Review of Merry Christmas(movie) in the light of Western Classical Music

I am a big fan of filmmaker Sriram Raghavan and after Andha Dhun the expectations were high. His recent film Merry Christmas did not fail to amuse me. It was a rapturous experience to see his film in theatre. Witty dialogs, on screen flirting, old world charm of Bombay (not Mumbai as he

wrote in title roll) and a Hitchcockian drama in a Victorian set up is all I needed for a thorough entertainment. However, there is more to it if you see details and feel the film. The screenplay is doubtlessly taut with twists and turns every 15 minutes; there is God in details. The visuals of Victorian Gothic and Art Deco buildings of Mumbai added a splendour. Particularly for people who like Mumbai, this movie is a treat because Bombay seeps into it as a character. With an overtone of Christmas, the choice of cityscape cannot be better than Bombay in whole of India.

I never knew Katrina Kaif has so much left in her in terms of acting and histrionics. In Bollywood and regional films of India an actress is outdated after few years being in her peak. She is generally shown and seen as a Diva and an item number. Most of the actresses are out of business before they hit mid-life. So, in that kind of background Katrina has made a comeback and what a comeback it is!! Her charm added to her free willy nature of the character and surprisingly her histrionics later on exhibited the violence and cruelty in that character. Vijay Setupathy made “Non-Acting” his acting style. His witty one liners, awkward dance and subtle expressions made my day. His method acting made it a superb watching experience. And I must mention Sanjay Kapoor, who, in a brief role, was hilarious.

The movie is a dark comedy, a Noir film where two lonely souls with chequered past and shades of grey cross paths on a Christmas night and gets locked forever. You may love or hate the ending but last 15 minutes was extraordinary. And now comes the role of Western Classical Music in creating and maintaining the mood of this film.

I have observed earlier in Andhadhun how beautifully Sriram Raghavan used Beethoven’s Symphony no.5 to show the jarring visuals and rapturous moments. Similarly, the background music in “Merry Christmas” was heavily influenced by Western Classical Music. For example, during the gunshot the crescendo

of Grieg’s Peer Gynt Suite no 1,“In the hall of the Mountain King” superbly helped to muffle the crime. If you hear this classical music piece you will relate how the slow tempo initially is growing to a thundering crescendo eventually within few minutes. For your reference I am pasting the Youtube link below. If you see the film you can relate to what I mean.

Similarly, to add class, Maria was playing Habanera from Carmen by Bizet. Listen to the video. Ronnie was constantly saying “Oh she is a classy woman.” In India, due to a colonial hangover, anything Western means sophistication and it implies that to enjoy western classical music, Opera particularly one needs good education and sophistication, which is treasured by many. So the Habanera from Carmen is a great choice to exemplify class.

And in the end Vivaldi’s Winter played for almost 10 minutes to the perfection. Starting with the Pizzicato which exemplified the sprinkling of doubt in the police officer’s mind, it moves on to a rise in tempo and tone, where swiftly the hidden things expose fast climaxed with the exchange of ring between two souls with tormented past. There is anxiety, hope, romance, despair, magic realism and baffle in that last 5 minutes superbly portrayed by Vivaldi’s Winter. Nowhere in Bollywood I expected Vivaldi’s Winter to personify the swift changes of human behaviour amidst the movie characters. Sriram Raghavan deserves a special mention for this intelligent use of western classical music to evoke and maintain feelings in a film.

Earlier I have observed use of Western Classical Music pieces in a Satyajit Ray movie or Shyam Benegal movie. For example, Gluck’s Melodie from Orpheus and Euridicce was used in “Jana Aranya” by Ray and he also borrowed Mozart’s Symphony no 25 in Feluda theme in “Joy baba Felunath” or Mozart Symphony “Jupiter” and Requiem mass in songs of “Hirak Rajar Desh e”. Kamaleswar Mukherjee used Beethoven Symphony 5 first movement

in his “Meghe dhaka tara”. Shyam Benegal films like Kalyug, Trikal or Mammo used music of Beethoven and Mozart. However, in Bollywood use of Western classical music motifs are few and far. In a refreshing take, Sriram Raghavan has used Vivaldi, Grieg and Bizet in “Merry Christmas” to reflect and set the mood.

Overall, the movie “Merry Christmas” brings a point that “Content is King” in an industry flooded with Jawaans, Pathaans and Animal. Merry Christmas is a thoroughly entertaining movie where you have to sit on the edge not to miss the details. Particularly the edgy ending was something a movie goer will remember for a long, long time. In fact, Merry Christmas opens a new year of pure filmmaking and story telling in Bollywood

_____Biswa Prasun Chatterji.