Critique

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Songs of Forgotten Trees: Desire, Detachment, Burden and More

Anuparna Roy's debut film *Songs of Forgotten Trees* (2025), the only Indian film selected for the prestigious Orizzonti section of the 82nd Venice Film Festival and winner of the FIPRESCI Award of 11th Ajanta Ellora International Film Festival, is a humble attempt to delve deep into the patriarchal ideologies and politics through the story of two women. It is the tale of Thooya (Naaz Sheikh) and Shwetha (Sumi Baghel) who migrated to Mumbai city from two different places of India with their responsibilities, desires and complexities. Reference of the Hollong tree and the Assamese song sung by Thooya at the very beginning reveals that perhaps she is from Assam or some other North Eastern part. In contrast to the restless chaos of Mumbai, the film takes place in the intimate setting of a small but quiet apartment. However, despite being set in Mumbai, the movie is more about its characters – their unique personalities, their decisions, and their spaces rather than the city.

Roy, who grew up in Narayanpur, a village in Purulia, West Bengal, and later moved to Mumbai to pursue a career as a filmmaker, expressed her own personal experiences through the characters of her films. She started her filmmaking career in 2023 with a short film *Run to the River* which again tells us about Pankhi (Tinny Roy) and Kandhi (Poonam Saha) a widow who had to go through harsh realities in the impoverished backdrop of British Bengal.

In different interviews Anuparna Roy admitted that *Songs of Forgotten Trees* and *Run to the River* are reflection of her childhood experiences and memories, where she attempted to project the existing patriarchal system that confined a woman so badly that she even can't move out from that to fulfil her small dreams (seeing a river). *Run to the River* revolves around the fulfilment of a dream to see a river by little girl Pankhi when she becomes a woman. Regarding her stand on women's issues, Roy, in one interview stated that "as a woman filmmaker I always stood by my gender, which is

supressed, ignored and manipulated by society, thus my theme has womanly images and layers of suppression. In my film everyone is a victim of suppression and power" (Sarkar, 2024).

In *Songs of Forgotten Trees*, Anuparna Roy delicately presents both the external realities and the internal conflicts of Thooya and Shwetha through carefully composed still frames, long takes, and a restrained narrative style. Thooya, a part-time sex worker and aspiring actor, is haunted by a traumatic childhood memory that continues to shape her present. In contrast, Shwetha is employed in an IT company and is involved in a relationship that she hopes will lead to marriage. Initially, both the characters are living under the same roof with their own. But gradually they become close and tried to become intimate by negating the heterosexual idea.

Most of the time when we see a sex worker on screen she is forced by her situation; she is always a victim. But here in Thooya's case she is not a victim, neither she is regretted. Filmmaker is not emphasizing on that aspect; rather trying to say that she is someone trying to help a wife (landlord's wife) who is avoiding her husband physically to find peace.

Here, we have encountered with the third woman character who is paying a sex worker (Thooya) to keep her husband satisfied. I believe that intentionally or unintentionally, through the character of Nitin's wife, filmmaker Roy is trying to tell the audience about the emergence of a 'new woman' who will also deny the heterosexual norms just like Thooya and Shwetha to find a new individual space. But her way is different from other two; unlike Thooya, Shwetha and many other woman (as projected in mainstream cinema) she is not going for a homosexual relationship, but may be by religious faith (as shown in the film) or some other similar factors.

Roy's intention is very clear when it comes to heterosexual desire. She desired to portray the women characters not as an object of desire, but as someone who have the courage to overthrow the burden of heterosexuality. More than a narrative on women's complexities; this film speaks about their choices regarding sexuality. Here, all three women characters are sexually detached from male. Thooya's intimate moment with Nitin and other male customers reveals the fact that she is sexually dry. Even Shwetha also pushed back her boyfriend Ravi while he approached for a kiss.

Further, filmmaker's personal experiences, feelings and guilt are expressed through her cinematic characters. In *Songs of Forgotten Trees* her childhood regret reveals through the character of Jhuma Nath, her first school friend, who was married at the early age of thirteen, and due to Jhuma's caste position Roy, (here Thooya) had to break their friendship following her father's instruction. Audience can feel the presence of Jhuma within Thooya in almost every moment of the film. But in the bathroom scene, Shwetha tried to pretend to be Jhuma by making a phone call. The long take of two characters in two different spaces (bathrooms) reveals their distance but while Shwetha was expressing her own feelings for Thooya by posing as Jhuma and comforting her, they were both captured in one location. Debjit Samanta's superb cinematography not only establishes

the film as art in the purest sense, but it also makes this scene more symbolic and intense for the audience.

One recurring and potent element of Roy's filmmaking is symbolism. Even the titles of her films also reveal that. Film titles *Run to the River* or *Songs of Forgotten Trees* symbolically express the theme of the film narrative where she tells us the story about women's desire, social boundaries, patriarchal values and finally fulfilment of her desire with her own terms. Interestingly, the titles somehow connect the life of women with nature (*Prakriti*) either with 'river' or a 'tree', a connection explored by eco-feminism to showcase the role of patriarchal ideologies in the oppression and exploitation of both nature and women.

To signify Thooya's connection with her past life, Roy used Hollong tree, which is found in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and has a great socio-cultural significance in these regions, as a metaphor. The tree also signifies the strength and longevity. So, Roy's selection of this tree is not random, but vey intentional to signify the theme of the film.

Further, traditionally, red symbolizes auspiciousness, valour, fertility, passion and emotional intensity, mostly associated with marriage, new beginning and womanhood. Although, in modern times red has become a symbol/statement of power, of femininity; but interestingly, in *Songs of Forgotten Trees*, we have observed that Roy (as expressed by her) used this red colour to symbolize the burden of love and desire. Initially, the red saree is metaphorically used to signify the male desire towards Thooya when Nitin, the sugar daddy insisted her to wear the red saree. And similar desire has been showcased in the eyes of Shwetha when she brought a red nail paint for Thooya. It suggests another burden on Thooya, but this time from a girl. Thus, it shows that though Shwetha is a female, she too has a male perspective. Therefore, along with togetherness this relationship also brings burden to them. It seems Roy's intension is not to establish homosexuality as the solution to such problem; it might not be a happy ending for them. But her story is trying to put forward the possibilities. Thus, intentionally the filmmaker left it open for the audience to conclude it as per their own experiences and perspectives.

In Songs of Forgotten Trees, Roy not only avoided the male gaze because her camera never lingered on women's bodies, but she also resisted it by using her camera to capture an undressed man, which naturally demonstrates her bravery. Her camera supported her claim that "my filmmaking vision revolves around creating women centric films that reject the male gaze" in addition to the story. I think that promising filmmaker Anuparna Roy can use her filmmaking style to bring about a change at a time when women are attempting to challenge male dominance in the creation of the image of a woman through writing or filmmaking.

Reference:

Sarkar, Dipankar Interview: Anuparna Roy talks about her debut short film Run to The River (2023) - North East Film Journal, Jan 27, 2024.

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