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UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION OF INFLUENTIAL FACTORS IN RELATION TO IDENTITY FORMATION DURING ADOLESCENCE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF NIL BATTEY SANNATA

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Abstract:

The process of identity formation implies an intricate intersection of various factors such as family, peer group, the individual himself/herself, social context etc., in which adolescence emerges as a crucial foundational stage. For identity formation, the contribution of the social context can be adverse or benevolent depending on whether it puts obstacles or supplies help to the individual concerned. This paper intends to argue if the social context has an adverse effect on an adolescent placed in the process of identity formation, parental figure and peer group may be instrumental for him/her to withstand or overcome that negative effect. Thus, in this context, the following paper attempts to study *Nil Battey Sannata*, a critically acclaimed film of 2015 merging the lines between serious film and commercial film in the light of identity study. It presents the coming of age story where an ignorant, intransigent, rigid adolescent Appu comes to the path of transformation - a UPSC aspirant, with the help of her mother, Chanda. This paper, deploying a psychosocial perspective, analyses the roles that social context, parental figure, peer group, and Appu herself play in her identity formation. It closely reads the film and analyses it from the concerned viewpoints. The paper is divided into three parts: an introduction, a brief review and analysis of the film, and identity, and a conclusion. However, the paper limits its analytical study only to the interplay of influential factors mentioned above.

Keywords: Individual, Parental Figure, Peer Group, Social Context, Choice-making

1.0 Introduction:

In recent years the field of Hindi film has witnessed an upsurge in content-oriented films that deal with serious contemporary issues related to the education system, women empowerment, identity-based on caste, gender, sexuality etc. by presenting them in an entertaining manner, thus, merging the line between serious art film and popular commercial film. One such critically acclaimed entertaining film is *Nil Battey Sannata*. It delves into certain burning issues such as discrimination in the education system (Murarka, 2017), conflictual mother-daughter relationship, the bond between women (Nagpal, 2017) and so on leaving a trail of optimism at the end.

Studies and reviews of this film have looked at it from the perspectives of sociology of education and gender studies mainly and shown how it critiques the discrimination lying in the

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contemporary education system (Goswami, 2017), exemplifies “parity” at levels of gender, class and women empowerment (Rai, 2017, p. 117, 120; Nagpal, 2017). However, presenting a coming of age narrative, *Nil Battey Sannata* creates a space for studying how identity formation integrates the influences of both internal and external factors. Therefore, deviating from previous explored issues, the following paper concentrates on the matter of identity formation in this film to analyse the function of some crucial factors impacting the identity formation process during adolescence. It puts the argument that for identity formation, the contribution of social context can be adverse or benevolent depending on whether it puts obstacles or supplies help to the individual concerned. Given this situation, parental figures and peers may be instrumental for the adolescent to withstand or overcome the hurdles. In this regard, deploying a psychosocial approach, this paper follows an analytical study of the important roles played by social background, the individual himself/herself, friends and mother in the journey of building identity during adolescence. The finding of this study would help in developing a better understanding of the functional aspects of the individual, peer, parent, and social context in adolescent identity formation.

As for structural part, this paper contains a brief overview of *Nil Battey Sannata*, a review based on the concept of identity and how adolescence is connected with this process, an analysis concerning the argument as stated above, and a conclusion based on the analysis.

2.0 Overview of *Nil Battey Sannata*:

Set in the background of a slum area, in Agra, the film shows certain aspects- the underprivileged life of Chanda (mother) and Appu (daughter), Chanda’s struggle and hardship for earning bread and butter, Appu’s colourful life with her peer group, the conflict between mother and child for Chanda’s admission to the same class with Appu in school to encourage her daughter for study and less struggling future in society, and the resolution between them brought by peers. The crux of this film derives from Appu’s disinclination to study and improve her position as well as social standard in life, her acceptance to pursue her mother’s vocation as a ‘maid’, and her mother’s disapproval of Appu’s passive acceptance of her fate predetermined by society to some extent. In this light, this film highlights some matters related to identity such as access to the resource, availability of options along with the importance of making choices. Simultaneously it inquires the imperatives of nurturing dream in life, exploration of inner resources for attaining identity, and how the surroundings, parent and peer participate in this journey along with the adolescent herself.

