

Article

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Bulbul Can Sing (2018): Stories from Edges

She is absent from history, her story is never told; because she is the ‘Other’ (Beauvoir, 1949). It is he (the Self), who tells her story. Consequently, she is often mis-represented and underrepresented. At this juncture, women’s engagement in writing her story is indeed an essential step towards women’s emancipation. Écriture feminist Hélène Cixous rightly said that,

“Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement. The future must

no longer be determined by the past” (1976).

To create a place of her own in the history, to acquire a place in the social knowledge system; women must have to write her story through different mediums and film is one of the most powerful medium among them.

Here, we can discuss about Claire Johnston’s groundbreaking article ‘*Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema*’ (1976) where she raised some pertinent questions on the ideological operations practiced in the production of mainstream cinema. She explained how women are codified in the narrative cinema with camera work and lighting. In that article she mentioned about the need of women’s cinema that can be termed as Counter cinema to the mainstream narrative cinema. Of

course, this counter cinema will not be relied only “on self-reflexivity or foregrounding the conditions of film production but one that would draw on female fantasy and desire” (Hayward, 2000:116).

Counter cinema, as an important genre of exceptional women projection negates the stereotypical role of women and depicts women with her separate identity. Srajita Sarkar in her thesis, attempts to resemble counter-cinema with Foucault’s idea of ‘counter-investment’. The main argument of counter cinema is based on the negation of patriarchy as superior to femininity (Sarkar 2012, 43). Counter cinema, according to Foucault, is an attempt to concentrate on the discourses that have been avoided so far (Hayward, 2000). Even by expecting some more counter cinema with new outlook, Clair Johnston suggested that one should learn to function at various levels, which means that movies should also be made in different genres other than the male-dominated one. Independent cinema, for Kaplan, “either attempt to discover for women a voice and a subjectivity, a place from which to speak, or try to define what the ‘feminine’ might be in a system that has done everything to define femininity for women” (Kaplan 1983, 8).

In Indian context female directors like Vijaya Mehta, Sai Paranjpye, Parvati Ghosh, Aparna Sen, Kalpana Lajmi, Deepa Mehta, and Mira Nair are engaged in writing women’s stories. They are producing movies on women, ‘in search of social and sexual identity, women

firmly located in specific socio-historical contexts’ (Datta 2002,73). They have shown immense interest in making films from women’s perspective. Their women characters are always in search of their own identity. In this regard Subeshini Moodley said,

“The female characters in Nair and Mehta’s films rebel against their oppression through the exploitation of their sexualities and the reclaiming of their bodies. By stretching the boundaries of their sexual identities, these women speak out in resistance through the language of their bodies” (Moodley 2003, 68).

They attempted to negate the so-called stereotypical role of woman strongly maintained by popular Bollywood movies.

“The depictions of women’s multiple and heterogeneous sexualities, desires, and identities in *Fire* disrupt the post-colonial nationalist attempts to create a unified, singular identity of ‘woman’ as mother and wife, as keeper of the domestic sphere, by reviving the ideas of purity, duty, and Hindu womanhood” (Madhuri 2009, 88).

This anti-stereotypical projection of women by such serious filmmakers changed the conventional notion on women’s identity and

brings the realist issues in forefront.

Recently, in Assamese film industry a small group of woman story tellers emerged to bring the stories from the margins. Women filmmakers Manju Borah, Santana Bordoloi, Bobby Sarma Barua, Rima Das and Reema Bora represent this newly emerged group. Assamese cinema started its journey with a woman centric film (*Joymoti*, 1935); where we find a silent, but courageous woman. Of course, due to the influence of mainstream Hindi cinema or so-called Bollywood cinema, in later period, women hardly found a place within the narrative and cinematic compositions for a long period of time. She was surrounded with her familial roles – as dutiful wife, as loving and caring sister/ sister-in-law, as a sacrificial mother etc. Being a follower of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Padum Barua in his one and only movie *Ganga Silonir Pankhi* (1967) attempted to create a narrative and cinematic space for woman. With heightened camera work and realistic narrative description Barua projected the inner and outer conditions of a widow, who rejected her beloved for her family's prestige. After that, a series of movies on women's issues have been made by directors like Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Jahnu Barua, Santana Bordoloi, Manju Bora, and some others.

