

Critique

Dipsikha Bhagawati

The Storyteller: Slow Burn Juxtaposition of Holistic Paradoxes



“To create is human; to reproduce is divine.”

As an instrumental homage to Satyajit Ray’s craft “Golpo Boliye Tarini Khuro”, Anant Mahadevan’s *The Storyteller* delves deep into two polarised psyches, adorned with soothing renditions of Tagore’s perennial croons, primarily as BGMs – Purano Sei Diner Kotha, Tumi Robe Nirobe, S. D Burman’s inspired timeless composition ‘Tere Mere Milan Ki Ye Raina’ (frequently hummed by Tarini Babu) and an instrumental rendition of a piece from Ray’s ‘Hirak Rajar Deshe’ accompanying the closing credits, serving as a civil tribute to the narratives rendezvoused- share, remember, and when necessary, adapt or appropriate to navigate the intricacies of life.

The plot of *The Storyteller* revolves around the executive chemistry between capitalism and artistry, between a cotton baron (Ratan Garodia, played by Adil Hussain) inflicted by chronic insomnia and a passionate storyteller (Tarini Charan Chattopadhyay, played by Paresh Rawal). The interesting thread between these two anti-auxiliaries create a slow burn frequency to grasp and understand the entire current of the film where plot progression plays a pivotal role. Comparatively, in the set hours of fast and furious screenplays, each and every crafted sequence of *The Storyteller* is like a tranquil, slow burn, elaborate wait for the next season to arrive.

This film explores the intriguing clash between trade and art, delving into themes

such as plagiarism, introspection, and the battle against diffidence. Directed by Anant Narayan Mahadevan, it features powerful performances and a captivating narrative that transports the audience to the enchanting locales of Kolkata and Ahmedabad. The film's allure lies in its deliberate pacing and artistic sensibility, although some may find the slower tempo less appealing. Among the tales shared by Tarini, the narratives of a century-old tree in the Aravalli forests and a World War II spy pigeon stand out as particularly fascinating. Yet, the director somewhat falters in bringing these stories to life on screen. A notable aspect of the film is its ability to conceal its plot twist until the very end, leaving the audience in shock as the intricate labyrinths of the story eventually unfold.

“Hasari Pal: The gods have not made it easy to be a human being.

Max Lowe: No, they haven't. But I guess that's why it feels so goddamn wonderful to beat the odds.”

- *City of Joy, Roland Joffé, 1992*

Kolkata has ever been inscribed in the generic psyche as a vintage marvel. Even in the mathematics of the newly constructed structures, that yellow feel croons as a bird of some old man's vintage land! Our protagonist, Tarini Babu, is explained as a superannuated sexagenarian who loves fish and Durga Puja and a hard-core anti-capitalist. He doesn't want to join his son, who resides in the USA, saying it is a land of vampires. He has quit a total of 73 different jobs, and we see him leaving his employer, Amrit Publications, where he served for 11 months. The city's heritage Writer's Building

is simultaneously framed as a contract and parallel to Tarini's ability to tell inquisitive stories and his nonchalance towards publishing them. Alphonse Roy's camera vividly captures the yellow city of joy with its antiquity – the narrow and wide alleys, the taxis, the boisterous fish markets, the perennial flavour of Durga Puja, and above all, the moods and moments shared by Tarini and Ratan through eloquent close-up shots. The suggestive use of shades of brown is intended to evoke the independent and communicative psychology of both protagonists. Despite being individuals of two opposite natures, what works as the executive chemistry between them is their mutual empathy and a shared standard of tolerance.

Garodia plagiarises works of literature in an attempt to win back Saraswati, his ex-girlfriend, Revathi. As art is more important to Saraswati than money, he publishes Tarini's stories under his name (in the guise of Gorkhe) in a Gujarati magazine in his hometown. In the movie, Garodia may be heard saying, “Saraswati does not like Lakshmi.” Tarini is introduced in the movie as Garodiya's business partner at one point. He jokes, “He makes cotton; I spin the yarn.” As an insecure businessman, Adil Hussain is commendable. His persona consistently strives to convey an air of academic and intellectual proficiency. In her cameo role, Revathi is up to the mark. Manikchand, Garodia's housekeeper, is portrayed by Jayesh More. In contrast, Tarini's friend, the librarian, is portrayed by Tannistha Chatterjee (as Suzie Fibert), leaving a lasting impression in the collective temperature of the film. Paresch Rawal performs excellently as the typical Bengali who loves mach (fish)

and pujo (Durga Puja), seizing every opportunity to criticise capitalism. He has a powerful dialogue about literary theft: “Even to copy, one needs intelligence” (nakal ke liye bhi akal chahiye), where he outsmarts Garodia. Tarini’s vivid recollection of his remarkable experience with Garodia stretches back to a significant period two decades ago when both of them were navigating the complexities of life in their vibrant 40s. At that time, society was immersed in the charm of everyday technology, and the lifestyle was characterised by the familiar presence of rotary telephones ringing in homes and the classic Ambassador cars cruising down the streets. This nostalgic setting serves as a backdrop for the anticipated screen adaptation, which is not only expected to portray the heartfelt connections of the characters but also to evoke a sense of appreciation for a distinctive era that many will remember fondly.

