



Decoding the Cinema of Rajni Basumatary: Thematic Concerns and Perspectives

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Abstract :

Since its inception, filmmaking has been a male centric universe. In this masculine domain, women have had to struggle really hard to make their presence felt. However, with the improvement in their social status and access to education and technical skills, they are gradually coming out of the shadows to assert their cinematic craft and vision. The release of Suprabha Devi directed *Nayanmoni* in 1984 was a defining moment for women filmmakers from Assam. Since then women directors from Assam, have been a regular presence in North eastern film circuit, exploring themes as diverse as women's identity, child abuse, local culture and traditions, history, rural lives and livelihoods etc. Straddling the genres of both Art and Popular Cinema, women directors from North East have time and again proved their filmmaking skills and earned both commercial and critical acclaim. The main purpose behind the paper is to examine the cinema of prominent film maker from Assam, Rajni Basumatary. Basumatary films namely *Raag: The Rhythm of Love* (2014) and *Jwlwi: The Seed* (2019) are subjected to intense scrutiny to arrive at an understanding of its thematic concerns and critical perspectives. The exercise is taken to explore the multi faceted aspects of the movies in question. The study uses the research methodology of Textual Analysis in order to open up the text to the possibilities of multiple interpretations.

Keywords : *Women's cinema, Insurgency, Infidelity, Loss, Feminism.*

Introduction :

The overtly patriarchal structure of the film industry is well known. Cutting across geographical boundaries from Hollywood, Bollywood to even Regional Cinema, the business of movie making has largely been a male affair. With the predominance of men in every department of filmmaking from cinematography, screenplay writing, directing, editing, distribution and

marketing, arrival of women into this field has been belated. Multiple obstacles in the form of lack of access to education, skills, economic resources and societal perceptions of female incompetence, women have had to struggle really hard to break into this male bastion. However, with the growing stature of women in the society and increased enrolment of women in film schools, a marked increase in the number of female filmmakers has



been noted. The glass ceiling has been shattered with the infiltration of women into almost every aspect of filmmaking from script and content writing, production, direction etc. In the recent decades, women directed films have not only garnered attention for their sheer brilliance but collected many awards and recognition. Mention may be made of Katherine Bigelow's Oscar winner *The Hurt Locker* (2008), Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988), *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), *The Namesake* (2006) and *Queen of Katwe* (2016), Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), Nandita Das directed *Manto* (2018), Anusha Rizvi's *Peepali live* (2010) etc. In the Regional Cinema of the Northeast, Assam in particular, women filmmakers are privileged, enjoying an equal footing with their male counterparts. Greater gender diversity is visible with more and more women filmmakers getting drawn to the lure of moving pictures. A feminization of regional cinema is fast taking shape, thanks to the efforts of filmmakers like Manju Bora, Santwana Bordoloi, Suman Haripriya, Rajni Basumatary, Reema Borah, Bobby Sharma etc. Of these, the name of *Village Rockstars* (2017) fame Rima Das deserves a special mention for placing Assamese Cinema on the global map, as India's official entry to the Oscars in 2019. In Assam, the initiation of women into filmmaking began as early as 1984. "The journey of the female Assamese filmmaker began with Suprabha Devi in the 1980's, when she made the film *Nayanmoni* (Apple of the Eye, 1984), a family drama revolving around a widow mother and her two sons -Parag and Arup" (Baruah, 1). The female engagement in Northeastern cinema is also visible in other areas

like script writing, music direction, production etc. Most of the films are in fact cinematic adaptations of works by women writers. Santwana Bordoloi directed *Adaijya* is based on eminent writer Indira Goswami's famous novel *Dontal Hatir Uiyekhowa Haoda*. Likewise, Manju Bora directed Bodo film *Dau Huduni Methai* is based on the novel *Dau Hudur Gaan (Song of the Horned Owl)* by Rashmi Rekha Bora. Again, Bobby Sharma Baruah has directed, produced and scripted her movies like *Adomya*, *Sonar Baran Pakhi and Mishing*. Reputed singer Tarali Sharma has composed music for Manju Bora directed films like *Laaz*, *Akashitorar kothare*, *Basundara*, *Abhijatri* etc. Further films like *Village Rockstars*, *Bulbul Can Sing* have been directed, written, produced by Rima Das. Even the cinematography is hers. This goes to show how women are taking over all aspects of filmmaking and shown that their cinema making skills are no more suspect.

