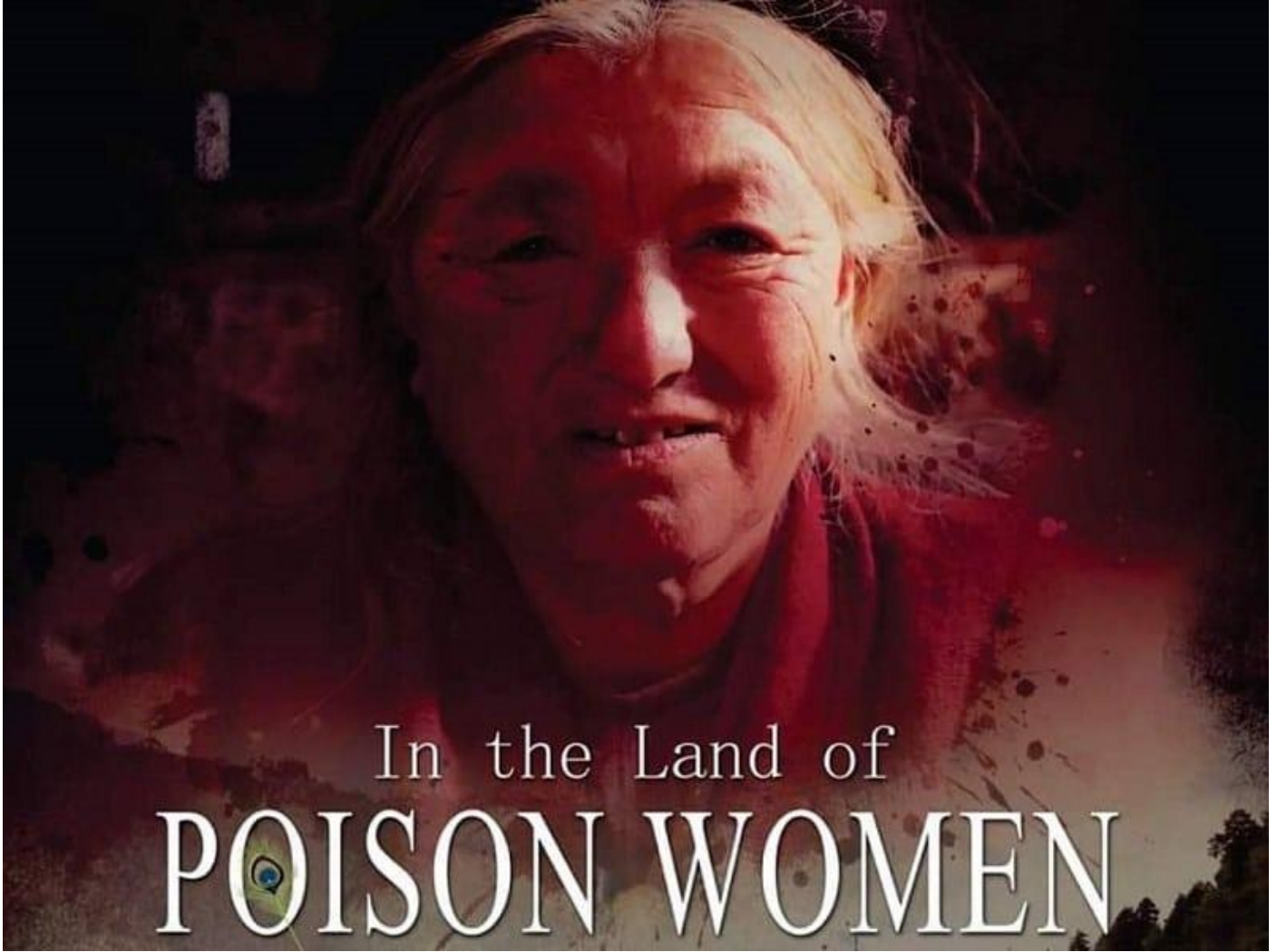


Critique

Subrat Jyoti Neog

Manju Borah's *in the Land of Poison Women*



The film “In the land of poison women” is based on the acclaimed Assamese novel ' Bishkaynar deshat” (In the Land of Poison Women) by Sahitya Akademi Award-winning writer Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi. It is a faithful adaptation of Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi’s novel. Film director Manju Borah’s ‘In the land of poison Women’ was released in the year 2019. This film was made in the Pangchenpa language. The Pangchenpa language is spoken by the Monpa people living on the Indo-China border in Arunachal Pradesh. The film ‘In the land of poison Women’ has been selected for the prestigious Indian Panorama, 2019. It also won the National Film Award in the

category of best regional film. In the citation of the National Film Awards, it has been written as – “The Film is a depiction of an individual’s effort to break the myth of ‘poison women’ in a remote part of Arunachal Pradesh.”

