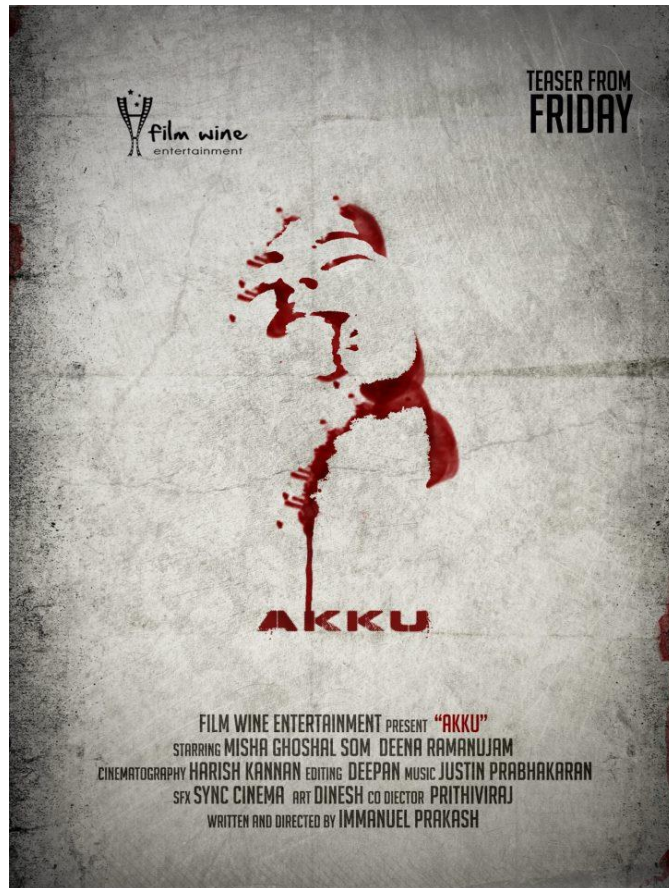


A Study of Visual Rhetoric in *Akku* and *India's Daughter*

P. Ponnivalavan, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate



Abstract

This paper considers the short film *Akku* and the documentary *India's daughter* as two different forms of visual rhetoric on the same issue. Both these films deal with the gang rape of Jyoti Nirbhaya Singh in India's capital, Delhi. The films would be compared in the paper in terms of their rhetorical efficiency and an analysis of the techniques and aesthetic devices used by the film makers to achieve the intended effect.

Keywords: Nirbhaya, Delhi, Gang Rape, Rhetoric, Documentary, India's Daughter, Leslee Udwin.

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***Nirbhaya* – A Symbol of Long Struggle**

Nirbhaya was the name used by the press to discuss the brutal gang rape and fatal assault of twenty three year old Jyoti Singh Pandey, a Physiotherapy intern, by six men when she was travelling with a friend in a school bus on the night of 16th December, 2012. The media used the name *Nirbhaya*, which means fearless for the sole reason that the Indian government does not allow the rape victim's name to be publicized. On 29th December 2012 Jyoti Singh passed away due to the mortal injuries inflicted on her by her assailants. This created a massive public unrest and four of the convicts were sentenced to death by a fast-track court. Since one of the convicts was a juvenile, he was sent to a reform facility for a period of three years. One of the five other convicts had apparently killed himself in police custody.

The incident garnered national and international attention and the attitude of Indian men towards women was widely attacked. The *Nirbhaya* case became a symbol of the long-drawn struggle against the Indian mindset of accusing the raped woman and not the rapist. Based on this issue, a made-for-You tube Tamil short film titled *Akku* directed by Immanuel Prakash was released on 9th July 2013. Couple of years later, based on the same issue, The British Broadcasting Corporation telecasted a documentary titled *India's Daughter*, directed by Leslee Udwin in the UK on 4th March 2015. It was a part of the BBC's Storyville series. The Documentary was banned by the Indian government based on a court order on 4th March 2015.

***Akku* - A Fictional Short Film Based on the *Nirbhaya* Case**

Akku is a fictional short film based on *Nirbhaya*'s case with a running time of approximately twenty minutes and *India's Daughter* is a documentary on the same case with a running time of approximately one hour. The former is a fictional story springing from a real incident and the latter is a documentary, which “tells a real life story”, claiming truthfulness (Aufderheide 2). The short film *Akku* traces the life of a motherless young medical intern Nithya, brought up by her father. On a late night, when she leaves the hospital with her boyfriend after attending to a child birth case, she is fatally raped by three men on a running bus. The film ends when her father comes out of the hospital room where a dying Nithya is admitted, to see the new born baby girl whose birth was aided by Nithya a short while ago.