In the realm of Cinema from Assam, Rajni Basumatary is a name to reckon with. From a Boro family in Rangapara, Assam, Basumatary's love for the visual art of storytelling goes back to her childhood interest in story writing. Her first directorial attempt was making corporate films in 1995. Basumatary forayed into commercial cinema as screenplay writer and actor in 2004 with Assamese film *Anuraag* which was much appreciated for its bold theme of marital infidelity. The disruption of conjugal harmony brought by the protagonists' extra marital affair culminating in the homecoming of the estranged husband was the thematic core of the movie. After a ten year long lull, Basumatary returned to film making in



2014, shifting gears to directing a tale of love and longing, in *Raag: The Rhythm of Love*. Her latest release is the 2019 Bodo film *Jwlwi: The Seed*. Not only in the directorial craft, Basumatary has also proved her mettle in the field of acting with cameo appearances in Bollywood movies like *Mary kom*, *Shaukeens*, *III Smoking Barrels* and *Shuttlecock Boys* to her credit. *GoodBye* with Amitabh Bachchan is in the pipeline. Of these, her role as Mary Kom's mother Mangte Akham Kom in Priyanka Chopra starrer *Mary Kom* remains the most significant. As a filmmaker, Basumatary's forte lies in her linguistic expertise in both Bodo and Assamese allowing her to weave cinematic narratives in both the mediums. At a time when Bodo cinema is still in its nascent stage, Basumatary's effort is inspirational for aspiring filmmakers of Bodo cinema too.

Objective :

The main intent of my paper is to critically examine the cinema of prominent woman filmmaker from Assam, Rajni Basumatary with reference to two of her movies *Raag: The Rhythm of Love* and *Jwlwi: The Seed*. The paper seeks to examine the thematic concerns of the movies and their wider implications in the social context. Simultaneously, it also sheds light on how different tools of filmmaking add to the construction of meaning.

Methodology :

The methodological framework of textual analysis has been used here to explore the ideas embedded in the chosen film texts. Using textual analysis for film analysis involves watching the films in their entirety to discover the thematic concerns and critical perspectives. "When we perform

textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text" (McKee, 1). Textual analysis works by uncovering the hidden meanings of a text. Meaning exists both at the primary denotative level and the secondary connotative level. 'Denotation is generally defined as the "literal" meaning of a sign; whereas the connotations are the socio-cultural or personal associations' (Chandler 141). In a film text, various tools from lighting, dialogue, camera angle to shot selection- all contribute to the construction of meaning. Using a viewer centric approach, textual analysis marks a shift from the producer to the consumer of a text as the meaning maker. Both the films are subjected to intense scrutiny, even if it involves multiple viewing, to elicit meanings about the text in general.

Discussion :

Basumatary's films are known for their feminist orientation in that they take a close look at the workings of the female heart that very often go unnoticed. A woman's quest for identity is at the heart of *Raag: The Rhythm of Love*. With Zerifa Wahid in the lead, *Raag* foregrounds the predicament of Radhika, trapped in a loveless marriage. The marital happiness of Radhika and Alok comes under strain with increasing work pressures on Alok. Boorish, uncaring and a workaholic, Alok can hardly spare time for Radhika or care about her emotional needs. His adamant refusal to start a family until his career takes off puts her motherhood dreams on hold. An accomplished musician, Radhika doesn't receive any moral support from Alok to pursue her musical dreams either. Alok's indifference



