

Critique

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Akashitarar Kathare: A Significant Addition to the Tradition of Indian Women-centric Films

Manju Borah's 'Akashitara Kathare' was released on 14 November 2003. This film received the 'National Film Award' in the category of the best regional film in Assamese. The film's background singer Tarali Sharma also won the National Film Award for the song 'Kimte, Bhakti Karibo Tomat Hari A'. The film won the Audience Award at the Dhaka International Film Festival.

Manju Borah is also a short story writer. *Akashitarar Kathare* is based on the short story "Naimittik Praloy" (Occasional Catastrophe) written by Manju Borah. In an interview, Manju Borah told- "The film is based on my own story ", Naimittik Praloy", where the protagonist had a stroke and was confined to bed. When she was well, she took care of the whole household, but she discovers to her shock, that when she is not well, no one is bothered about taking care of her. She is unattended and uncared for. I incorporated a Devadasi dance in this film as these customs are nothing but pretenses of exploiting women in the name of religion." (Barpujari, p. 328)

The director has not changed the tone of the original story, but she has added lots of new elements to the film. The story 'Occasional Catastrophe' shows a housewife named Malati, busy all day fulfilling all the wishes of her husband Suranjan and mother-in-law with two children. She doesn't care about her wishes and aspirations. She couldn't even care for her health while satisfying everyone in her family. Everyone was indifferent to her broken health. The indifference of her family members towards her led to her death. To make this story into a film, it is important to mention the new things that Manju Borah introduced to make the film version of the story a success. First, the story begins by describing the ordinary boring life of a housewife named Malati. But the film starts with Akashitara lying in a hospital

bed. Then there is a flashback to the story of Akashitara. The scene in the hospital has created a kind of curiosity in the audience's minds. The audience must wait till the end of the film to find out why Akashitara had to be admitted to the hospital. The storyteller does not create this curiosity in the storytelling of the main story.

Secondly, Manju Borah has created several strong characters for the film that are not in the original story. As an illustration, consider Tawai, who serves as both Akashitara's father's buddy and a father figure for her. He plays a key role in making important decisions in Akashitara's life. Tawai is like a member of Akashi's house. Tawai is the main man who inspired her to pursue research. The film is about the spiritual relationship between Tawai and Akashi. This character Tawai is not in the main story.

The third point to mention about filming Manju Borah's short story is that Manju Borah has redesigned some of the characters in the original story. For example, the character of Malati's brother-in-law in the original story. Malati had to take care of this character like the other family members. Like the other members, this character was indifferent to Malati. But the film makes this character a sensitive character. This character shared the grief of Akashitara. This character criticised his brother's masculine or patriarchal mentality. He even told Akashitara to rebel, but she quietly endured everything.

Fourthly, the connection of the pre-wedding of Akashitara, which is not in the original story, adds a special dimension to the film's plot. This film portrays Akashitara as a researcher of folk culture. Manju Bora says about the filming of this story –

"Occasional Catastrophe is a short story. Through the one-day diary of the main character

Malati, an attempt was made to express a pathetic truth about the pain of a housewife – her neglected personality or her nameless existence. But the scope of the story was limited for a film. Therefore, his post-marriage period was redesigned to give a special dimension to the main character. Malati was transformed into 'Akashitara' and introduced as a researcher. The topic of research was taken – women-centric folklore – which focused on the fact that women do not get equal status with men despite making great sacrifices for society and family. But in her personal life, she became like a bird imprisoned in a cage from the moment she got married. The bird that had been flying in the open sky for so long seemed to have its wings cut off. The punishment and neglect that women have endured since ancient times – Akashitara not only discovered it through research – but also protested the patriarchal mentality of the society through her research paper – but did not think that the same pain, punishment, and ridicule of her husband would happen in her own life". (Dutta, p.20-21)

Fifthly, another notable aspect of the film is the relationship between Akashitara and Rajeev. She met Rajeev in a village during her field study on Hudum Puja. The original short story does not describe the relationship between Akashitara and Rajeev. Rajeev understood the philosophy of Akashitara, and he had immense respect for her. Sometimes Akashitara reminded Rajeev. After a long time of marriage, this young man came to meet Akashitara. But due to the interference of Akashi's husband, he could not meet her. The contrast between the relationship between Akashi and her husband, Raghav, and the relationship between Akashi and Rajeev gave a new dimension to the film's plot.

