

Article

Subrat Jyoti Neog

The Surrealist Elements in Bhaskar Hazarika's Films: An Analytical Study

Assamese Filmmaker and writer Bhaskar Hazarika has emerged as a bright star in Northeast India's Cinemas. National award winning Assamese filmmaker Bhaskar Hazarika has only two films under his belt, but he has drawn great attention—first with “*Kothanodi*” (*The River of Fables*, 2015) and then “*Aamis*” (*Ravening*, 2019). In the tradition of Indian film, there are a few good surrealist films. Indeed, the genre of Indian surrealist film is not so prominent. Bhaskar Hazarika's second film “*Aamis*” (2019) can be considered a surrealist film. “*Aamis*” enriched the tradition of Indian surrealist film genre. The surrealist filmmaker emphasized the absurd and non-rational aspects of life. The surrealist filmmakers create some impression in the development of the theme which is meaningless externally but the significance of it can be detected in the climax and end of the story.

In “*Aamis*”, the filmmaker shows that the central character tried to satisfy his girlfriend providing his flesh; it is externally non-rational and absurd. One of the surrealist filmmakers told- “Many surrealist films are driven by strong feelings of longing, love and sexual desire what the founder of surrealism, Andre Breton called 'insane love". This love or desire, while appearing self-destructive or illogical to the rational world, leads characters in surrealist films and viewers in real life to realizations they may not have otherwise had". We can easily consider the film “*Aamis*” as a surrealist film in the light of this comment. One of the main characters Suman is a student of Anthropology. He has been pursuing his research on the meat-eating culture of India's North-East. Incidentally, he met Pediatrician Nirmali. She is a married woman who has a pre-teen son. Slowly a friendship develops between them.

Suman introduced her to different kinds of Meats, especially those which are considered forbidden. Gradually their relationship became more intense and strong. The conscious self of the characters always encouraged them to end their relationship and to maintain the social norms. It is noteworthy that at last inner sense discarded the conscious self which was suppressed by some social norms and so-called tradition.

Conflicts of inner and outer sense of Suman have been symbolically portrayed by the character Elias. Nirmali's inner world always tries to break some age-old social norms but her moral sense prevented her to break the barriers. But Nirmali's friend Jumi encouraged her to break the social barriers. Jumi-Nirmali's conversation and Suman-Elias conversations visualized the inner conflict of Nirmali and Suman respectively. Like other successful surrealist films, inner world conflicts of characters have been strongly portrayed.

At the end of the film, we noticed that Suman and Nirmali showed their courage to break all the barriers. The message of the film dissatisfied a lot of people as this film supports extramarital affairs. They want to raise some questions- is it a good message for our society? Will, not it encourages our younger generations? Is this type of relationship acceptable in our society? On the other hand, another section of our society will be happy with this end. If someone is unhappy in a relationship, then he/she should move away and should try to find out a happy life. Hypocrisy makes our beautiful life more miserable. Indeed, Nirmali was not happy with her husband who is often away for weeks in remote villages for his duty. When he is home, he is a self-righteous, bore, rarely listening to his wife, consumed by his important work in the villages. On the other hand, Suman gives her a comfortable space in his life and she gets a path of happiness through Suman. So, she listens to her inner voice and ignores the matter of social acceptance. She knows the path she has chosen, will not be accepted by society, yet she chose it. Her philosophy of choice reminds us of a popular quote of Kafka-"Stand with what is right rather than what is acceptable"

A section of the people of our society says that the end of the film is inimical in the context of Indian society and culture. Social acceptance and norms are not universal, these are relative. Other sections may accept this end who believes in the popular tag-"Just follow the instincts." This film is made for the entire world and the inner sense of human beings is given priority in the film, so most probably, the filmmaker ignored the specific society's socio-cultural backdrop and values.