Young and talented filmmaker Rima Das' two masterpieces – *Village Rockstars* (2016) and *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018) brought some relevant issues related to women belonging to rural areas of Assam. Storyteller Das canvases

the social reality through her camera. Being an independent filmmaker Das covers those common issues from a different point of view. Each of the movies tries to convey a message to the society. Stories are very common, but the way she serves those stories is commendable.

Being a *joyful* feminist (as she mentioned in one of her interview), internationally acclaimed Assamese woman filmmaker Rima Das intentionally selected two quite relevant stories of Assamese society, where women seems to be encircled with patriarchal norms. However, unlike other woman centric films (*Agnisnan*, *Firingoti*, *Adajya*, *Akashitorar Kothare* and some others), her way in respect of the description of those issues are different. If *Village Rockstar* is celebrating the dream of a little girl and determination of a mother; *Bulbul Can Sing* definitely postulates the complexities of an adolescence girl within patriarchal norms and expectations. Das' stand on the issues of woman's subordination is very clear. Both the films suggest that the solution of every problem is in your hand and woman can succeed if they help each other. She must search her own identity.

Bulbul Can Sing undoubtedly a feminist comment on the patriarchal social system where both man and woman are encompassed with socio-cultural expectations. Their stories are very common to the people of greater Indian society in general and Assam in particular. Das has done an admirable job by covering three issues pertaining to socially marginalized section of a society. *Bulbul*,



Bony and Suman are struggling to find their own way amidst the societal mores and moral codes. Both woman and man with feminine qualities are restricted to do certain things. They are expected to perform the gender role that Butler in her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* (1990) explained. Butler defines gender as performance; she said

“Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender” (1990).

Thus, for Butler we all are performing our gender role, and these are all set by the society. Society will decide how woman and man should behave; and those who are not

performing their role set by the society will be treated as abnormal (Sumon). Butler also explains body as a prison of gender and sexuality in reference to Foucault’s chapter on *Docile Bodies* whereby “the body was in the grip of strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions and obligations” (Foucault, 1975). All three characters of *Bulbul Can Sing* are performer (victims) of socially set gendered roles. If Bulbul and Bony is the performer of the feminine attributes set by the society; Sumon is the deviant one in this socially sanctioned masculine/feminine divide. Simultaneously, their sexual behavior is also controlled by the society through certain rules and regulations. As a result of that, they are restricted and humiliated by the so-called moral police. Failing to overcome the humiliation Bony commit suicide and this tragedy turns Bulbul’s life, and at the end of the movie she tried to sing (her own song). Her metaphorical journey towards singing carry the message of a ray of hope where women will be able to overcome those social restrictions bestowed in the name of tradition and culture.

Suman’s character represents another socially
Page 4

marginalized section of society who is always in search of a social identity (acceptance). Due to their physical structure they are always a subject to be bullied or humiliated. Director Das beautifully covered their issues, their pain, and their struggle through this character. Suman is always teased by the village people as *ladies* and it affects him badly. This is a common scenario of almost each and every society. They hardly find a respectable place in society. Even most of the time, they become easy target for sexual assault.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Helen Cixous, the *écriture* feminist who in her article *The Laugh of Medusa* (1975) asserts that “a woman must write herself; must write about women and bring women to writing”. She is the one who can better explain her story. Rima Das and her two films *Village Rockstars* and *Bulbul Can Sing* are definitely moving towards the writing of women’s history from different perspectives. Her characters (Dhunu and Bulbul) are growing day by day – from childhood to adolescence. Uncovering the problems of a woman at different stages of her life, Das is trying to give the message of women’s empowerment or freedom by her own efforts. Dhunu, Bulbul, Bonney and Suman – all are searching for their self with the help of each other. Here director’s

intention is to convey a message to the suffered and suppressed section – woman or LGBTQ of society that you are the one who can uplift your condition; you are the one who can overthrow the age old social restrictions, you all have the right to dreamt a dream, you have the right to sign a songso try to sing a new song of your own.

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