



✳ Love it or hate it, winning an Oscar seems to be the epitome of cinematic achievement for many people.

The pitch and roll of the Oscars

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

A film I would easily name as one of the best I saw in 2012 is Michael Haneke's *Amour* or *Love*. It began its prize-bagging spree at Cannes where it walked away with the Festival's top Palm d'Or. Later, the Los Angeles Film Critics named it the best movie of the year, and it also went on to win big European film awards.

Now, Haneke's French language drama has been nominated for five Oscars, including Best

Picture, Best Director and Best Actress for Emmanuelle Riva.

What is even more impressive is that the director has scored a double whammy by getting a nod for the Best Picture in both the Foreign Language and the general category. Until now, merely three movies have won this distinction: Roberto Benigni's 1998 *Life is Beautiful*, Costa Gravas-helmed *Z* in 1969, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* by Ang Lee in 2000. All of them won only the Foreign Language trophy. *Amour* is a hot foreign picture favourite, but, as some critics aver, remains a "dark horse" as far as the Best Picture Oscar in the main event goes.

Last year's Best Picture winner, *The Artist*, was a French production with Gallic stars, but featured just a single line of dialogue — in English. Which curiously made it an English language film! (Oh, the ways of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences ...). Again, while many foreign helmers have earned the Best Director Oscar — Michel Hazanavicius, Milos Forman, Ang Lee and Roman Polanski among others — their work has been in English. So, if Haneke is crowned Best Director, he would be the first ever to take home the statuette for a non-English movie.

Amour's five nominations are not a record though in the Foreign Language section. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* picked six nods, while Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* took a record seven in 2006. Nonetheless, Haneke has secured a place in the Oscar gallery of greats.

Haneke, known for a cinema that has so much of violence or violent thought under the surface (*Funny Games* and *The White Ribbon* are two examples), has this time around made something beautifully tender. Yet, there is the classic Haneke's touch of cold brutality in *Amour*. It talks about ageing, disease and death, reminding us, sometimes gently, sometimes harshly, about our own mortality. In a dramatically unexpected end, Haneke's film may be throwing up ideas for those in a predicament similar to the lead couple.

George (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and Anne (Riva) are elderly musicians absolutely devoted to each other, a devotion that continues when she falls seriously ill and is paralysed. George knows that it can only be downhill after this,

and though he is attentive and caring, his final act will come as a shock to audiences — the Haneke touch, cold and cruel, but brilliantly executed.

India has — as usual — stumbled in the Oscars race. The country's official submission, Anurag Basu's *Barfi!*, was not even in the first Foreign Language list of nine movies that was later filtered to five. The story about a deaf-mute boy and his love affair with two girls, one of whom is autistic, may have been set in Darjeeling and Kolkata, but it could have happened anywhere in the world. There was nothing uniquely Indian about the plot. Which is what, I am told, the Academy looks for under this classification.

But was there something uniquely French about *Amour*? The couple could have been living in any city other than Paris. This is certainly not to imply that *Barfi!* is better than *Amour*. Haneke's creation is masterly, and Basu is miles and miles behind him. Yet, I always had this sneaking suspicion that the West is rather unfair to India, and in a way, the Academy is prejudiced about Indian cinema.

Yet, India is often obsessed with the Oscars. I still remember when *Lagaan* was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Picture some years ago. It was the third to be so honoured after *Mother India* and *Salaam Bombay* in the long history of the Academy Awards, and it was hoped against hope that the Aamir Khan production (*Lagaan*) would win the trophy. Also Khan had the money for the huge PR exercise needed if a film were to aspire for a win. But *Lagaan*, unlike the rustic Indian cricketers in the movie, could not beat the foreigners.

Despite this long road of disappointment, India continues to dream of the day when it will come back home with the Best Foreign Language Picture Oscar. Strangely, even a legend like Satyajit Ray had this weakness for the Oscars. In 1992, when the Academy presented him with an Oscar for Lifetime Achievement virtually on his death bed, he called it the greatest moment of his life. When Mira Nair recently quipped that she never understood why India looked up to the Oscars, it may have disappointed and angered Ray worshippers.

Yet, there have been writers who have had views similar to Nair's. They have over the years felt that one reason for India's fixation with the Academy Awards could be Ray's own fascination for it. Admittedly, this may be traced to the Master's own confession that he learnt the craft of cinema by watching Hollywood films.

One writer is brutal when he says: "It may sound like blasphemy to Ray-worshippers, but the truth remains that if any single person is to be held responsible for misleading some Indian moviemakers and a section of the viewing public here into believing that getting the Oscar is the same as being born again, it is Satyajit Ray for whom otherwise one and all have deep veneration. Everyone has an Achilles' heel; in Ray's case it was his unrestrained enthusiasm — at times looking like a pathological excess — for practically anything smelling of American Cinema, particularly of the '30s and the '40s. He repeatedly spoke and wrote about how he grew up on that kind of cinema. True, once in a while, he doffed his cap at Italian neo-realism, particularly Vittorio de Sica, or at Jean Renoir who he had grown close to in Calcutta when the great Frenchman was shooting *The River*, but much of the space in the chamber of Ray's appreciation of foreign cinema was taken up by Hollywood."

True, but my own take on this Oscar business is, if at all India must send a film for the awards, it should make a real effort to submit one that has at least a slight chance at the Kodak Theatre.

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