In the introduction to the original novel, the novelist Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi says – “While reading the story in class 8/9, I heard about a horrific murder that took place in the Zemithang area of the then undivided Kameng district. Later, the then popular Hindi magazine 'Dharma Yug' published a photograph of a beautiful girl from the Pangchenpa tribe with a touching account of how the beautiful

mountain girl was brutally murdered. When I was the Commissioner of Tawang District, I saw a mysterious house at Brokenothang in the Zemithang area. I have heard the story of an old couple living in that mysterious house, but I have never seen them with my own eyes. I heard that the old woman in that house was very beautiful. Readers will find out the answer to the connection between this mysterious house and the old men and women who lived there with the horrific murders I heard about in the past”.

The novel is based on a true story and the director Manju Borah emphasizes eradicating superstition from society. Among the Pangchenpa speakers, women were considered 'poisonous women'. The film beautifully shows how the central characters Thuptein and Tashi went to dispel this superstition. The novel takes the socio-political issues of the people living on the China-India border so seriously, but the political issues are secondary in the film. The filmmaker focuses on the issues of superstitions in society. Filmmaker Manju Borah says in an interview-“The community shown in the film is known as Pangchenpa and their place of living is in the remote corner of the country, with their population less than 5,000. This was one of the main reasons I chose this novel. The location was a point of both attraction and challenge. Pangchen or Zemithang is situated along the Indo-China International border and very sensitive and high alert zone. Secondly, the story about Pangchenpa women was the biggest challenge. They are believed to be poison women who carry poison in their nails. The legend goes that whoever takes food cooked and served by them, die either instantly or slowly but most certainly, die. Can you even believe that such a belief exists in this country? ...The women themselves believe this and are unwilling to think and do otherwise.” (Barpujari, p.334)

Thuptein is the protagonist of the film. He is an officer working in the intelligence bureau. He comes to a place called Brokenthong. The Pangchenpa language is spoken in this area. Thuptein, although a son of the Monpa tribe, is not very familiar with the Pangchenpa language and culture. Thuptein grew up in Bomodila. But Thuptein has a passion for his own culture and language. He

also considers himself responsible to the Pangchenpa society. After arriving at Brokenthang, he learned that- the Pangchenpa women are considered to be doumo (poisonous girls). It is believed that the poison is produced in the nails of the Pangchenpa women and if a male takes any edible from a Pangchenpa woman, he dies of the poison. That is why no one eats anything with their hands. Thuptein was surprised to learn this.

Thuptein met Tashi Yoden, an educated Pangchenpa-speaking woman who was a Circle Officer in Zemithang Area. When they first met, Thuptein drank tea from Tashi's hands and defied the tradition of being called 'Poisonous Girl'. Thuptein soon developed a close relationship with Tashi.

There was a mysterious house in front of the camp where Thuptein lived. An old couple was living there. Thuptein later learned that the old man who lived there was his father's older brother, and the old woman was Tashi's father's sister. It is worth mentioning that the old woman named Ama Lochang is considered by everyone in the area as the 'Poisonous woman'. Everyone knows that she has already killed her children, and she is serving seven years in jail for this murder.

Thuptein and Tashi soon developed good relations with the old couple-Ama Lochang and Apa Changra. Thuptein and Tashi were also married at the initiative of Apa Changra. Thuptein and Tashi, who lived on the Sino-Indian border, one day, learned that China had occupied one of their areas. Immediately they had to go about their government duties. After the heated situation subsided, Thuptein and Tashi went to visit the sick old woman, Ama Lochang. Thuptein and Tashi tried to explain to Lochang, who had always been considered a 'poisonous woman', that she could never be a 'poisonous woman'. At the end of the film, it is seen that Lochang's children did not die after drinking traditional drinks made by Ama Lochang. Apa Changra suspected that his wife had an affair with his daughter's boyfriend. In the end, Changra revealed that it was he, who mixed poison in the liquor as he wanted to kill Dawa Tsereng, the boyfriend of his daughter. But unfortunately, his children were killed, and Ama Lochang had to spend her life with the stigma of doumo. Lochang had to

bear the blame for this mistake made by Changra for the rest of her life. The film ends with an example of Tashi-Thuptein's efforts to dispel the superstition of 'poisonous women'.