3.0 Identity:

The study of identity, mainly existing in social sciences and psychology, distinguished itself with Erik Erikson’s noted lifespan theory that shows identity being formed and developed at eight “psychosocial” stages from childhood through adolescence to adulthood (Côté & Levine, 2002, p. 92), and acquired by the performance and resolution of each task ascribed to those stages (Kroger, 2000, p. 10). Another related term, ‘identity crisis’ simultaneously propagated by Erikson, suggests a “condition” and a sense of disruption and discontinuity within own self (Côté & Levine, 2002, p. 95).

Due to its multidimensionality, the concept of identity cannot be restricted to a singular definition or explanation. Identity can be a process as well as a product where the intersection between the individual and society results in building the achieved identity (Josselson, 1994, p. 12). It also implies an intricate psychological and sociological process occurring from micro to macro level interacting with the individual, family, parent, peer group, social milieu, class, gender, ethnicity, race etc. (Kroger, 2000; Head, 1997). Belonging to a particular group or being a member of a community also can create a sense of identity to an individual (Marsh et al., 2007). Identity has

also been considered as a meaning-making tool (Jossleson, 1994, p. 12) changing its structure at different stages of life (Kroger, 2000). It also ascribes “a sense of recognition” to the person concerned (Fearon, 1999, p. 6).

For identity formation, adolescence emerges as a crucial fundamental stage conjoining childhood and adulthood. Erikson identified adolescence with “the ideological state” among “three value orientation stages” of identity formation because of “unresolved concerns”, conflicts and identity crisis (Côté & Levine, 2002, p. 98). The collective influences of physiological/biological, psychological and societal transitions at this stage accelerate the identity formation process (Kroger, 2000) for the adolescent to find the answer of who I am. Consequently, understanding of own existence in relation to others and society, an inspection of previous identifications, exploration of availability of options, and making choices become necessary for an adolescent (Selvam, 2017, p. 132). Thus, active participation is generally found in an adolescent while making choices, choosing surrounding people or shaping/modifying himself/herself according to the responses received from others (Williams, 2018, para. 1).

4.0 Analysis:

This segment would analyse the social context as presented in *Nil Battey Sannata*, its impact on Appu’s psyche, how it is not that much supportive or favourable for forming a new identity and then what roles peer, individual and parent play in this connection. Representing the physical and social surroundings, social context stands for the locus of action, development or changes. Its presentation also signifies the socio-economic status, the social position of people living in it (“Social Environment,” 2020). In *Nil Battey Sannata* the social context exists in two forms: as visually visible on screen and as an invisible pervasive force influencing the psyche and the way of perception of the characters, mainly that of Appu. The physical presentation is established with the visual portrayal of the setting of the slum area nearby the Tajmahal, that of the images of torn slippers, a sewing machine in Appu and Chanda’s room, and the different working places of Chanda and Amar (Appu’s friend). This portrayal settles the topographical space, the underprivileged socio-economic background and the marginalised position of the central characters in society, further suggesting their hardship, struggle for survival, humiliation, lack of access to resources as well as vocational options.

An upbringing of a child in a particular social context can influence his/her to internalise the rules and regulations of that society through socialisation and psychologically to be caught into the existing system. This reflects the psychologically trapped condition of Appu, Pintu, Sweety, and that of Appu’s neighbours, where instead of resisting the determining force of society in their life, they almost surrender themselves to it submissively. The unquestioning conformity propels them to accept the preordained roles and social identities. It brings forward a social space where the “social rank and kinship network into which one was born determined one’s place for life” (Ferrer-Wreder & Kroger, 2020, p. 5).

Contrasting the Eriksonian view of society as a benevolent, supportive force favourable to identity formation (Kroger, 2000, p. 9), the social background of Appu, Pintu, Amar as presented resembles more the Freudian view of society as an oppressive and restrictive force (Lemert, 2010, p. 12) being adverse to the development of marginalised without providing equal opportunities to the characters. The adversity tricks Appu, Pintu, Sweety to believe in the persuasion of their parents’ vocations as the only option left to them: “I will be a maid....An engineer's son becomes an engineer....and a doctor's son becomes a doctor. What else can a maid's daughter be? Maid. It's that simple” (*Nil Battey Sannata*, 2015, 00:16:27-00:16:34). Therefore, the social context in *Nil Battey Sannata* appears as regulatory and unfavourable for exploring and forming new identities other

than the preordained ones offering minimum access to resources and choice-making to the adolescents, degrading their self-esteem, and causing self-depreciation.