The subject matter of "*Aamis*" reminds us to film "*Unfaithful*". Nirmali's hunger, which is a result of her unfulfilled desires, can be compared with Connie's (Diane Lane) hunger. Though the genre and the message of both films are different, yet in the context of the subject matter, there is a lot of scope for the intertextual study of both films. Nirmali's hunger has been symbolically presented through the obsession with the flesh-eating habit of Nirmali. On the other hand, Connie's hunger for physical and sexual needs is directly presented through some exotic sexual scenes. Like Nirmali, Connie has a small family with a pre-teen son and husband. Like Nirmali-Suman's extramarital affair, we find Connie and Paul's extramarital affair in "*Unfaithful*". Connie-Paul's relationship was one type of infatuation and physical. But Nirmali-Suman relationship was not confined to only physical attraction. Through Suman, she obtained one type of mental satisfaction. Flesh-eating is the only way for her to meet Suman. One day, he declared that he is unable to provide his flesh. Then she obsessed with human flesh. Suman, at last, killed a rickshaw driver and offered the flesh of the driver to decrease the hunger of Nirmali. He did it only to satisfy her. This narrative indicates that Suman can do anything for her satisfaction.

High-class cinematic language is one of the important aspects of the film "*Aamis*". Nirmali is a married woman and she is elder than Suman. In this situation, Suman questioned himself-is it, love? Will society accept it? What is the name of this kind of love? The director then used only one meaningful shot to show these inner conflicts of Suman. The director used a Big Close up where Suman was

googling the term, Platonic Love. When the audience saw the term Platonic love on the screen then the audience parallelly got a chance to ponder over it- is it platonic love like Dante and Beatrice? But it is noteworthy to say that the filmmaker at the end of the film established that it is not platonic love.

Using a few meaningful symbols, the filmmaker makes the content or subject matter of the film more visible and meaningful. For example, in the last scene, Nirmali, and Suman whose faces were covered by cloths, and among public gatherings, Nirmali hold Suman's hand ignoring the social norms. After that, the director Bhaskar Hazarika focused on a ray of mild sunshine which was coming out from some dark clouds. Symbolically, the image indicates a meaningful and positive ending to the story. In this film, a Full Moon has been used as a symbol. Suman met Nirmali before he killed the rickshaw driver and talked with her about the satisfaction of her desire. In this conversation, the director focused on a full Moon. This image signified the desire for Nirmali's satisfaction. Again this image has been shown when Nirmali was waiting for the flesh of the rickshaw driver. Thus, a lot of symbols make the film's content worthy. After all, Bhaskar Hazarika's "*Aamis*" is a pride of Indian film. So, Film maker Anurag Kashyap, who is known for his unique and original vision, rightly said that such a film has not come out of India before.

His debut film "*Kothanodi*" (2015) won the Best Feature Film in Assamese in the 63rd National Film Awards. The story of the film is based on traditional indigenous folktales of Assam. Bhaskar Hazarika picked up four stories from Buri Aair Sadhu (Grandmother's Tales), a collection of oral folktales by the doyen of Assamese literature Lakshminath Bezbaruah. The four tales are- Tejimola, Champawati, Ou Kuwori and Tawoiekar Sadhu (The story of Tawoi). The film renders four folktales, not as separate episodes but as a single. Indeed, all four stories are beautifully interconnected. The story Tawoiekar Sadhu is about Poonai, a fish trader, and his wife Maloti. Poonai, who, on the advice of his

