

Critique

Pranjal Borah

Decoding the Tangible Dreamscape of A Film and Its Distinct Milieu That Dares Its Audience To Question: ‘Semkhor’



‘It is wrong to be born being a woman.’ laments a pregnant woman crushed under the weight of toxic masculinity of a fiercely tradition-driven society in ‘Semkhor’, “None understands you. Even if you’re worn out, you can’t stop carrying babies till you become bed-ridden. What a tradition...!” An unshakable feminist tint pervades the length and breadth of ‘Semkhor’, the first ever Dimasha language film. But Aimee Baruah’s luminous, anthropologically tinged film far transcends the insularity of such a simple categorisation and cerebrally evokes in us an irresistible curiosity to appreciate and critique how indigenous people are accustomed and conditioned to figuring out broader human realities. In this case, how a monolithic, stubbornly tradition-driven society inevitably

exacts its price from the individual in a regressive way seems to be the overarching theme. Here is a more forceful and inclusive call for internal reform. Aesthetically, ‘Semkhor’ seems to exemplify a steady shift toward realism in the portrayal of indigenous people in popular culture. In this respect, it is redolent of “Tanna” (Australia, 2017) and even “Embrace of the Serpent” (Columbia, 2016) for its highly evocative visuals, naturalistic performances, and economical filmmaking coupled with its impactful story and fresh cultural perspective. Although in league with these two recent cinematic masterpieces to a certain extent, “Semkhor”, however, is nowhere near the epic grandeur and cinematic profundity of “Tanna” and “Embrace of the Serpent”.

Curiously the cinephiles of Assam now seem to be raving at the emergence of a young breed of filmmakers bent on churning out rich, diverse and often experimental cinematic narratives in structure and content hitherto unknown to the cine buffs of this terrain. The socio-political, economic and cultural milieus often creep into their narratives as a readily real leitmotif. (Haobam Paban Kumar's *The Lady of the Lake*, Suraj Dowerah's "*Orong*", Jaicheng Jai Dahotia's "*Handook*", Reema Bora's '*Bakul*', Anupam Kashyap Borah's "*Bondi Bhotiyai*", Sanjib Dey's "*III Smoking Barrels*"). Most of these young filmmakers seem to have well-defined film sense and well-defined film perspective. They often show an innovative and tight sense of scripting that paves the way for highly evocative storytelling in an acceptable film language. (Bhaskar Hazarika's '*Kothanadi*' and '*Aamis*', Reema Das's '*Village Rockstars*' and '*Bulbul Can Sing*', Sanjib Dey's '*III Smoking Barrels*'). They have a penchant for acquiring good command over film aesthetics and language, and most of them seem to be striving to improve and strike an equilibrium in their forms and contents, as evident in their works. (Manjul Borua, Jaicheng Jai Dahotia, Bhaskar Hazarika, Khanjan Kishore Nath, Anupam Kashyap Borah, Rima Das, Reema Borah, Himjyoti Talukdar). Consequently, their works are often fortified with suggestive and evocative cinematography, content and essence-driven editing styles, spiffy and meaningful sound design, adroit application of highly effective ellipsis, and quality acting. More than evident in them is a readily visible tendency to weave a cinematic narrative which is minimalist in gimmicks but rich in cinematic beauty and

veracity. A rhizomatic narrative often pepped up by a cerebral dose of cinematically veracious hyperreality is no longer conspicuous by its absence in the cinema of Assam. (Bornadi Bhotiyai, Kothanadi). At times, a few seem to resort to a conscious endeavour to bring in a flavour of fusion cinema to be commercially viable. (Anupam Kashyap Borah's "*Bornadi Bhotiyai*"). Most of them seem to show allegiance to Independent Film Movement in their own ways. The fact that these new filmmakers are fast looming large as a flicker of hope has inspired the discerning film buffs to envisage a Renaissance in the offing....! '*Semkhor*' is one of the latest to jump on the bandwagon and definitely an ace up Assamese cinema's sleeve. Aimee Barua's film also has many of the dominant characteristics of a riveting documentary, even though it is inspired by primitive traditions of a hill tribe rather than true events. It is almost an ethnographic probing of the indigenous tribes and their monolithic cultural dynamics and positions, which are always caught up in a labyrinth of many deadly dualities. The allegorical '*Semkhor*' is about unbridled tribalism, fiercely held customs, brutal coming-of-age realities, and how an outwardly tranquil and smooth sailing, fundamentally tradition-driven homogeneous society subjugates woman folk and shatters their fundamental human rights at the altar of regressive traditions.