Sixthly, the film shows the stories of Sati-Beula, Sati-Jaymati, Sita, Kamala Kunwari, Hudum Puja prevalent in the Rajbanshi society, Kherai, and Deodhani of the Bodos, Kumari Puja and Devdasi customs – all reminiscent of the self-sacrifice of women for the welfare of society. The presentation of these folk stories contributes to strongly illuminating the story of the self-sacrifice of Akashitara. It is worth noting that the original story does not include the

sacrifices made by women through the female-centric folk traditions of Assam.

In Indian society, women by any means are not placed at the nether end. Hindu philosophy considers women as the better half of their spouses. In this society, the respect for women is so high that even one's country is said to be his motherland. Aren't the great goddesses Laxmi, Saraswati, and Durga, who are the emblem of wealth, knowledge, and power, the token of Indian women themselves? But this ideal has failed in the lives of Indian women, failed to give social dignity and equal rights to ordinary women – proven on every page of history. Not only ordinary women but women in developed countries are also being humiliated and neglected by men. Akashitara is also one among such countless women of the world. She is highly educated, intelligent, and ambitious. Higher education, aspiration, and freedom in her life are also trimmed off by marriage. Manju Borah in an interview says-

"Akashitorar Kothare is a feminist statement about a women's sacrifice for family and society. It might sound cliché, but it is not. I took the help of folklore from Assam, which is unknown in other parts of the country. Through this film, I raised questions about the misuse of women through a particular folk ritual that commands women to strip to appease the rain god. Akashitara is a researcher in folklore, and the story moves around the change in the life of this researcher, who meets and marries the deputy commissioner of police, which turns her life around. A subplot involves a woman who goes into a trance and how social forces around her exploit her till her life is in ruins. I had some censorship problems, but when the film won the National Award, it was a happy moment for my team and me." (Barpujari, p.329)

Many films in Assamese portray the plight of women who live according to the ideals set by the patriarchal society. Dr Ranjit Kumar Baruah, in his research paper 'Women, leads in 'Agnisnan', 'Adajya' and 'Aakash Torar Kothare': An Examination of Archetypal woman's Essentialist Identity' described the plight of women in the patriarchal society in the light of post-colonial feminist theory. In this paper,

he also effectively examines the character of Akashitara from a feminist perspective. He says – “Now, a leading women filmmaker of the country, Manju Borah’s most acclaimed multi-award-winning film, ‘Akashitarar Kothare’, is centred around the atrocious gender bias that refuses to go in a traditionally patriarchal society even today. The film subtly depicts the age-old Suppression of women despite their vital role in the upbringing of the family and the well-being of society at large. It is about the pains and voiceless suffering of the archetypal women in a traditional society defined by a male hegemony...The present paper is just a humble attempt to peep into the world of shattered dreams, thwarted hopes, tainted identity, morbid existences, and the 'flipper of hope' that the female protagonists in these contemporary films experience in life. These films unveil before us the familiar world of Indian women – a world that relegates women to a marginalised entity, a world marked by acute gender bias, a world which often turns out to be nothing less than hell for the women- a world where life continues but living ends for her. It is a male world whose callousness often shatters and thwarts the dreams and aspirations of Menoka, Kiran, Akashitora, Durga, Saru gossanee, and Giribala. Still, it is where they are fated to Persist or perish.” [P. 5085-5086]

In the film 'Akashitara Kathare', Akashitara's husband Raghav is indifferent to her boring life. He was just busy with his world. Akashitara's brother-in-law Raju, however, understood Akashitara's grief. Sometimes he told her to rebel. The characters of Raghav, Akashitara, and Raju are reminiscent of Bhupati, Charu, and Amal in Satyajit Ray's 'Charulata'. The film does not show the relationship between Akashi and Raju as an extramarital love relationship like Ray's Amal and Charu. The presentation of the monotonous life of Akashitara is reminiscent of the life of Ray's Charulata. The director strongly presents the content of the film in high-quality cinematic language. Akashitara reluctantly obeyed Raghav and left her little boy at the boarding school. She felt even lonelier after that. One day she remembered her little boy when she entered the deserted house from outside. When she dropped the boy off at school, she told him to always

take the name of God at bedtime. Remembering this, she confesses, 'I always pray to God for your well-being. But where is my God?' – While saying this dialogue, Akashi is waiting at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the upper floor of the house. Director Manju Borah uses High Angle Shot to portray Akashi's current situation meaningfully.