India's Daughter

On the other hand, *India's Daughter* is a documentary which reconstructs a few incidents from the Nirbhaya case with a voice over and interspersed with actual footage and the interviews of Jyoti's parents, Jyoti's tutor, Mukesh Singh, defense lawyers of the criminals, Police Commissioner and a few others. The interview of Mukesh Singh, one of the convicts, acts as a central piece to the narrative of the documentary.



Focus of This Paper

This paper considers these two films as two distinct forms of visual rhetoric based on the same issue with a similar purpose. Though belonging to two different sub-genres of film, they are cultural creations, creatively differing from other films in terms of their rhetorical quality.

Akku is an Indian film, made from within the culture critiquing it, communicating what and how the culture should be and *India's Daughter* is from another culture, criticizing the way India treats its women seeking a change in the mindsets of men. But the purpose of these two films seems to go beyond national boundaries, and it is to create awareness and sensitize people about rape.

Products of Human Creativity

In countries like India, cases like these and honor killings are not uncommon. Sometimes, people take the word culture right out of the context which is being civil and “allows us to live together in communities” (Ryan ix) in harmony and use it for justifying violence against women. As creative cultural productions, these two films attack violence against women and demand a change of social attitude. They are products of “human creativity” which “is our way of modifying the first meaning of culture as civilized normativity” (Ryan x).

Since they are two distinct film genres they attempt to convey the immediate need to change the way in which women are treated in the name of “civilized normativity”, in two different ways. Not only do these films deal with the same subject matter, but they also vehemently demand a cultural change. They don't propagandize ideas of a political party, or a dominant ideology, but they ask for a change in the unhealthy culture in which the victim is blamed for rape.

Made with a Purpose: Social Change

Since these films are ingrained with the need for social change, the researcher considers them to be two varied forms of visual rhetoric. The researcher has chosen the term rhetoric to discuss the films in question, because of the purpose with which they are made: To bring about a

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social change by identifying and persuading. Films, as compilations of carefully shot visuals projected on screen, try to convincingly tell a story and prove a thesis which is precisely what the rhetoricians attempted in the streets of ancient Rome.

Definition of Rhetoric

In the Aristotelian sense, Rhetoric: “is an essential art, for example, for the persuasion of uneducated or uneducable audiences”. (Richards 32) In other words it is the art of persuasion, usually limited to oratory. Sometimes it is considered to be an art of ill repute because of its ornamental word play.

The present day associates Rhetoric with politicians, who persuade masses to their own ends with their language skills. But in the 20th century, the literary theorist Kenneth Burke had a major influence on Rhetorical theorists. He separated new rhetoric from the old one: “A fundamental Burkean contribution to rhetorical studies was the move away from the traditional association of rhetoric with acts of persuasion, and toward the more elaborate idea of rhetoric as the process of identification, which is rooted in the notion of substance”. (Ryan and Ingram 59)

According to Burke, the identification is not possible if there is no common substance between the rhetorician and the audience with which they could identify themselves. (Ryan and Ingram 59) After Burke, Rhetoric was not just limited to oratory but included “performative acts” which were “directed towards persuasion and identification”. (Ryan and Ingram 59) Visuals have played a major role in communication as early as the Egyptian Hieroglyphics. Film could be seen as a highly evolved visual form which still serves the age old purpose of communicating and convincing. It is extremely difficult to perceive the inclusiveness of the term visual. Some scholars limit it to charts and graphs while some extend it to include artistic images. Virtually, “it could include the study of the visual aspect of pretty much anything created by human hands — a building, a toaster, a written document, an article of clothing -- making the study of “visual rhetoric” overlap greatly with the study of design”. (Hill and Helmers ix-x) If we apply this term to advertising, television and cinema, a “new field of inquiry” emerges, opening up a number of new possibilities. (Hill and Helmers ix-x) So in this paper, the term visual is used to discuss the rhetoric of the two films in question.

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The Identification Process

To begin with, the “identification” process takes place very early in both films. In *Akku*, the title credits are backed up by a colorful musical montage of Nithya’s life from a little girl to that of young Doctor, being brought up by her father. The identification happens in the mind of the audience as soon as it realises that it is about a gentlemanly father and his beautiful girl child. Family, being one of the most powerful cultural institutions in India, is employed as a part of the narrative in this short film to familiarize itself with the audience to make them identify themselves with the story and establish a bond between the storyteller and the viewers.

From another perspective, if the film can be considered as an artistic tool created to sensitize the minds of men, every man would identify with the responsible father. Not stopping with this, the identity is reiterated when after talking to a sinking Nithya in the hospital, her father looks at one of the rapists who is meeting his new born girl child for the first time, without the knowledge that the man is responsible for all the terrible misery.