The film shows the superstitions of the Pangchenpa-speaking society as well as the patriarchal mentality and ethnic discrimination in this society. The film's main female character, Tashi, goes to villages to free Pangchenpa women from the stigma of poisonous daughters. Women are taught to live cleanly. She talked about the importance of the toilet. She expresses her anger over the humiliating position of Pangchenpa women and says that what is the scientific basis for a girl being a poisonous daughter. Why does the male society impose such a huge stigma on women? The patriarchal mentality of society has been reflected through the character Apa Changra. The children of the old couple died from Apa Changra's flaws. But marked as a poisonous woman Lochang had been convicted for the death of their children. Apa Changra did not want to tell the truth. Changra told the truth only at the time of her death, yet Lochang was not angry or resentful about this. Indian women are symbols of tolerance – through this kind of statement the patriarchal society has always been exploiting women.

Along with the main theme of the film, the filmmaker deals with some socio-political issues in the China-Indian border region. The issues, however, do not interfere with the pace or enjoyment of the main story. Director Manju Bora can be credited for this. The presentation of the administration of the border areas, the Chinese invasion, etc. is vivid and realistic. It has been shown that China is slowly occupying many parts of Arunachal Pradesh due to the weakness and short-sighted decisions of some administration officials. Such socio-political issues are brought to light through the statements of Tashi and Thuptein.

The strongest character in this film is Tashi Yodan. Kedan Tashi's performance as Tashi Yodan, a strong nationalist, is commendable. The actress was able to capture the qualities of Tashi Yodan's intelligence, efficiency, candor, and determination with her beautiful expressions and acting. Thuptein's love and respect for the confident and self-respecting

Tashi were increasing day by day. The following excerpts from the conversation between Thuptein and Tashi are enough to highlight Tashi's personality.

Tashi: I won't provide Porters ... Inform your Superiors that our administration has resorted to non-cooperation.

Thuptein: Why? Isn't arranging porters for us... part of your duties?

Tashi: True... But as an Indian citizen, I also have a duty.... I don't want foreigners to occupy our land...so; I sent a proposal for withdrawing Samsudurungsu camp even for a single day is wrong.... when your department does not listen to the suggestions of our civil administration, why should we listen to yours?

Thuptein: I understand.... you are right..

Tashi: If you understand then don't ask for porters..

Thuptein: But I must carry out my responsibilities... can you help for my sake?

Tashi: Sorry, I cannot, don't take it personally.

It is noteworthy that through the film "In the land of Poison women", Manju Borah has tried to contrast the status of two different women from two different backgrounds. The director Bora asserts in an interview- "One is labelled a poison woman and forced to live an isolated life rejected by society carrying the guilt of having killed her two children including few of their friends after having served them wine she had brewed herself that turned out to be poisonous. The other woman is an educated, smart and confident government officer who tries to remove the age-old superstition of women carrying poison in their nails. I have tried to spread this message among small ethnic groups that with education and determination, their women can also go up in life like any city woman and help their weaker peers in uplifting their lives." (Barpujari, p.336)

Another notable strength of Manju Bora's 'In the land of poison women' is its aesthetic beauty. The cinematic language of the film is worth mentioning. In this context, we can talk about the use of the suggestion Preference shots. The director uses these shots during the long conversions of the characters. Through these suggestion preference shots, the

director has freed the audience from the boredom of long conversations. Director Manju Bora frequently uses suggestion Preference shots in the long conversation between Apa Changra and Thuptein on the China-India border issue. The viewer does not feel bored during the long conversation due to the proper use of this shot. The director used long shots to highlight the beautiful scenery of Arunachal Pradesh surrounded by mountains and rivers. These shots enhance the aesthetic beauty of the film. It is noteworthy that Lochang was surprised when she encountered Thuptein for the first time. The close-up and big close-up shots used to convey the expressions of surprise of the old woman are appropriate.

However, there are a few flaws in the film. Lochang made a confession when she first saw Thuptein. This confession is 'That same face, the same appearance ... Yes, yes, the same face, the same nose, the same ears, the same skin, exactly the same...' Immediately after this confession, a sequence of Thuptein dreaming is introduced. In this dream, Thuptein sees the confession of the old woman. This whole thing is

artificial. There is a lack of spontaneity and realism. Such imposed sequences reduce the aesthetic beauty of the film. When Thuptein returned in the morning after dinner at Tashi's house, he followed Lochang and Changra. He heard the conversations of the couple. It is unrealistic. Similarly, it is not natural that Changra and Lochang did not know that Thuptein was following them because Thuptein is coming within hearing distance of them. The inclusion of such sequences diminishes the artistic quality of this film. Thuptein once worked in the Tawang office for a month. One day, he suddenly took out the file of Changra and Tashi from among many old files. The covers of these two files were brand new. It is not realistic to have two new cover files inserted between old files. Sometimes the director is indifferent to such subtleties. However, director Manju Bora aesthetically presents the attempt to eradicate superstitions and stereotypes from society through 'In the land of poison women'. The film has a strong social message and is one of the most successful films of Manju Bora's career.

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