pushes Radhika into a state of shrieking loneliness. It is at this juncture; Radhika meets Iqbal, a painter and develops a bond strengthened by their mutual love for art. Radhika does her bit to bail Iqbal out of his financial crises by arranging an exhibition of his rare paintings, assisted in this humanitarian gesture by Partho, her admirer from college days. Meanwhile, the shocking disclosure of Alok's infidelity leaves Radhika totally shattered. All along, Alok has been in a relationship with his colleague Nandini, now pregnant with his unborn child. The climactic scene where Radhika and Partho perform a *Jugalbandi* on stage with Iqbal seated amongst the audience with a four year old girl generates a lot of curiosity. Nothing is revealed about Radhika's ultimate destiny. Whether Radhika walks out of Alok's life to start afresh remains only in the realm of speculation. Again, whether it is Iqbal or Partho who becomes a part of her journey remains unknown. Whether the repentant Alok is accepted by Radhika and given a second chance is deliberately left inconclusive. Basumatary remains tight lipped and non committal on these issues preferring instead to let the viewers draw their own conclusions. Textual analysis presupposes the absence of an authorial agency. It encourages the audience/reader freedom to interpret the cinematic text from his perspective generating in the process a plurality of meanings. Making sense of its ending is a privilege that Basumatary grants to the spectator. The plot device of leaving the film open ended is a stylistic novelty in the realm of Assamese Cinema and Basumatary deserves full credit for incorporating this stylistic innovation into Assamese cinema. In debunking the 'happily ever after' endings of

popular cinema and opening up the narrative to multiple interpretations, Rajni Basumatary endorses the modernist approach to cinema. Rajni's technique is reminiscent of Shavian discussion plays that see art not as mere consumption but active engagement. It makes an intellectual appeal and stimulates varied responses. And this is very true of *Raag* as well. The similarities with Ibsen's *A Doll's House* where the protagonist Nora shuts the door behind her husband Helmer who never valued her and walks away are also too conspicuous to be missed. The lack of closure is a calculated move on the part of the Director. And this is what works in Basumatary's favour. It is a risk well worth taking as the success of the film across theatres in major cities like Bangalore, Delhi and Guwahati bear ample witness to. Her debut movie as a writer *Anuraag* also touches upon the theme of marital conflicts. While *Anuraag* culminates with the restoration of marital bliss and stability by duly eliminating the other woman, *Raag: The Rhythm of Love* takes a different stance. Radhika returning to her husband is only one of the possibilities as the narrative does not rule out the prospect of Radhika walking out of his life and embarking on a new journey. While *Anuraag* consolidates the institution of marriage, *Raag: The Rhythm of Love* exposes its fragility.

As a filmmaker, Rajni Basumatary loves to reinvent herself, refusing to be bracketed within genres. In her next venture, *Jwlwi: The Seed*, Basumatary explores a theme strikingly different from *Raag*. Both the worlds of *Raag* and *Jwlwi* bear nothing in common other than their shared concern with women's suffering. The romanticised image of the designer Saree clad heroine of *Raag*



gives way to the simple and rustic village women engaged in the simple concerns of everyday life. The parks and posh city locales are replaced by village greens and cobbled roads. Rajni Basumatary seamlessly straddles these realms portraying both these worlds with a convincing intensity. The effortless ease with which Rajni depicts village and city comes from her mixed exposure to both rural and urban upbringing. Basumatary's films thus appeal to both the elite and the rural. The credibility of Basumatary art lies in her experimentation with cinematic form and content. If *Raag* was about love and betrayal, *Jwlwi* treats a subject with larger socio-political implications. Basumatary breaks new grounds by attempting the unexplored theme of insurgency on screen. Bollywood's experiment with insurgency driven movies is well known. Be it Kashmiri insurgency, the Khalistan movement, the LTTE militancy, Maoist struggle; Bollywood has shown it all in films as diverse as *Maachis*, *Madras cafe*, *Mission Kashmir* etc. However, the ten decade long Bodo insurgency has languished in obscurity. Basumatary's *Jwlwi: The Seed* fills up this void by reproducing on screen the horror of the Bodo unrest of the 90's. By highlighting the dark days of insurgency and draconian AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act), Basumatary invites public attention to an issue hitherto ignored by mainstream cinema.

