

Critique

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The Story of Grand Capitulation :
Jahnu Barua's *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai*



To tell the story of the people, one doesn't need to profess the ideology, which must pertain to the discourse. Most great directors of the world cinema have, very candidly and poignantly too, captured the people's lives, the pang and pain on the celluloid. What is needed is the eye, the sensitivity to understand, and the aesthetic capability to project the same through the images and good mise en scene.

Jahnu Barua's 1987 film *Halodhiya Choraya Baodhan Khai* (Catastrophe) is a milestone in

Asomiya cinema. Based on a famous novel by Homen Borgohain, the film director has turned the tragic tale of Rasheswar and his endless struggle for survival into a great piece of cinematic art through his oeuvre of an auteur. Because it is narrated in the most basic manner, the simple tale of a poor farmer strikes the heart most piercingly. Indra Bania, the actor protagonist in his helpless, submissive body language, the hesitant gait of a walk, perhaps becomes the poor representative farmer, the residual

exploited of the feudal lord and the character of Sanatan Sarma, the landlord turned politician, the constant binary, who, by a matter of principle, as it were, harasses the likes of Raseswar, stands at the other extreme.

The basic and elementary nature of the tale, the condition of the oppressed and the perennial nature of the vulnerability of the poor are so well expressed through the shots (mostly long shots and a few close ones) that it helps in the smooth linearity of the narration. The circuitous plan of fate or the Capital becomes so tricky that the protagonist is led from one peril to another. He is on the brink of losing his only strip of land because his father, in ignorant naivety, had not kept the receipt of the payment for the mortgaged land to the wealthy landowner. So, he has to rescue the land, the only supplement for survival. He must rescue his dream of making his son a magistrate or collector and making a good life for his children. But the sense of irony which is earmarked in every page of the original novel is also retained in an astounded manner. The shattered illusions and fractured dreams are very strikingly depicted through the evening gloom, the vast barren fields (over which they walk, briskly and times slowly in fatigue), the scenes in silhouettes and also in the central leitmotif or symbol of their home, the rickety thatched house, the courtyard, where all the scenes of love and loss take place.

It's a Kafkaesque drama unfolding before the audience when the protagonist is entrapped within the labyrinthine journey of hope against hope and futile optimism in his attempts at getting back justice (the land he had, which is his life and living). Corruption prevails in the collector's office and prevents every genuine move in the process. At last, after the last straw of hope, the protagonist meets the collector coincidentally, and some respite is given in the form of recompense meted out by the kindhearted Collector. He gets back his land, but when he gets ready for tilling and ploughing, he is gently reminded by his wife that to file the petition for his land, to bear the cost he already had sold his pair of oxen. To tell it in a nutshell, Rasheswar loses his battle repeatedly. All the compromises he makes in the survival process

are of no avail; what confronts him is a series of new challenges.

It is a tragic tale of an impoverished landless farmer. Still, the genuinely credible treatment of his life and family in the cinematic form contributes immensely to the overall effects of the film. Their life runs on the bare necessities, yet the small pleasures of life and family bonding are evident in the scenes where a certain sense of happiness prevails despite the lack of money. The young daughter wants a bare piece of red ribbon for her hair, and the studious young son needs his book of Arithmetic! Once the father brings the required items from the village market, they are happy. The mother, as the housekeeper, sweats and toils to make ends meet and is one of the most burdened but assists her husband to the best of her capacities. Purnima Saikia, in character, becomes the woman who has coped with the regimen of dire poverty along with her husband and her family. This character bowed with the burden, losing the beauty of life prematurely, excellently portrayed by the veteran actor, Ms Saikia. All these deductions made from the viewing refer to the suggestions and impacts that are both subtle and deep.

In the adaptation of the original novel by Homen Borgohain, Jahnu Barua has mostly stayed the same from the narrative. Still, he has created beautiful cinematic images to render a sense of authenticity to the story. The scene of the impending rain is beautifully shot, and the whole environment is very aesthetically projected. The shots of the resplendent rain in Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* are also reminded of Barua's film. Of course, the sense of the cosmic conveyed by the rain scene in the Bangla classic becomes personal and individual in the Asomiya film. But the development of the shots, the dark clouds, the twirling crops, and the gushes of the wind changing the topography in nature are some of the most refined ever seen. The running figures of the mother and daughter in the storm are memorable shots in the film.

The efficiently rendered script chooses only the most relevant and the most suggestive events and scenes from the original narrative. To convey the bareness and barrenness of poverty, the director may

feel that sparse dialogue also serves a good purpose; hence, he uses very suggestive and pithy lines to significant effect. The half-uttered lines by the young son Mohen, who has to join as the domestic help in the wealthy household of the village chief, convey the sheer sense of helplessness of the situation very poignantly. The two songs in the film are thematically integrated within. The background score “ Halodhia charaye Baodhan Khai “ tells the tale of oppression and economic invasion in the principal metaphor of the seed-eating birds, also called granaryvores, such as Munia, Collared dove, Baya weaver birds etc. The trope of alienation, oppression and victimisation is well expressed through the music.

As everyone knows, this tale of the crushed dreams and the last illusions, including the director, is not individual and specific but essentially political and social. The economic structure of society accommodates both the sections, the privileged and

the underdogs. Without going into anything moral or didactic, the film director exposes the prevailing economic, social and bureaucratic corruptions and discriminations. The film’s protagonist is a perennial victim of the greed of the upper hierarchy. He wages war for himself to sustain but not against the system because he doesn’t have the means and courage to do so. But at the film’s end, Rasheswar is shown to have self-reflection and recognises his oppressor's true character. He realises the fact that, though his land is given back to him by Sanatan Sarma, the act was only to garner a mass vote for himself in the election. Now he is left with nothing for the future, and mad with rage, he tears and crushes the posters he had pasted on the trees and walls. The last shot is of this realisation. That is as it was crystallized on the screen – the tree first and then the colour red spreading to the full screen! Maybe we saw the same treatment of protest in Shyam Benegal’s *Ankur*.

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