

Critique

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Soul of Silence: Trilogy of Sensory Parade



Xobdo Nixobdo Kolahol (Soul of Silence, India, Assamese, 2022, 83 mins) by Dhanjit Das

Sobdo (Sound)

When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I'm feeling sad. I simply remember my favourite things, and then I don't feel so bad. - 'My Favorite Thing's from The Sound of Music, 1965.

A hut. Medium close shots capture the interior and the yard. Dry, pale, with no harmonious balance with the surrounding greenery. In the backdrop of a rural proletariat set-up, an ordinarily decorated room. A young woman, dozing. Extreme close-ups show that it is not age that has made her detached and incurious of the immediate micro universe she's been in, but it is her internal suffering and poverty. Simultaneously, a kind of silent approval of life has made her sustain the torment she has been living with. Adjacent to the display, she is shown another room, but the existing physical space between the two turns out to be more disastrous, causing her an emotional log-out by bringing her another tragedy - her husband's second wife.

A bamboo pole inside the house is infected with worms. The constant shrill sound of the mouse makes the woman bitterly irritated. An alcoholic carpenter husband who doesn't regard his wife as anything but a bedmate, who currently remarries a tender-aged girl - this implicit anguish constantly torments her, and the nasty crackling of that insect that doesn't let her sleep peacefully. The parallel movement of this grunting with every scene in the film bears a constant equilibrium. The sound is explicitly symbolic of the psychic conflict of the woman, her nihilistic affairs, and the state of her decaying family. Here, the sound engineer has done a highly commendable job. The external reflection of her anger, rage, and volcanic susceptibility is not exploded through loud vowels. Instead, by imposing a 'distinct effort' on the trivial spontaneity with which the various tasks of daily domestic life - washing clothes, cleaning utensils, hauling a sack of rice - are all performed, with redundant emphasis on the 'accessible medium' that attempts to remove the accumulated level of anger that time and life have

brought. When the loneliness of the first wife became even more intense after her husband remarried, and he even started ignoring her as a sex mate, which he had forcibly done before, she started feeling the need for a sound as a door to overcome that transparent ignorance. The hoarse voice of the insect that once compelled her to try to kill him with kerosene or a sharp knife gradually seems to be her companion. In many nocturnal hours, the absence of that sound made her feel dismayed; she knocked restlessly on the wooden edge of her bed, on the bamboo pole in the room. When the sound is back, relief appears on her face. Despite being surrounded by people, despite the presence of her husband in the other room, though he no longer belongs to her - the woman is lonely. She needs a little sound to fill this physical and mental void – a sound which will only be hers. Then let it be the dull, seemingly annoying sound of the worm. The ingenious and beautiful use of this personified metaphor gives a filmic wave to the somewhat ‘flat narrative’ of the story.

Throughout this journey, Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia’s timeless film *Agnisnan* makes a random impression occasionally. There, the first wife of the protagonist Mahikanta - Menaka, did not accept the shameless and violent polygamy of her treacherous husband. Although the language of her protest was very ‘bold but controversial’, Menaka developed the ability to carry that courage amidst multiple challenges of a once patriarchal society, especially with a powerful, wealthy man like Mahikanta. It was a fight for rights and honour.

In *Sobdo*, the first film of the Anthology, *Soul of Silence*, - the first wife accepts her situation, her husband's polygamy, as fate. Her protest is noticed only once, when one night, drunk, his husband physically assaults his new wife for not serving dinner, and she, despite having food in her kitchen, remains quiet and doesn't proceed to protest her. Despite all this, she accepts the situation with a kind of silent understanding, perhaps out of fear, poverty or other conventional social stigmas. When her drunken husband forces her to have sex, the close shot shows a kind of surrender on her face instead of protest. Even the words of the old woman, a frequent visitor, seem to support the man's polygamy when she

says, ‘Men don't need much. All they need is food to eat and clean clothes in time.’ The first wife is not given a single dialogue except in the film’s last scene. But powerful visuals ‘speak’ her, fully supporting her body language and face physics. Silent cinematic language establishes everything that the vocal effects of dialogue can express. When she lost her sleep in the pain of inappropriate behaviour and loneliness, the sound of the insect relieved her, at least temporarily. Apparently, the film’s ending doesn't seem to resolute the split lives of the two wives; instead, a deliberate sense of surrender and praise of the polygamous husbands’ ‘toxic masculinity’ dominates the thread. Except for the ‘personified’ status given to that ‘sound’, the rest are sub-subjects, which are allied to the cinematic development of the story.

Nisobdo (Silence)

Site of major construction work. Allied to that is the noise of its various coordinating elements all around. The sound of trucks carrying rock, sand and cement, the deafening roar of huge machines, the variable bedlum, the commotion in and around. Hundreds of workers talking, laughing, having some discreet conversations to break their monotony - sipping tea, trying to forget their being drained in the smoke of cheap cigarettes. In the middle of it all, a worker - unheated, carefree, relatively happy. Monstrous or soft - no sound touches him. He is not saddened by anyone's slanted conversation. He goes to bed after the day and falls asleep in peace. He opens an old trunk and shows a carefully kept white Punjabi shirt to a friend with a naive smile – ‘This is for a wedding’ the other says something, and he laughs again. Extreme close-up portrays his proud face puffing a friend’s cigarette with carefree nonchalance. In a long shot, a river - him sitting quietly on its banks.

The site guard pushes him away to save him from a potentially fatal collision with a speeding truck from behind. They see a doctor and get fixed a hearing aid. He's happy - now he can hear everything. The suffering of childhood deafness, the ceaseless insult of ‘deaf deaf’, this humiliation will probably end - the thought brings a smile to his face.