Not only by treading on an unknown thematic terrain, but by investing it with feminist overtones, Rajni Basumatary challenges the prevailing cinematic representations in more ways than one. Insurgency narratives filtered through the masculine gaze are largely structured around

the conflict with the attendant paraphernalia of bombs and bullets. Ethnic nationalism and the right to self determination remain the prime focus of attention. However, the internal turmoil of women who are the worst victims of ethnic conflict hardly makes it to the screen. Basumatary breaks this cultural erasure by placing the untold stories and unheard voices in the cinematic domain. Speaking from the vantage point of her personal experience, Basumatary becomes her own story teller. In an interview to *The Wire*, Basumatary says "I have observed that during the separatist movement, it is the women who suffer the most. When a man becomes a fugitive in the eyes of law or loses his life, he would have seen it coming as it was his decision to join the armed struggle-whether due to genuine concerns for the oppressed or due to his misguided dreams. But the women are invariably left behind at home to fend for themselves-unprepared and caught off guard. Most of the time they are unskilled and untrained. They find themselves having to look after not only their children but also oftentimes their ageing in laws. These unimaginable hardships have broken yet made them strong; hopeless yet eternally hopeful for their better tomorrow. This fascinated me and made me write *Jwlwi* from the women's point of view."

She further adds "Being a victim myself, I thought no one could tell this story better than me. Of course, the story of *Jwlwi* is not exactly my family's story but the story of many households in the region in the last three decades. It was important for me to tell this story because there are not many mainstream films made on the subject. As I was directly affected, I thought that



no one could tell this story better than me. The film has also proven to be cathartic for me” (Basumatary). On a personal level, *Jwlwi* gives her a sense of emotional closure to the trauma of losing two of her nephews and coping with the sudden disappearance of her own brother.

The narrative of *Jwlwi: The Seed* relies on the connotative potential of visual motifs to highlight its key thematic concerns. The opening shot of an army truck patrolling the streets builds an atmosphere of uneasy calm and simmering tension, setting the tone for the grim proceedings. With its narrative focus firmly positioned on the struggles of a young widow, Alaari, *Jwlwi* effectively uses the cinematic tools of lighting, dialogue, shots and framing in the construction of meaning. Hardly, two or three scenes into the movie, a close up shot of a handful of freshly reaped grains appears suggesting the significance of the seed symbol in the narrative. Though at the primary level of signification, it refers to the seedlings that breed crops, at the deeper level, it conjures up the ideas of reproduction and continuity. After the premature death of both Alaari’s husband and son Erak, her grandson-Duimali is the sole surviving seed of her family tree. To preserve and nurture it for the continuity of her clan becomes her only reason to live. The shift in gender roles as an outcome of insurgency also constitutes a thematic subtext of the movie. Faced with livelihood challenges, Alaari assumes the traditionally masculine role of the provider and bread earner of the family. Shots of Alaari chopping firewood, selling the farm produce and hand woven garments, taking stock of the crop harvest are interspersed in the narrative to show how she

‘man’s up’ to meet the challenges. In this context, what Judith Butler says of gender roles appears pertinent. According to Butler, ‘gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a “doing” rather than a “being” (Butler 25). Further, the societal construction of the single woman as sexually available and desiring constitutes is yet another subtext of the movie. Basumatary’s counters this view by showing how entirely baseless Mira’s suspicions of an illicit affair between her husband and widowed Alaari are. A play of shot reverse shot where the camera’s gaze alternates between close up shots of Alaari and her half built house aptly captures Alaari’s inner turmoil even as images from the past roll out. The flashback technique is used in the film as shots constantly alternate between the past and present to create the haunting sense of loss. Written codes like 1996 and 2014 used at the beginning and end of the movie give the viewer a sense of the passage of time. Within this span, the narrative keeps shifting back and forth in time. With the image of the half built house waiting completion for years as a consistent presence till the end, it becomes a character in itself. No more a mere concrete structure, it becomes a poignant reminder of Alaari’s economic hardships and death of dreams. Again, the film also throws light on the psychological impact of insurgency on young minds - a less explored area on screen. *Jwlwi: The Seed* scores on this point subtly depicting how his father’s death leaves Erak emotionally scarred for life. The army official’s sympathetic pat on his shoulder is jerked off by Erak who returns the former’s gesture with an angry glare. The semiotics