The final scene, full of dramatic irony, conveys the message that rapists are not monsters from space, but common men and the mindset is what makes them different. An observant male viewer would be able to identify himself with Nithya’s father as well as the rapist, as the father of a girl child. In the documentary, identification begins right from the title. The word ‘India’ in the title is carefully chosen to bring the Indian audience together. The word ‘Daughter’ is used as an appeal to not just an Indian women but women all over the world. As Leslee Udwin remarks in an online interview, “To me the word daughter conjures up a set of imperatives. I’m the mother to a daughter. I feel the need to protect her in a world that is hostile to her” (Udwin), the film tries to communicate the information that women should not remain mute when violent crimes are committed against them.

Consubstantiality of the Audience

At the next level, the film focuses a lot on the interview of the victim’s mother at their modest home, though the interview of Mukesh Singh acts as a center piece to the film’s narrative. With a tone that is like a slap on the face, *India’s Daughter* exposes the brutality that is

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inflicted on a young Indian woman, to the world. Once the identification process is complete, the audience becomes “consubstantial” with what it identifies with and “share the same substance”. (Ryan and Ingram 59)

This helps greatly in the process of persuading the audience to bring about a change by being sensitive. Without the identification process, the audience would not be involved enough in the film to be affected by the rape itself. Being a fictional short film, *Akku* achieves the intended effect in a subtle manner while *India's Daughter* accomplishes it through the hard hitting details about the rape though it doesn't reconstruct the rape incident.

Sustaining the attention of the audience

There is no assurance that the audience which has identified itself with the films at the surface level would not deviate or feel alienated at a given point of time. Therefore, it becomes necessary for the rhetorician to sustain what has been achieved in the beginning.

The films in consideration have a lot of well-chosen symbols embedded at the right places. These symbols are nothing but an extension of the identification that has happened initially. This idea helps us to understand that persuasion, identification, and consubstantiality are not different from each other, but a single whole which cannot be separated. (Ryan and Ingram 60)

Living Place as an Effective Symbol

One of the most striking visual symbols of *Akku* is the protagonist's living place, which is a brightly lit bungalow where she resides with her father. Subconsciously this would appeal to the upper class individuals in the audience. No one from this sect of the audience would be unmoved when such a wonderful home virtually crumbles to pieces when Nithya is raped. Educated audience which watches this film on YouTube would also be able to connect with this symbol.

The cinematographer of *Akku* makes it a point to use a few wide angle shots to showcase the posh house in the background. The wall clock, sofa settee and the gate are some of the objects that are seen in the house which add on to the symbolic significance of the house.

In reality, Jyoti Singh Pandey is from a poor family which struggled to support Jyoti's education. The portrayal of Jyoti's family in *India's Daughter* is completely different and close to reality as it claims truthfulness as a documentary. But Immanuel Prakash uses his creative freedom to take *Akku* to his target audience: the upper class. The upper class viewer might be watching this film in his workplace, on a moving train or at home with an at home feeling.

After the title montage, the film proceeds unassumingly, focusing on the love life of Nithya with the bungalow in the backdrop and adding on to the at home feeling of the targeted viewer. Once the primary identification phase is complete, when the viewer begins to tread along in the shoes of the protagonist, the individual's at home state is demolished when Nithya is mercilessly raped. People who like to watch fictional romances and relationship stories rather than harsh documentaries are delivered a tremendously violent film which initially created an "impression of shared interests". (Ryan and Ingram 60)

The house in *Akku* is a major symbol which enables the upper class viewers to identify with the film and once they are in, it showcases its own crumbling, destroying their at home feeling, demanding a social change.

The Bus

Similar to the house in *Akku*, in *India's Daughter*, the bus which features in the reconstructed parts of the documentary is an essential symbol. The initial identification happens in this case by the ordinary fact that worldwide a number of people commute by bus every day. In this case, the rape has taken place in a "school" bus. Usually, the school bus stands for innocence, laughter and fun. But in this documentary the bus stands for the horror of rape.

Though the rape incident is not visualized, we get to see the recurrent interior and exterior shots of the bus throughout the film. The interior shots are dark and eerie accompanied

by creepy music, symbolizing the darkness that has engulfed Jyoti's life and also stands for the darkness that has taken over the psyche of her assailants. The exterior shots portray the moving bus, amidst the bright lights of other automobiles similar to the American Noir films of the 70s and 80s. By not recreating the rape incident and filming just a few shots of the bus, the film maker lets the viewers imagine the incident all by themselves. This multiplies the horror of the actual incident and demands action from the audience's side for social change, making it a kind of visual "enthymeme" which is a "loosely syllogistic form of reasoning in which the speaker assumes that any missing premises will be supplied by the audience" ("rhetoric").

