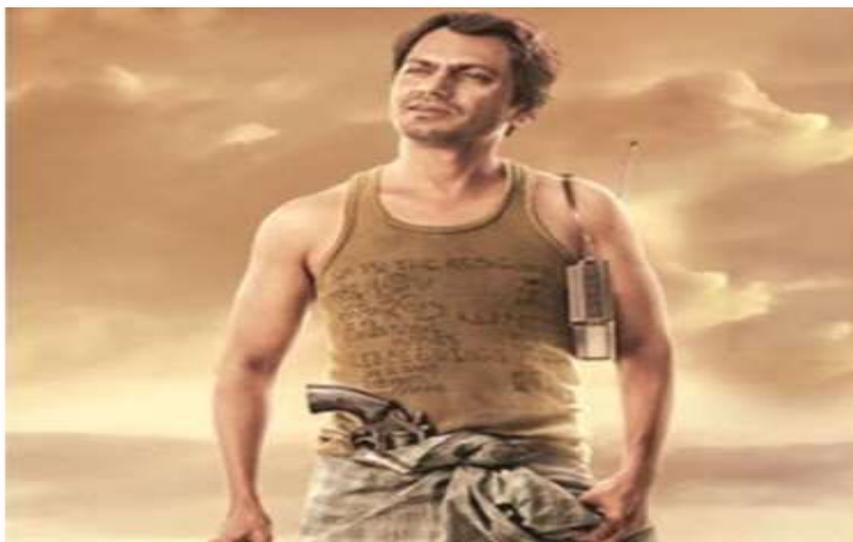


## Nawazuddin Siddiqui – myriad moods, fascinating faces

July 25  
2017

09:19 PM



A promotional image from Babumoshai Bandoobaz, which releases in August.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Most people who watched Ravi Udyawar's recent debut feature, Mom, swore by Sridevi's performance. Said she had carried the film. I disagree. For long after, the curtains had come down, what remained in my mind's eye was the brilliant acting by Nawazuddin Siddiqui. He had completely gone in for an image makeover, and even his diehards fans found it difficult to recognise him. As a private detective, DK, he infused into his role a wonderful sense of wit and cunning, even changing his voice beyond the familiar. With a perfect sense of timing, he made DK almost mesmeric. Remember that scene when he is shot in his office. I can never forget the expression on his face, one of disbelief, of disappointment and helplessness!

And nobody even remembers Siddiqui in his pre-Gangs of Wasseypur days – which was just about five years ago. Those days, Siddiqui had to struggle, even share a room with a friend in exchange for a promise that he would cook food. For one from a zamindar family in Uttar Pradesh, life could not have been more torturous.

But then director Anurag Kashyap's Black Friday in 2007 followed by another of the helmer's work in two parts, Gangs of Wasseypur – which premiered in the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes – changed the lines on his palm and the alignment of his stars, so to say.

However, let us not forget that Siddiqui, despite a none-too-impressive screen presence and rather ordinary looks, rose to become an actor of substance largely because of his choice of roles, and his ability to be gutsy enough to experiment. No hero would have dared to look so ugly as he did in Mom. (The only other person I remember who transformed himself to play a leper was the Tamil actor, Sivaji Ganesh – a riveting performer – a little too theatrical though. But then times were such.)

Siddiqui said in one of my interviews with him soon after Gangs that the moment the movie was released, he was flooded with as many as 200 scripts. "If I had chosen all of them, I would have burnt out very quickly... Instead, I decided to be absolutely selective". Which again called for a considerable degree of boldness. For, how many newcomers would have the courage or conviction to say no at the very beginning of their careers!

Much like Irrfan Khan, another cinema great, Siddiqui made it a point to play a mind-boggling variety of characters. As a gangster in Gangs..., he was lucky enough to get a part which was emotional. "Although I once again essay a gangster in Kushan Nandy's upcoming Babumoshai Bandoobaz, I am completely devoid of emotion. I am a ruthless killer", he averred in another interview.

The film – which opens on August 25 – is an unusual narrative about a contract murderer who lives in a small town, and his stature as number one is threatened when a rival criminal appears on the scene.

It is these kind of variations that make Siddiqui an actor of repute. As an office clerk, playing Irrfan Khan's underling in The Lunchbox, he brought a lovely contrast to the other man – about to retire and facing the prospect of a lonely life, his wife having predeceased him.

Even in a small role in Bajrangi Bhaajan, Siddiqui – who plays a TV anchor and who feels he has got a lifetime of a chance when the news of an Indian spy is conveyed to him – outshone the protagonist, Salman Khan. Much in the same way, Irrfan Khan as a Pakistani cop in Michael Winterbottom's A Mighty Heart (about the murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl) pushed a renowned artist like Angelina Jolie into the shadows.

And can one ever forget Siddiqui in Manjhi – The Mountain Man, who singlehandedly digs a road through a hill so that the distance from his village to the nearest hospital is considerably shortened. His wife's death because she could not reach medical help in time pushes him to undertake an arduous task like this – a task that takes years to complete. Siddiqui was refreshingly believable here as he was as Raman Raghav and as a bank robber in Badlapur.

More importantly, we would soon see him in Manto by ace actor-director Nandita Das. It will not really be a biopic, but more a perspective on his radical ideas – as Das had once told me during an interview in Chennai. The movie, on Pakistani writer Saadat Hasan Manto, could

not be coming at a more appropriate time, when the freedom of every kind is under threat in India.

In fact, a trailer of Manto that was screened at the recent Cannes Film Festival – where Das and Siddiqui were present to promote their almost-complete venture – was compelling. Siddiqui – looking every inch Manto – is seen portraying the angst-ridden author, who conveys the pain and anguish of those turbulent times when the Indian subcontinent was split. Manto, who was tried for obscenity thrice in British India and thrice after Independence in Pakistan, wrote with power and punch that the Radcliffe Line was the biggest lie which was told to the two nations.

Das could not have zeroed in on a better performer than Siddiqui – who is seen as the frail, bespectacled but firebrand of a writer who raised a tempest in the literary and cultural citadels of India and Pakistan. And when Manto stood accused, it merely reflected the kind of malaise prevailing then, and the desperate bid to throttle truth and hide all that was hideously wrong in the two counties.

Gautaman Bhaskaran has been  
writing on Indian and world cinema  
for close to four decades, and may be e-mailed at [gautamanb@hotmail.com](mailto:gautamanb@hotmail.com)