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Exploring Philosophical Themes in ‘A Ship of Theseus’: Self, Body, Mind, Karma, and Spiritual Influence

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ABSTRACT: This paper critically examines the philosophical and spiritual themes presented in Anand Gandhi’s 2013 film *Ship of Theseus*, using the titular paradox as a framework to explore questions of identity, consciousness, morality, and transformation. Through the intersecting narratives of three characters—a blind photographer, an ethical monk, and a stockbroker who uncovers organ trafficking—the film delves into the fluidity of selfhood and the ethical dilemmas tied to physical and existential change. Drawing on key philosophical theories such as Cartesian dualism, Buddhist concepts of karma and impermanence, and Vedantic ideas of Atman and self-realization, the paper argues that *Ship of Theseus* challenges conventional boundaries between body and soul, self and other, and physical and spiritual. It further explores how the film reflects the interconnectedness of human experience, suggesting that true identity may lie not in a fixed essence but in conscious engagement with change. By integrating cinematic analysis with philosophical inquiry, the paper positions the film as a profound meditation on the nature of being and moral responsibility in the modern world.

KEYWORDS: Identity, cinema studies, Ethics, Embodiment, Self-realization, Karma

I. INTRODUCTION

Ship of Theseus is a 2013 Indian drama helmed by Anand Gandhi. The film comprises three intersecting narratives, each contemplating profound philosophical and ethical questions. The characters—Aliya, Maitreya, and Navin—undergo transformative experiences that challenge their perceptions of self and morality.

Aliya, an experimental blind photographer, relies on touch, sound, and instinct to create her art. After a successful cornea transplant, she gains her sight but struggles with her craft, as her other senses are no longer in sync with her new visual perception.

Maitreya, a devout Buddhist monk, advocates against animal cruelty in pharmaceutical testing. Diagnosed with a life-threatening condition requiring treatment from companies he opposes, he faces a moral dilemma: uphold his values or preserve his life.

Navin, a stockbroker who recently underwent a kidney transplant, uncovers an organ trafficking racket. His investigation forces him to confront questions of justice and privilege, shaking his previously comfortable worldview. The film is framed around the ancient *Ship of Theseus* paradox: if all the parts of a ship are replaced, does it remain the same ship? If the original parts are reassembled elsewhere, which is the true ship? The film applies this paradox to its characters, who grapple with personal transformations—both physical and existential—and question whether they are the same individuals as before. The film's overarching themes include identity, justice, and the meaning of life and death. Winner of the 2014 National Film Award, *Ship of Theseus* has been widely acclaimed for its depth and innovation.

II. THE EXPLORATION OF SELF: IDENTITY AND THE QUESTION OF "WHO AM I?"

The *Ship of Theseus* paradox asks whether an object that has had all its components replaced remains fundamentally the same. Gandhi’s film uses this as a metaphor to explore identity and personal transformation.

Aliya’s story is emblematic of this dilemma. Before her surgery, she had adapted to her blindness and developed a unique style of photography. After regaining her sight, her previous instinctual methods falter. The question arises: is she the same photographer, or has her essence changed?



Maitreya's narrative deepens the paradox. A principled ascetic who refuses life-saving treatment to avoid complicity in animal cruelty, he later undergoes a transplant. Does his ethical shift undermine his identity, or does it mark a deeper understanding of compassion and the human condition?

Navin's transformation is perhaps the most striking. His journey from indifference to moral urgency after learning of the organ trafficking implicates him in a system of exploitation. This leads him to question not just his identity but the moral fabric of society.

Through these characters, the film presents identity not as a fixed essence, but as a dynamic, evolving consciousness. It invites viewers to consider whether fundamental change negates selfhood or refines it.

III. THE BODY AND THE MIND: CARTESIAN DUALISM AND THE NATURE OF EXISTENCE

René Descartes' theory of Cartesian dualism posits that the mind and body are distinct entities. *Ship of Theseus* challenges this notion by portraying characters whose physical transformations deeply impact their mental and spiritual selves.

Aliya's restored vision doesn't merely affect her sight—it disrupts her inner world and creative identity. Her experience underscores how closely intertwined the senses and cognition are.