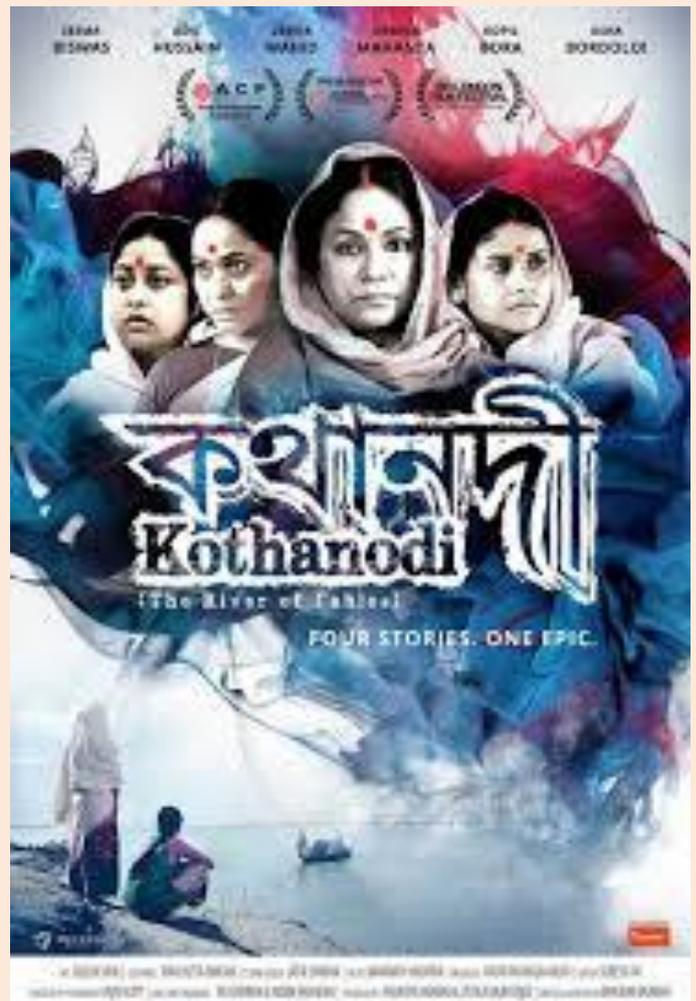
Tawoi (Father's friend), keeps burying his newborn babies. The story Tejimolar Sadhu is about Tejimola, a teenage girl, who suffers tremendous abuse from her evil stepmother. The story of Ou Kuwari is about a tribal woman who gives birth to an Outenga (Elephant Apple) who is accused of being a witch and kicked out of her home by her husband. The story of Champawati is about a greedy mother, who arranges a marriage for her daughter with a python in the hope; it will bring fortune to their family.



Reconstruction of folktales in films is not a new trend. A filmmaker tries to interpret the tales with a new approach through the reconstruction of folktales. Imposing a new thought, Bhaskar Hazarika reconstructed four folktales in the film. The filmmaker Hazarika tries to erase the established concept or age-old tradition through reconstruction. It is noteworthy that the filmmaker attempted to express the workings of the unconscious mind and to synthesize these workings with the conscious mind in this film through

reconstruction of folktales. Bhaskar Hazarika allowed his narratives to develop non-logically so that the result represents the operations of the unconscious. The filmmaker has taken the gist of Ou Kuwariar Sadhu and he presented the story in his way. He omitted a lot of things from this original tale. For instance- In the original tale, the king had two wives and his younger wife gave birth to an Outenga (Elephant Apple). The marriage of Outenga (Elephant Apple) was also part of the original tale. But the filmmaker has dropped these kinds of narratives in the film. The relationship of the tribal woman and the outenga (Elephant Apple) has been newly interpreted by the filmmaker. The Outenga (Elephant Apple) has been presented as a symbol of the tribal woman's sorrow. The limitation of the tribal woman is not accepted by her husband, who kicked out her from home. After that, the outenga (Elephant Apple) tried to follow her as if the sorrow of her life follows her. One day father of Tejimola, Devinath, and a businessman encounters the woman, and after that Devinath resolved to unearth the mystery of the outenga (Elephant Apple). This narrative indicates that Devinath understood her and tried to throw out her sorrow. Reconstructing the outenga (Elephant Apple) tale, the filmmaker tried to present the patriarchal attitude and witch-hunting problem of the society. Bhaskar Hazarika reconstructed the story of Tawoikar sadhu. In this story, a man always followed the dictation of his 'Taiwoi' (a father's friend). He buried his newborn child. Though he was not interested to follow Taiwoi's advice, yet he followed it as he believed one day everything will be alright. The character Taiwoi is a symbol of our destiny. Everything that happens for the best-this type of tone has been reflected through this narrative. In the story of 'Tejimolar Sadhu', the filmmaker omitted a lot of original narratives. He focused only on the inner conflict of Tejimola's stepmother. He constructed the inner world of Tejimola's stepmother in the light of some surrealistic elements. Secondary or less important characters or events of the original texts have been given priority whenever it is reconstructed. In the Champwati story, the original writer focused on the marriage of Champwati and the python that later turned out as God of the forest.

