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VISUALIZING KUMAR GANDHARVA'S RESTLESS, MEDITATIVE MUSICALITY

by SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

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Phool Ka Chhand (Rhythm of a Flower, 2024), filmmaker Amit Dutta's creative documentary cum tribute to the Hindustani classical singer, Kumar Gandharva (1924-1992), displays a transitional, ephemeral artistry. In it, forms keep shapeshifting through animator Allen Shaw's delicate watercolour illustrations. A man taking a dip in a river morphs into a peacock feather, a tree's trunk mutates into a hand strumming a *tanpura*, and the horizon becomes a snake charmer's musical pipe. This fluid flow of images imbues them with unceasing possibilities and life, as it retains some of the essence of the originals through colour or shading while continually turning them into something else. This stylistic choice visually translates the inventiveness of Kumarji's compositions and the freedom with which he combined notes. It delights the viewer with its boundless originality, and also becomes Dutta's way of using his medium to envision Gandharva's evolving musical artistry.

We enter the film and Kumarji's home in Dewas, Malwa, with a man seemingly drawn, like us, to the strains of the maestro singing Raga Lagan Gandhar. Once inside, we encounter a bed-ridden Kumarji, who contracted tuberculosis in his mid-20s at the height of his musical prowess, and was warned by doctors that singing could prove fatal for him. We hear him telling his wife Bhanumati, "Don't you worry. As long as I do not sing, I will not die." The statement bears a wistful sadness, but as the musician lies in his bed looking out of his window, the silence and emptiness of his reality is resisted by the richness of the music and imagery that abounds both within him and without.

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Memories of his childhood in Sulebhavi flood his senses, as we are immersed in a life lived in close conjunction with nature. A foetus forms in its lush churning womb to become the child Kumar Gandharva, who runs barefoot through fields entranced by a bird call. The rhythms of life in the village, with its mud houses, trees, temples, clotheslines swaying in the breeze, bullocks, tinkling bicycles and travelling Harikatha players, evidently shape Kumarji as a musical artist and thinker. [At one point in the film, there appears, like chalk scrawling on a blackboard, Kumarji's advice on how to find the essence of Raga Sarang: to sit in the afternoon sun in a village house, which has a courtyard plastered with cow dung.] We see the young would-be artist listening so intently to Ustad Abdul Karim Khan's Bhairavi thumri "Jamuna ke Teer" on a gramophone, that he is swallowed by its horn and transported to its swirling musical waters inside. There, he swims in gently rotating circles, that mimic the movement of the record on the player. This sequence draws exquisitely on the connections between natural phenomena and their influences on the artist's music.

Amit Dutta wrote *Phool Ka Chhand* with music composer Kuldeep Barve. This is Barve's second collaboration with the director, after Dutta's acclaimed *Nainsukh* (2010), on the 18th-century miniature painter from Guler. With *Phool*, Dutta adds to a long line of films on Indian artists and artistic traditions (*The Seventh Walk*, *The Unknown Craftsman*, *Jangarh: Film One*, *Mother*, *Who Will Weave Now?*), where he eschews linear historical dramatization to get at the nature and particularities of the form and the creative process itself, lauding the art while dispelling some of the mystery around it. Hence, woven through *Phool* are deliberations on the structure of a *bandish* and its relation to a *raga*, on *madhya laya*, on Kumarji's almost spiritual contemplation of the expansiveness of a note, on his emphasizing the necessity of visualizing notes and the spaces between notes on a scale for his students, and on his creative pursuit as a deep meditative practice. The last idea is exemplified in a mesmeric series of images, where the shapes of yogis, seated in meditation on a rotating circle, transform into those of *tanpuras*.

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In the film, Kumarji's songs are paired with imagined sequences from his life. For example, "Tum Ho Dheer" (Raga Gandhi Malhar, created by Kumarji in memory of and as a tribute to Gandhiji) aligns with the rhythms of a train ride, as Nehru's announcement of the assassination of Gandhi on the radio is heard; or "Kahe Re Jagawan De Sone De" (Raga Saheli Todi) accompanies the artist's gentle fading away into the elements. Elsewhere, Kumarji likens a *bandish* to a snake with its tail in its mouth (visualized here), explaining that the beginning should lead to an improvisation, which should then encapsulate the beginning and lead to another improvisation. Simultaneously, mirroring the idea of the *bandish*, and in keeping with Dutta's penchant for repetitive structures and imagery, there is a return to the beginning of this film as early images flash by. They then lead to an improvisation – a new visual of the snake slowly coiling around a lung, pointing to Kumarji's infirm condition.

Sucheta Chakraborty is a Mumbai-based journalist who writes on cinema, dance, books and culture.