But things don't go as expected. Now he hears a lot of oblique comments from colleagues he thinks are friends. Cracked eared, cracked-eared... 'The smiles I've been thinking of as praise for so long become ridiculous and pierce like a shell' – 'The deaf will get married.' He can't sleep at night, sensing terrible barks of dogs and cats, the metallic noise of the machines outside, and other people fighting. The bitter sound of the sweet words he thought increasingly disturbed him – 'this vocal world, this noise is not mine, I don't belong to this... there's no blessing sound of the river...'. From the time he put on the hearing aid, no one believed that he was deaf. Once, while sitting quietly, he heard the extremely sarcastic comments thrown at him – 'Such is his anger!! A small bidi can extinguish it!!' Ignominy leaves the poor man's heart increasingly squeezed with grief and breakdown. These are the sounds better not to hear!! Even his suitor deserts him.

He throws the device into the river. After a long time, He expands his hands and breathes in joy to celebrate the sound of the river he was born with – '... this solitude of my world is my happiness and comfort...'

The second film in the anthology, *Nisobdo*, figures out the power of burble at every moment; sound attachment is used only to establish his position. His deafness was not ridiculed by isolated metallic sounds or natural sounds - but the human sounds. Even after he regained his hearing, the sound of people made him sad. He saw - the pain behind the smile. His peace was in the flowing water of the river - which is forever silent.

The director's design of establishing the world around him with various long shots, especially the network of multiple sounds, elevates *Sobdo* from a narrative to a cinematic text. The use of entirely organic sounds - such as the sound of machines, bouncing conversation, and the hero's 'natural nonchalance' to these things, nowhere to sympathise with the protagonist but locates him as a naive happy soul. The director interprets the entire event through his beautiful eyes - the interpretation of others is secondary. Before he hears anything, some blur, faint sounds are roughly audible to the spectators, but balanced consistency of colours and visual clarity

make them sense 'what is happening'. This clean optical warmth is the strength of the film. The episode randomly reflects echoes of the short story 'Awaaz', written by the esteemed fictionist Saurabh Kumar Chaliha.

Many poignant films have been made on and about deafness, including Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Khamoshi* and the Academy Award-winning film *Coda* Directed by Sian Heder. Troy Kostur, who won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for *Coda*, is deaf in real life and is the first differently abled actor to win an Oscar.

The protagonist and the director both have done a coveted task, especially in the scene that perfectly captures the unconfined joy of the man in the lead- when he throws his hearing device into the river, voluntarily embracing deafness for a tranquil living.

***Kolahol* (Commotion)**

A group of workers are going to work in a vast construction. An infant in its father's lap got injured while trying to get into the truck. Only after reaching their destination did the men learn that the baby had died. The particular worker class is so impoverished that they have little time to grieve over any issue- let it be the tragic death of a dearest one. Perhaps neither civilisation nor God has given man more tremendous suffering than hunger. In poverty, no absence of anyone can hurt another of the fraternity for a prolonged period; this sorrow cannot imprison them; many a times, tears feel like an unaffordable luxury for them. Life is forced to go on. The dead child's mother cannot bear this pain and continues to blame her husband for the death. Their dispute angered the rest of the workers. Everyone wants some rest at night after the day's hard labour. They have to stay in a claustrophobic area inside the construction, so there is no such thing as private "space" for anyone. Many people advise the man to get his wife pregnant again so that she can forget about the lost baby. However, many attempts cannot relieve this pain.

The mother's constant sombre face, the ceaseless noise of the vast construction that undermines her tears, and this noise, the pain of the

people who have been isolated in the crowd - are captured by the pithy projection of close and medium long shots. The actors' costumes are near perfection, as it plays a special role in a film's credibility. In that respect, *Kolahol* has become convincing. There is some inertia and 'forced effort' by some actors in projecting the indigenous language of a particular ethnic group, although it hasn't overshadowed the flow. Considering the film's depth and overall production design, this conclusion seems a little weaker compared to the other two parts of the anthology. It could have been a little flowy.

In Kalpana Lajmi's cult *Rudali*, the wife Shanichari, devastated by the sudden death of her husband, could not even cry her heart out due to dire poverty. She neither had time nor opportunity to grieve, but the very thought of how to cremate the dead body. Sitting by the riverbank, Shanichari broke her bangles as a sign of widowhood. Her profession was to cry at people's death.

Kolahol or *Commotion* echoes this flavour from time to time. The film succeeds in establishing the father's internal turmoil, except at the end when he hears a Hindu youth say that he has found peace by shaving his head at the end of observing the death rituals for his departed mother. However, his religion doesn't have any remedy as such. The Hindu youth's trouble was physical, but the protagonist's grief was

mental. Some discrepancy in consistency between these two points may be apparent to the invested observer.

Holding his wife's hand, they go to the riverbank in search of an expression of long-suppressed grief - only to cry their heart for their departed son. This long shot is quite to the credit.

Much noise and countless people - even then, like the tantalus cup, many people either don't have time to express or discuss their grief or any time to listen. Maybe it's a lack of connecting passion or an irony of life. *Kolahol* establishes this inescapable helplessness of poverty and struggle in the sensitive language of cinema, tactilely; that's like a tantalising cup - 'Water water everywhere, not a drop to drink.' (The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge).

All three films in the anthology *Sobdo Nishobo Kolahal (Soul of Silence)* unfold the immense power of its theme - *Sobdo* - in different dimensions through the lives of its various characters and their associated situational conditions. With very little dialogue, the entire teamwork of *Soul of Silence* is commendable for establishing the integrated ethic of the language of cinema - 'show, don't tell'.

There is no greater solitude than that of the samurai unless it is that of the tiger in the jungle... Perhaps... - Le Samourai

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