On the other hand, the filmmaker has not covered this marriage. Instead of it, the second incident of the original tale-the marriage of Elagi's daughter with a real python has been portrayed as the main narrative in the film. The cultural tradition of Assam has been beautifully presented in the film. Through the character of the tribal woman of the outenga (Elephant Apple) tale, the tribal culture of Assam has been presented and a picture of a traditional marriage ceremony is shown through the marriage of Banalatika, the friend of Tejimola.



Generally, the narration of off-beat films is slow. But *Kothanodi's* narration is speedy. So, the audience appreciated the film. Variegated colors and shots make the film more attractive. For instance, in a sequence, Champawati's mother put on a pure white sador (Assamese traditional dress) and Banalatika's mother donned a red sador. Speedy application of Close Up shot (CU) and Mid Long Shot (MLS) and the contrast of the red and black

color of this sequence created contrariety between the Champawati's mother and Banalatika's mother. In this film, the filmmaker has used music and sound before an incident of the film to draw the attention of the audience to that particular incident. But a few filmmakers and critics viewed that it is not an appreciable creative work. According to them, this type of imposing work should be avoided. Bollywood filmmaker Kiran Rao nullified this kind of work in her "*Dhobi Ghat*". Bhaskar Hazarika's "*Kothanodi*" will be able to get an extra point as a good realistic endeavor if he nullifies this traditional work. Sometimes we observe a few drawbacks in the makeup and costume of the film. As the backdrop of the film is old Assamese rural society, modern beautification techniques such as waxing, threading, etc. were not available at that time. But the elegant and sophisticated physical appearance of some characters such as Tejimola's stepmother and Keteki, the tribal woman reflects that modern beautification techniques have been used. Moreover, in a sequence, Tejimola and Banalatika hugged each other like a modern character. This is also non-realistic.

Using surrealistic elements in films is the passion of Bhaskar Hazarika. Though his first film "*Kothanodi*" is not a surrealist film, yet we can identify some surrealistic elements in the film. For

instance-Bhaskar Hazarika created the character of Tejimola's stepmother with surrealistic elements. The character represented two different worlds. The outer world of the character reflects her general actions. At the midnight, she often went to meet a devil-like character and talked with him about her anxieties. These conversations visualized the inner world of the character. Erasing the physical and mental gap of the conscious and subconscious mind of the character, the director tried to create a reality where real and unreal, actions and thoughts are assimilated and it influences life. After all, Filmmaker-writer Bhaskar Hazarika's films have enriched the genre of Indian surrealist film.

Bibliography:

- Barpujari, Manoj. *Jyotiprasadar para Jahnu-Jwngdaoaruanyanya*. Assam PrakashanParisad, 2019
- Earle, William. *Surrealism in Film: Beyond the Realist Sensibility*. Routledge. 2017
- Sherman, Sharon R. and Koven, Mikel J. *Culture Folklore/Cinema: Popular Film as Vernacular*. Utah State University Press.2007
- Richardson, Michael. *Surrealism and Cinema*. Berg Publishers. 2006
- Williams, Linda. *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film*.University of California Press.1992

Dr. Subrat Jyoti Neog is an Associate Professor & Head of the Department of Assamese, Tezpur University, Assam.