On the other hand, *Akku*, being a short film, includes the rape scene as an important part of the narrative. Though the scene doesn't have the multifold effect produced by the absence of the rape incident, it is the crescendo of the film and works as a part of a larger whole rather than in isolation.

Two Images

Two strong images are placed one against the other in the mind of the audience which has become "consubstantial" with Nithya's father in *Akku*. The first one is the over the shoulder shot showing Nithya's father with a glass of alcohol looking at his dead wife's portrait on the wall, which Nithya calls her father's 'romance' with his dead wife. Secondly, when Nithya boards the bus with her friend Prakash, within a half-dark wide frame, we see the chief perpetrator of the crime looking at her with a cigarette between his lips. These two images juxtapose in the mind of the audience, suggesting that ultimately what matters is how a man treats a member of the opposite sex and culture is not a restraint but a matter of choice. Though these two images don't appear one after the other, they simulate the human experience which is "spatially oriented, non-linear, multidimensional, and dynamic" in nature in order to persuade. (Foss 303) The non-linearity becomes an obvious element in the documentary which strings its visuals (such as interviews, reconstructed incidents and footages of public protests and so on) in a specific manner to achieve its desired effect. When the visuals are used the right way, they become more real than reality itself, by the way they impinge themselves upon the mind of the audience.

The next important image used in these films is the recreation or recounting of the childhood incidents of the victim. In *Akku* the title montage contains visuals of Nithya growing up with her ambition of becoming a doctor. One particular image that captures the attention of the audience is that of a very young Nithya using a toy stethoscope on her father.

Similarly, in *India's Daughter*, Jyoti's mother recollects how as a child Jyoti would pull her eye lids asking her to wake up and her father says he didn't have an answer when Jyoti asked him why the moon comes out in the night.

Visual vs. Speech

Akku provides the image visually while *India's Daughter* constructs it through speech. In both the cases, the purpose is to persuade the audience, using the aesthetic response that is produced by the childhood images of the victim, to the rhetorical purpose of rising against the idea of privileging a man though he is a rapist. The role of the interviews of the defense lawyers in the documentary is to expose the attitude of educated Indian men towards women. The attitude of the lawyers is not very different from that of the illiterate Mukesh Singh, one of the convicts. Education does not change the minds of these men as they are corroded by the dominant narrative of considering woman just as another object a man could possess. This objectification process is the dominant narrative, which is countered by the childhood images of the victim, through its aesthetic response.

The Shortcomings in terms of Rhetoric

These films in question achieve what they intend to for the most part. But there are a few shortcomings which could be spotted in both the films in terms of rhetoric. Being a short film, true to its title which is the last Tamil alphabet comprising three dots, *Akku* focuses just on the personal aspect (of the victim, of the victim's father and of the criminal) of the crime and it doesn't touch upon the political and social aspects of the crime. However, this is certainly to do with the limitation of the genre to which the film belongs rather than the film itself. But as an end product, the rhetorical effect is slightly reduced because of this limitation.

India's Daughter on the other hand has a problem with its title. Being a BBC produced documentary it has a larger reach and the audience would include viewers of many nationalities. When a non-Indian views it there arise two issues: firstly, the immediate response to the title would be to brush it aside as another film from a first world nation about the miseries of a third world nation; second, if a non-Indian viewer watches the film, he would be concerned about the rape in the documentary and rapes in India, but not about the rapes that happen in his/her own country. The danger is the audience might lose its focus on the issue at hand and get diverted or alienated by the word "India's" in the title. Because of this, the film which is supposed to be against rape and to sensitize people, seems to stop with portraying "the voice and image of the "Indian man" with the "brutal mindset"" (Krishnan). Not only what is inside the film, but also the packaging of the film stand in the way of its complete rhetorical success.

Effectiveness of Visual Rhetoric

Rhetoric is "Often used as an insult in the contemporary political scene, the word rhetoric has come to suggest...trickery set in contrast to real action..." (Ryan and Ingram 53). But the study of visual rhetoric in these two films reveals that rhetoric, when used for a just cause, is capable of bringing about a social change. People who had been insensitive to the real Nirbhaya incident might be sensitized by the images of it in these two films. Rhetoric is the beginning of critical thinking as it makes us "self-reflective". (Richards 176) Rhetoric as an intellectual discipline has allowed us to study the films *Akku* and *India's Daughter* in a better light. Furthermore, the films have led us to a vivid understanding of the rhetorical techniques discussed in this research paper.

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P. Ponnivalavan, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Madras Christian College
East Tambaram
Chennai – 600 059
Tamilnadu
India
valavan22@gmail.com

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