Similarly, Akashitara once said, 'We are wives, they are husbands. We are Romoni-Kamini-kanta, they are man, Male– The lord and the master.' – After this dialogue, the director shows Akashitara’s face in Big Close up. This shot makes the whole sequence heartfelt by capturing Akashi's expressions of anger, resentment, and sadness. Raghav's mother was also highly educated. But Raghav’s father did not allow him to work. Raghav also kept Akashi locked up in the house. Through the wedding ring a husband wears to his wife, the director Manju Borah symbolically shows that marriage is captivity for women. A sequence in this film shows Akashi and her mother-in-law talking about their grief. This sequence shows Akashi finally crying and hugging her mother-in-law. This sequence ends with a big close-up shot of the rings worn by both characters. The meaningful application of this shot gives the whole sequence a different dimension. Here is another example of Manju Bora giving a unique dimension to the film’s content through the proper use of the High Angle Shot. Akashi tells her research supervisor that she has arranged her marriage with Raghav. The supervisor suspects Akashi's research will not be completed after the wedding. But Akashi says Raghav will cooperate fully with her. After that, Akashi left the supervisor's room. The director shows her coming down the stairs with a high-angle shot. The fact that she descended the stairs symbolically presents the decline of her future rise. Thus, Manju Bora developed the film ‘Akashitarar Kathare’ in high-level cinematic language as a noble art.

The characterisation of the use of folk music and folk instruments in Assam is a notable aspect of ‘Akashitara Kathare’. The main character, Akashitara, was introduced to the cultures of different ethnic communities while doing field studies. The folk music of Bodo, Koch-Rajbanshi, and other ethnic groups of Assam has been used beautifully in

the film. The instrument 'Dam Banshi' used among the Koch Rajbanshis and the 'Chereja' used among the Bodo community have been used in the film's music. The film also features a Bodo song at the beginning. There was a story associated with this song. This song is about a bird falling into a thorny tree. A bird flying in the sky broke its wings and fell into a thorny tree. This bird is in the same condition as the heroine, Akashi. In this regard, Manju Bora said in an interview:

"The central character of my story, Akashi, is like the bird that flies with its wings spread in the sky." (Dutta, p.23)

There are a few minor flaws in the plot's presentation and the film's technical skills. The dialogue in this film is sometimes lecture oriented. For example, the lecture-oriented conversations of Tawai decrease the artistic quality of the film. The film's dialogue is occasionally poetic. For example, Akashi's angry comments about the Devadashi dance turn out to be poetic. This is not realistic. It has already been said that Akashi's life can be compared to Charulata's boring life. Satyajit Ray has shown cleverness as a director by using a variety of shots with only one dialogue in the film's first seven minutes to portray Charu's trapped, lonely and

neglected life. The sequences of Charu slowly opening the windows and looking out of the confined room and the presentation of the scenes she sees outside the house through the window strongly present Charu's existence and compassion without a single dialogue. But the film's aesthetic quality would have been enhanced if Akashi's lonely, neglected, and monotonous life had been presented in some symbolic sequences after her marriage.

The biggest flaw of this film is that the subtitles are used to tell the story from the outside. For example, we can talk about the sequence of Akashi where she was putting her old books in her bag. There is no dialogue in this sequence. But the subtitles are about Akashi's mental state or her changed life. This subtitle says –

"Life of Akashitora has transformed with the birth of her baby. Research, Study took the back seat to the mother in her... Thus began the same old story of women."

The scenery in a film should speak, but the act of making statements through subtitles decreases the aesthetic beauty of a movie. In conclusion, it can be said that Manju Bora's 'Akashitara Kathare' is a significant addition to the tradition of Indian women-centric film.

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