The Samsa neighbourhood of Semkhor is where Diro resides with his wife and children. In this socio-cultural milieu passionately driven by stubborn life views, rigid customs and rituals and belief systems, people seem to live on traditions

and although people live a somewhat contented and fulfilling life, many of these traditions fringe on superstitions and take a toll on an individual's life. Diro, a relatively carefree, irresponsible tippler, is forced to stay away from his family for a year on account of violating a tradition. Fed up with the traditions which empower the male counterparts to live a life of sheer recklessness and frivolity, Diro's wife bursts into agony as she fumes up in a heart-wrenching monologue:

“You males never try to understand our sufferings. You know only about sex. I have given birth to six children. Good that the rest of the children died....You, you never learnt to take responsibility. You know only about bodily pleasure. Why are you not here now to devour me? So enjoy Busu (a carnival-like indigenous festival) as long as you want to...”.Then Diro is killed in an accident while climbing up a slippery hilltop in his desperate move to have a glimpse of his family across the hill. His tragic and untimely death forces his wife to fend for herself and their three surviving children all alone. Despite her relentless struggle to keep the rest of her family afloat, she loses her two sons to the man-eaters. Behind the lush green tract of jungle in Semkhor is always lurking the menace of man-eaters. But more treacherous than the man-eaters in Semkhor are some of its man-eating traditions and customs, which often spell doom for its inhabitants, especially its women. Child marriage is a norm here. According to Semkhor tradition, the baby is buried alive with the mother if a woman dies giving delivery. To her utter dismay

and agony, Diro's wife, sort of a midwife in the community assisting childbirth, encounters many such brutal traditional practices in her predominantly patriarchal world while desperately trying to save the babies, albeit unsuccessfully. In fact, she often objects to such stubbornly held inhuman traditions, lashes out at many of them, and advocates a change of mindset from within. Muri, who is only eleven and her only surviving child out of six she gave birth to, has to marry Dinar, whom she was betrothed to in her childhood. Sadly, Muri too passes away shortly after giving birth to a girl. Now, what will Muri's mother do to save her granddaughter from the jaws of inevitable death? Will she succumb to the Semkhor tradition of burying a surviving new born of a dead mother alive again by putting up a valiant yet 'doomed to fail' resistance? Or, will she somehow stand up against and undo the man-eating tradition in an exemplary way? Can human compassion and empathy be enough to bring about metamorphosis to the monotheism of a culture and belief system? All that is for the audience to probe into, ponder over and discover as they stand face to face with 'Semkhor'...!!!

With the director immersed in the culture of the people whose story she intends to unveil before us, the beauty of the environment and the poignancy of the story itself are underscored by the spiffily minimalist soundtracks that permeate the narrative. Although there are syntheses of diegetic sounds and minimalist sound design to underline dramatic tension, much of the score relies on ambient noises from the

forests, hills, and eerily quiet mountain valleys of Semkhor. But as the title indicates, the place and its people remain central despite being uniquely and proudly about the central character and her tragic and life-altering experiences. The lead, Aimee Barua, herself as Diro's wife, has the kind of fluid naturalism usually considered a realist's dream. However, her performance is marred at times by blatant melodramatic tinges that serve no purposes (e.g. her heart-wrenching outburst after she fails to save the midwife's new born daughter and again in her monologue after Diro is forced to stay away for a year from his village and family). The only other role of substance Aimee Barua, known mostly for her average mainstream outings, essayed was Radha in Jadumoni Dutta's national award-winning film 'Jatuka Pator Dore' (Like the Henna Leaves, 2009), where she strove to deliver but fell short of. But Diro's wife in 'Semkhor', with her masterful command of emotional range, is a stellar performance and definitely Aimee Barua's best till now. There is a strong universality to the plight of so many of 'Semkhor's characters, especially to the mischievous children who put in performances just as engaging and natural as their adult counterparts.

'Semkhor' is also one of the most stunning visual achievements in recent North Eastern cinema history, adroitly shot across a primordial landscape rich in the vibrant greens of the tropical forests and eerily beautiful yet treacherous mountain tract. The

camera evocatively conceives and constructs the menacing atmosphere of the poignant story bit by bit. Even when people engage in spectacular acts, like vivaciously dancing in unison or frisking around in a deadly terrain full of man-eaters or a woman delivering a baby, the camera frequently becomes a passive observer. But when there is a tonal and thematic need, the camera turns kinetic to capture the exact hues. Prodig Doimary's lenses also veraciously and evocatively capture the actors' authenticity and the luscious beauty of the landscape and add to the film's almost documentary-like atmosphere. Eulogising 'Semkhor' as a remarkably triumphant film, however, can hardly undo the fact that the film far falls short of a cinematic masterpiece on many counts. Its patchy script marred by many improbable coincidences in a carefully and consciously sustained motive of 'verite', many melodramatic overtures both in collective treatment and performances, and flatness in tenor is some of the readily tangible loopholes which vitiate 'Semkhor's appeal. Yet the first Dimasha language film, Aimee Barua's maiden venture as a director, 'Semkhor' stands out as a quality film. It gifts us a satisfying viewing experience by fusing artistic splendour, top-notch performances, and a readily palpable subtext about the muddling dilemma of cultural survival and the need to bring about a progressive and humane change to both the cultural dynamics and the stubborn mindset that feeds such a mindset.

■ **Dr. Pranjal Borah is an Associate Professor of Dikhowmukh College, Sivasagar and also serving as the Guest Faculty in Film Studies at Dibrugarh University, Jagannath Barooah College, and several other Colleges and Universities in Assam.**