of body language here suggests the birth of the rebel in Erak and his disillusionment with the state machinery. Close up shots of books on Mao Zedong and Che Guevara on his table become visual cues of the growth of his revolutionary idealism and initiation into the underground outfit. *Mise en scene* or the art of 'putting together in a scene' (Lewis 55) in order to highlight a point of view also generates specific meanings in the text. The way Basumatary puts together the scene where her son Erak gives away the guitar to his friends is loaded with connotative significance. Shot in a single frame with Erak and his friends, it symbolises Erak giving up his musical dreams to meet the more pressing demands of liberation and autonomy of his land and its people. On the contrary, the pursuit of musical passions by his friends continues against the backdrop of violence holding out the promise of hope amidst hopelessness. The effective use of dialogue or rather the lack of it is the highlight of the movie. As Alaari's husband bleeds to death at the marketplace, Alaari screams and wails. But the director intentionally opts for the language of silence to articulate the entire scene. The audio is turned mute to capture the tragic intensity of the moment and create the maximum emotional impact. By removing the linguistic barrier between the screen and the spectator, the audience is encouraged to totally immerse in the moment. The clever use of lighting also enhances the effectiveness of the narrative. Low key lightening is used to dramatic effect to shoot the scenes indoors whereas the outdoor scenes are shot in broad daylight. As tension builds up, the lighting colour scheme also takes on darker tones.

Erak's flight from his home and the army takes place under the cover of darkness. The use of extremely low key lighting creates suspense and tension. During indoor shoots, lighting props like the lamps and the fireplace keep the surroundings submerged in partial darkness illuminating only the characters. In the ultimate analysis, the film remains a tribute to womanhood highlighting how Alaari overcomes multiple challenge with fortitude.

A slice of history captured in camera, the Bodo film appeals to a larger audience by its use of English subtitles as also the use of mobile projections and digital platform for screening. Beset with financial constraints, the business of filmmaking is lagging behind in Assam. However, to tide over this crisis and not compromise on the quality of her cinematic vision, Basumatary resorts to Crowd funding taking a cue from many of her contemporaries like Bhaskar Hazarika, Kenny Basumatary etc.

No wonder, the film has been hugely appreciated at various national and international film festivals winning Best Film (Other than Assamese) Prag Cine Award, Best Screenplay at the Sailadhar Baruah Memorial Film Award, Special Jury Mention for Direction at Guwahati International Film Festival, besides being the official selection to Indian Film Festival of Melbourne and Tehran International Cine Fest, to name only a few. By picking up a theme as formidable and demanding as insurgency for cinematic treatment and doing full justice to its execution, Rajni Basumatary has proven her credentials as a filmmaker and silenced critics who refuse to grant female filmmakers due recognition.



Conclusion :

In the realm of cinema from North East India, Rajni Basumatary has carved a niche for herself. Having proved her expertise in both commercial and Art House cinema; dabbling in content which is both serious and romantic; with an ability to draw the elite and rural folks alike across age groups young and old to the movie

theatres, what strikes us most about her craft is its versatility. With yet another Bodo movie *Gorai Pakhri (Wild Swans)* taking shape under her directorial vision, Rajni Basumatary has indeed emerged as a name to reckon with in regional cinema and an inspiration for those women all set to take the plunge into the fascinating world of movie making.

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