the very physical scuffle, the Messiah and his flock are finally together and through Ranjit's exclamation it is clear that **The Saviour's mercy** matters. In an arresting **Aerial shot**, the caravan of buses carrying the Indians resembles a blue river which again, has a resonance of the **Exodus** through Red Sea, across the desert. They finally reach Amman. The **Messiah's gaze** finally finds the national flag fluttering in the airport of a foreign land. **Close up shot** of a teary-eyed Ranjit looks on as a song is played in the background, he kept remembering you whom you forgot...he came to your rescue, leaving everything behind.' which is a pane both to the **Motherland** and the **Messiah**. A **Long shot** establishes the Messiah with his people while the Tricolour is seen at the right side of the frame.

Reference:

1. Venkataramakrishnan Rohan. July2, 2014. Scroll.in
2. Exodus.3:16
3. Exodus.16
4. Exodus.14:1-31
5. Exodus.5:1-35
6. Exodus.16

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