

Critique

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A Light in The Dark...Like the Fireflies



I often used to wonder as a young girl why the hijras had to beg when they were perfectly capable of doing any job. As a grown woman, the smirk on people's faces gives me the answer. They will simply not be allowed to study, work and live a respectable life. After all, how many of us have studied with a trans, queer, or openly homosexual classmate? Now we can wonder why questions about gender equality even those for the biological female gender are uncomfortable for many.

Jonaki Porua or Fireflies is a poignant coming-of-age drama set in an Assamese village. In reading about cinema and gender representation, the inclusion of LGBTQ is far less where most studies are focused on the tussle between the binary genders. There are very few examples where a person from the community plays the lead character in a film. Of

course, we are not forgetting Chitrangada and a few others here. But, in Assamese cinema, this is the first-a film about a transgender woman and an openly gay actor playing the role. Not only this, the film is produced by Milin Dutta, a trans person himself. All these facts are by now well known to cinema lovers. What I want to focus on in the article is the authenticity with which the various societal prejudices, pressures, and injustices have been depicted in the film.

The film is a true reflection of a society where the majority is blissfully unaware or pretends to be unaware of gender diversities. It is a reflection of a society where discrimination on the basis of gender and upholding individual identity seems like uncomfortable topics of discussion. It is a mirror to

the society where the need for rights and justice are privileges of a few.

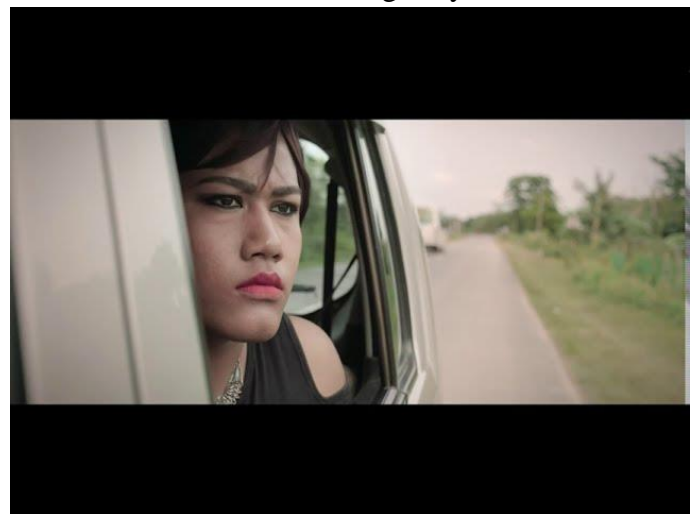


The film starts with a scene of sexual violence, dreamt by the protagonist, that jolts her out of her sleep. Not reading it as a dramatic start but a reality that most people from sexual and gender minority undergoes. The narrative then goes on to depict the life of young Jahnu in an Assamese village. The many events that follow next narrate how a typical day is for a young boy struggling to live as his true self and have the acceptance that others have in society. From casual taunts at home to name-calling, insults and mockery comprise Jahnu's day. The patriarchal mindset of justifying sexual harassment in the guise of punishment is evidently portrayed in the film. First, Jahnu is disrobed and touched inappropriately by a village elder when caught stealing mangoes from his orchard. Then, there is the tutor who molests Jahnu and forces him to perform sexual acts. Finally, Jahnu is raped by two of his peers after they 'catch' him being in a relationship with another 'outcast' man from the village. This scene gives one more reality check when one of the perpetrators expresses concern about being reported to the police and the other rubbishes off with the snob but very true remark 'who will believe him?' Acts of sexual violence are the most underreported crimes in the country. In our hearts we however know, we do not want to believe the victim, as though ducking it will make it non-existent. This act forces Jahnu to leave his home and village, transform into a woman (Jahnavi) and start living with other transgenders. When the police arrest Jahnavi for prostitution, they again disrobe and humiliate her. There are countless incidents, that many of us can recall and recount about such harassment.

Many studies have been done to assess the school dropout rate among girls due to the lack of

toilet and sanitation facilities for girls. However, the need for these facilities for transgender students is seldom stressed in everyday discourse. Jahnu waits uncomfortably to relieve himself. Since he is still a boy, he needs to use the boys' restroom that does not have a door. He has to wait for the place to get deserted.

Jahnavi gets into prostitution to survive, a vocation of many transgender people in the absence of other opportunities. She is able to progress in life and we learn that she lives in Mumbai. She also owns an apartment in the city but rents it and lives in the old house with her former acquaintances. A society that denies renting a house to a single person or asks a thousand questions before they do, has still not come to terms with living with a transgender person as their neighbour. You are allowed to own property but cannot live within the society. The marginalized existence and living in the fringes are best established in the last sequence of the film when Jahnavi's father dies. She reaches home but soon a village elder tells her that she is not welcome and the community will take care of the last rites and rituals. Jahnavi does not protest for she knows well these people are yet to come to terms with reality. They live in a bubble where anything divergent stirs them. She leaves after handing over a stash of cash to her friend for her family. The end reflects the position where society is. Jahnu grew to be Jahnavi but the society stayed there, where the young boy had left it. Jahnavi leaves with the realization that change is yet to come.



The film delves into many details about the lives and discrimination faced by gender and sexual minorities. Jahnavi's sister, the only person who

seems to understand her is much like her. Though we are not told about her gender or sexual preferences, a peek is given into her life through Jahnu's comment, 'I know your truth. I know why you don't want to get married. But I will not live like this. I will live as myself.' To this, she responds by asking him to think about their parents. Her comment tells us how much we are taught to live to please others and our individuality gets buried under societal and familial pressure. The person Jahnu gets involved with romantically is a social outcast and literally lives alone on the fringes of the village. He is the village madman, Paras pagol. He too is afraid to fight society and advises Jahnu against it. When their relationship comes to the fore, Jahnu fights alone. Another important aspect that the film very subtly puts forth is parental apathy. Either parent seems blissfully unaware of the turmoil that Jahnu is going through. While the mother notices his quirks and chides him casually, the father is happy with his ignorance, real or feigned. Parents ideally would be the first

confidante of a child. However, the child knows that the parent is also a pawn in a society driven by its rules and order. It is seldom that they will fight it, rather the uncomfortable issues are put in the back drawers.



If films are to be read as a reflection of the society and times we live in, *Jonaki Porua* (Fireflies) gives the most authentic of images.

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