Given the stunting of identity formation in a particular social context, some questions are raised: does the social context have the ultimate power to determine one's identity? Is an adolescent individual just only a puppet in the hands of society in this matter? To find the answers, the paper focuses on Appu as an individual adolescent in the film. Here, Appu is apparently portrayed as a typical adolescent trying to assert her individuality by going against her mother, Chanda, and showing more inclination to her peer group. However, unlike an exploring adolescent, she shows disinclination to find her own identity in view of society and others. Her inability to voice her dream or goal in life marks the absence of yearning for self-identity, which is a prominent characteristic of adolescence. A lack of sense of identity even though prevails in Appu's case, still, the apparent absence may not be suggestive of complete absence; rather, it can also be a possibility of a dormant state of identity that may come to prominence through the decisions and actions taken by the adolescent concerned (Head, 1997, p. 21). The dormant state manifests itself when Appu as a callow, intransigent adolescent, hastily decides to pursue her mother's vocation overlooking the hardship her mother faces every day. Her rigidity to mould herself, exclusion of the exploratory part of identity formation and the uncritical acceptance of predetermined available roles turn Appu into a more passive agent in her identity formation process, more submissive to the demands of social context.

In connection with Appu's decision about her future, the film complicates the matter further by incorporating an ambivalent influence of peer group on Appu; henceforth, the question comes whether the peer group helps Appu withstand the challenges in her path of finding her own identity or influences her to stick to her decision to become a 'maid' just like her mother. It has been observed that than the parent, the peer group is considered more inclinable and reliable to an adolescent as they are "purposive congregation of individual's experiences identical conditions of physical, emotional and cognitive change as well as sharing the developmental position of anticipating and seeking self-definition, integration and prescription" (Selvam, 2017, p. 132) so having more power to exert direct influence on the adolescent. Pintu and Sweety, comprising Appu's primary peer group, follow the similar path of blind imitation of already available roles. Pintu boastfully declares his plan to become a driver to Sweety and Appu, while Sweety thinks of ending up as a housewife. The initial influence of them along with the neighbours on Appu propels her to conform and restrict herself within her known limited territory, thus, finding a way to justify her decision and action to her mother. So her peer's influence works as a validating force for her but raises a conflict between Appu and Chanda.

Since Chanda appears as an affectionate, sacrificial, caring mother, struggling daily as a menial labour for survival and to fulfil Appu's small wishes with might and main, she is concerned about a better future for her daughter that is full of opportunities, hope, respect and social mobility. On hearing Appu's decision to become a maid, Chanda directly questions her: "Am I sending you to school so that you can be a maid? Do you know what it means to be a maid? Listen carefully, Appu, and remember. No matter what happens, you won't become a maid" (*Nil Battey Sannata*, 2015, 00:16:45-00:16:59). Appu's stubbornness towards learning and moulding herself, and her apparently aimless life drive Chanda to find a way to support and encourage her daughter so that she can understand what to become in future. Giving a blow to Appu's prestige and ego, Chanda takes admission to Appu's class in same school with the help of her employer, Mrs. Dhiwan, and in study performs better than Appu in the class. As Appu cannot digest her mother overshadowing her in the study despite being a mere 'maid', she venomously attacks Chanda to belittle her hard work. Chanda correctly identifies the reason for Appu's humiliation: "You're not

upset that you failed. In fact, you're upset because....that a maid exceeded you. Wonderful, Appu. Bravo...I didn't steal your friends. They feel ashamed to be with you...If you could, then you would have done by now" (*Nil Battey Sannata*, 2015, 00:50:44-00:50:56). On other hand, going to school provides an opportunity to Chanda to anchor herself in Appu's peer group. Gradually her optimistic attitude towards life inspires them as a peer to build their own identity in capacity not by imitating just what others do.

Chanda's transformation from the role of a traditional, sacrificial mother and primary caregiver to a challenger, risk-taker as well as co-performer of her daughter makes her instrumental for Appu's foundation stage of identity formation. For renegotiating her position in the family as well as voicing her individuality, although Appu blindly revolts against her mother without understanding her real motive, Chanda is seen constantly endeavouring to create a "supportive context" for her daughter's "exploration of individuality" (Kroger, 2000, p. 79) and nonconformity to the existing social system. She manages to take Appu out of her known comfort zone pushing her further to venture on unknown territories confidently, where she can avail herself of the opportunity of forming a new identity other than that of a maid's daughter as well as a future maid. Yet at the same time she does not forget to explain to Appu the importance of committing mistakes while facing the challenge:

You know, there's nothing wrong in failing...What's wrong is admitting Defeat without trying. Always remember one thing. Your dream is only yours. Lot of people will laugh on your dream. Ask them to go to hell. They can't snatch your dream. There are few people who will understand your dream. Keep them close. They will keep your dream alive. You will face difficulties on the way. That's for sure. But always remember one thing. If you have your dream in your sights...no difficulty will last for too long. Just don't let your Dreams out of your sight. Do you know Why? Because if there's anything we have to progress in life...it's...our dreams. And no one can snatch it from us. (*Nil Battey Sannata*, 2015, 01:35:35- 01:38:06)

This understanding of success and failure compresses the very essence of the process of identity formation, where ego development is strengthened by confronting the challenges and synthesising previous and past experiences of the individual. If the way of finding a suitable identity suggests the journey, to attain the intended identity refers to the destination to which a dream or goal can propel the individual to achieve it.

On the other hand, it takes time for Appu to understand what she actually wants. In order to heal her wound and soothe her anger, she takes revenge on her mother by wasting the saved money by Chanda on clothes and other fancy objects. Eventually, she enters a reclusive state being unable to resolve her confusion and during this period of mental turmoil and puzzlement, her peer group proves to be useful to bring her on track, and regarding this, Amar, the topper of Appu's class plays an important role. Unlike Pintu and Sweety, Amar stands out as more intelligent and resilient to understand the fuming condition of Appu. Enriched with an indomitable spirit, he appears to be more resistant to the adverse effect of the social background (working as a labour in a garage at night) and thrives to make his own identity in future. When Pintu and Sweety fail to encourage Appu, Amar takes initiative to break the ice between mother and daughter since only he is aware in class of the actual relationship between Appu and Chanda. By making Appu witness her mother's hard work on a cold winter night, Amar compels her to ponder over the situation objectively so making her realise where she lacks in, how she misinterprets Chanda's concern, and reconsider her future options:

Do you know why she works at a place like this? For you. You never expected anything from yourself. And she never stopped expecting. I don't know why, but she still thinks....that you'll score 50% marks in the pre-boards. And she'll need money to enrol you in coaching classes. She

isn't asserting her dreams on you. You are her dream, Appu. That...is my elder brother. Even he has expectations from me. At least I won't shatter his hopes. (*Nil Battey Sannata*, 2015, 1:29:48-1:30:47)

His words correctly capture what Chanda really wants- not to impose her wishes on Appu but to let her make her own way. As a peer, Amar's assistance helps Appu in adjusting to her inner conflicts and external demand. It also shows that peers' influence can be reciprocal.

For Appu, this incident comes with a moment of epiphany that can be interpreted as the actualisation of the chance of "self-reflection", a required session for confused, baffled adolescents (Williams, 2018, para. 13), where she can finally inspect her own acts. The formation of identity depends on individual choice-making, and she finally chooses by deciding to consider benevolent persons' views, to fill the void with a dream, and to construct her identity. Others' effort might have gone in vain if she herself had not overcome her rigidity. In the last scene, once stubborn, naïve Appu transforms into a prudent, confident UPSC aspirant on the verge of fulfilling her dream to become an IAS officer, crossing the hurdles in the path of dream and identity; therefore indicating her choice of withstanding the compulsive force of social background.

5.0 Conclusion:

To recapitulate, the process of identity formation complies with the suggestion that identity formation is a lifelong process in a flux; provided with support from others, challenges in moderate degree can make an individual more confident, self-reliant and prepared in the journey of attaining identity. Social context influences Appu's identity process mainly in two ways: crippling opportunities for her and making her believe that a maid's daughter only can be a maid. Although social context has an adverse effect on adolescent Appu, with the help of peer group and parent, and later her active participation, she at least takes a chance to mould herself than accepting her given identity. She chooses what to follow. However, the influence of peers can be ambivalent as it may drive one to restrict himself/herself within the limit or surpass the limit. While, Pintu, Sweetie along with Appu's neighbours initially show Appu to accept what is being given, Amar shows the courage and hard work to attain more. Just because one belongs to the marginalised territory, it cannot determine his/her future identity entirely. For parental figure, Chanda as a mother plays a multidimensional role by suggesting that parental opposition needs not to be interpreted as antagonistic always for adolescents; it also can be accommodative for their adolescent identity. Therefore, this paper concludes that the finding of this study supports the argument that parental figure and peer group can be instrumental in the identity formation of an adolescent by constructively guiding him/her towards achievement against obstacles of society.

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