Maitreya's refusal of medication due to ethical convictions demonstrates how bodily suffering intersects with spiritual belief. His eventual acceptance of treatment reflects a complex negotiation between bodily needs and moral imperatives.

Navin's case further critiques dualism. His physical recovery from a kidney transplant triggers an ethical awakening, demonstrating how bodily change can catalyze spiritual transformation.

Modern neuroscience supports this view. Embodied cognition research shows that physical experience shapes thought and emotion. *Ship of Theseus* resonates with this holistic perspective, challenging the mind-body dichotomy and emphasizing the unity of human experience.

IV. KARMA AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

The concept of karma is central to the film's narrative arcs. Buddhist philosophy views karma not as a system of retribution but as an ethical web where actions influence both individual and collective futures.

Aliya's transition from blindness to sight alters her art and sense of self. Her struggle reflects the karmic interplay of action and consequence—how a change in one domain ripples through others.

Maitreya's moral crisis presents a nuanced view of karma. His initial rigidity gives way to a more compassionate ethic, emphasizing interdependence over absolutism.

Navin's journey reflects karmic responsibility in a social context. Though unaware of the unethical origins of his transplant, he feels morally compelled to act. This illustrates how karma transcends individual intent, encompassing systemic ethics.

As Finnigan (2022) notes, Buddhist karma encourages a deep reflection on the moral impact of our choices, urging awareness rather than deterministic fatalism.

V. BUDDHIST AND VEDANTIC INFLUENCE IN SHIP OF THESEUS

The film subtly weaves together Buddhist and Vedantic philosophies, using lived experience rather than exposition to communicate these ancient ideas.

From a Vedantic lens—particularly Advaita Vedanta—the film reflects the idea of Atman, the true self beyond the physical and mental. Aliya's and Maitreya's narratives especially evoke this: as physical and moral layers are stripped away, they approach deeper self-realization.



Buddhism, by contrast, emphasizes impermanence (anicca), non-self (anatta), and interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda). All three characters confront change and loss, and in their surrender to transformation, they glimpse something larger than the ego.

Navin's arc is especially Buddhist in its ethical awakening through interconnectedness. His personal benefit comes at someone else's cost, leading him to pursue justice. This reflects the Buddhist notion of "interbeing"—that we are not isolated, but part of a moral and spiritual continuum.

The film does not force a rigid synthesis of Vedantic permanence and Buddhist impermanence; rather, it allows both to coexist. It suggests that the self is both evolving and essential, a paradox akin to the ship of Theseus itself.

VI. THE INTERSECTION OF THE PHYSICAL AND THE SPIRITUAL

In *Ship of Theseus*, physical change becomes a catalyst for spiritual evolution. The film blurs the traditional boundary between the material and the metaphysical, presenting the body not as an obstacle but as a medium for enlightenment. Aliya's restored vision challenges her artistic intuition, prompting an existential inquiry: is perception merely physical, or is it spiritual too?

Maitreya's moral rigor is tested by his bodily frailty, leading to a broader, more inclusive form of spirituality grounded in empathy.

Navin's transplant jolts him into moral consciousness, as he recognizes his role in a larger web of injustice and interdependence.

These stories converge on a shared insight: the body is not separate from the spirit, but its gateway. From a Buddhist lens, the body is impermanent yet ethically significant; from a Vedantic view, it is transient but housing an eternal self. In embracing change and discomfort, each character undergoes a spiritual deepening. The film invites viewers to listen to the body not as a limit, but as a source of profound spiritual insight.

VII. CONCLUSION

Ship of Theseus is a cinematic exploration of identity, consciousness, morality, and transformation. Through its three interlinked narratives, it critiques Cartesian dualism and instead advocates an integrated view of the body and mind. Drawing from Buddhist and Vedantic traditions, the film offers a spiritual philosophy rooted in both impermanence and essence.

The characters embody the paradox of the ship—changing yet continuous. Their bodily transformations prompt profound existential and ethical reckonings, illustrating that identity is not static but responsive to experience and reflection.

The film's philosophical richness lies in its refusal to give definitive answers. Instead, it invites a contemplative engagement with the complexities of human existence. In doing so, *Ship of Theseus* transcends cinema to become a meditation on what it means to be human in a world of constant change.

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