Garodia is a solitary individual who openly admits that his understanding is primarily confined to financial matters and accounting principles. At one point, he derides Bandopadhyay’s integrity by stating, “This world belongs to those who act, not those who ponder” (Yeh duniya sochne waalon ki nahin karne waalon ki hain). Conversely, Bandopadhyay gently criticises Garodia for his ‘ungrateful capitalist mindset.’ At one point, Tarini Babu voiced the futility of continuing with his stories when he wasn’t meeting his target, especially considering he was being paid for them. Yet, Garodia was reluctant to let him go. Two dynamics were at play here: Garodia’s insatiable desire for more tales and a subtle, complicated reliance on Tarini Babu. Garodia

adhered to a strict vegetarian diet, while Tarini Babu had a natural fondness for fish. He frequently brought home fish, which the cook, Manik, would prepare. Despite becoming aware of this, Garodia chose to remain silent; he didn’t want to lose his storyteller over minor disagreements. Despite their differing cultural and ethical perspectives, Tarini develops a friendly rapport with Ratan, who is quite taken with Bandopadhyay’s distinctive storytelling ability. When Garodia discovers that Bandopadhyay opposes the idea of publishing his stories, his astute business acumen leads him to devise a plan that alters the dynamics of their friendship. Garodia resolves to exploit Bandopadhyay’s narratives and presents them as his work. The work was accused of plagiarism, as Tarini Babu played a clever trick by telling him stories originating from Rabindranath Tagore, fully aware that the shrewd baron possessed a comparatively low intellectual capacity to discern what constitutes original thought—a shortcoming that he attributed to the baron’s limited studies and engagement with literature. Ratan himself admitted, in a moment of candour, that he had hardly ventured beyond the spines of the books that lined the shelves of his opulent home—a home that, despite its vast collection of literature, was more a monument to his wealth than to his wisdom. Ratan’s impressive library, filled with a remarkable collection of books, stood as a stark contrast to his lack of engagement with the written word; it was as if the pages of those books whispered their secrets to him, yet he remained deaf to their calls for exploration. His extensive collection, though visually stunning, served primarily as a status symbol

rather than a source of knowledge or inspiration.

This paradox extended beyond literature; his lavish home was adorned with expensive paintings and intricately crafted furniture, each piece an emblem of capitalism's triumph, where the aesthetics of art and the narratives of stories were prized solely for their market value rather than for their intrinsic artistic integrity or emotional depth. In such an environment, the essence of creativity became diluted, overshadowed by the pursuit of wealth and the desire for social elevation. Ratan's interactions with art and literature were transactional rather than transformative, reflecting a broader societal trend where superficial appreciation often eclipsed genuine understanding. Tarini Babu's manipulation of this dynamic serves as a critique of a culture that prioritises material accumulation over intellectual engagement, ultimately highlighting the dangers of a system that allows for the commodification of creativity. In this light, the allegations of plagiarism assume a more profound significance, revealing not just a personal failing but also a systemic issue within a society that often equates ownership with authenticity and wealth with wisdom.

In the concluding sequences, we see both of them writing the stories of each other. Tarini Chattopadhyay is seen using the pen gifted by his late wife. Veteran Ananth Mahadevan's directorial mastery and Kireet Khurana's captivating screenplay have once

again revitalised Ray's "Golpo Boliye Tarini Khuro" (1985) with a sweet, surrendering justice. As a captivating visual narrative unfolds on screen, it becomes apparent that even though, at times, both of the main protagonists find themselves requiring a bit more backstory for enhanced clarity and understanding of their character arcs, this need for exposition is more than adequately compensated by the captivating performances of Adil Hussain and Paresh Rawal. Their portrayals infuse the film with a depth that resonates with the audience, offering glimpses into their complex personalities and pasts.

The story, which slowly brews and develops, revolves around two characters who are polarised in their beliefs and experiences, yet their paths intersect in profound and life-altering ways. This journey of self-discovery and resilience that unfolds between them generates a remarkable screen chemistry that feels both authentic and engaging. As the narrative progresses, viewers are invited to invest emotionally in their struggles, triumphs, and moments of vulnerability. This investment in their journey embodies the philosophy that 'slow is beautiful,' a sentiment eloquently expressed in the iconic 1966 film 'Andrei Rublev'.

"The eternal grace of the universal cosmos tells us the beauty of this reality is limited only to the conclusion of the observing perspective."

Dr Dipsikha Bhagawati teaches English at Dawson Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School, Nagaon, Assam.