

Article
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Representation of the Women in the Films of Zahir Raihan



Director Zahir Raihan and Actress Shuchanda during the shooting of the film *Behula*

One January morning in 1972, just after the liberation war of Bangladesh ended, in a two storied house in Kayatuli in Old Dhaka, a phone rang asking for Zahir Raihan. His sister-in-law Panna Kaiser received the phone and called him. The voice from the other side said that there is some information about his brother Shahidullah Kaiser (Bangladeshi novelist and writer) who was abducted on 14 December with other intellectuals of Bangladesh by the Pakistani army. Zahir Raihan, with a few relatives and with the help of Bangladesh Army's 2nd regiment went to Mirpur to look for his brother. Mirpur, a suburb of the capital city of Dhaka, was one of the few strongholds for

Pakistani and Bihari collaborators at that time. After that day, neither Zahir Raihan nor his brother Shahidullah Kaiser was ever seen again. The tragic disappearance of the eminent film maker was no stranger than fiction. The nation still observes 30th January as the disappearance day or the death anniversary of Zahir Raihan. He was not only a film maker. He was a brilliant novelist, writer and journalist and actively took part in the Liberation War as well as the Language Movement. Many of his novels, stories and films were inspired by the Language Movement.

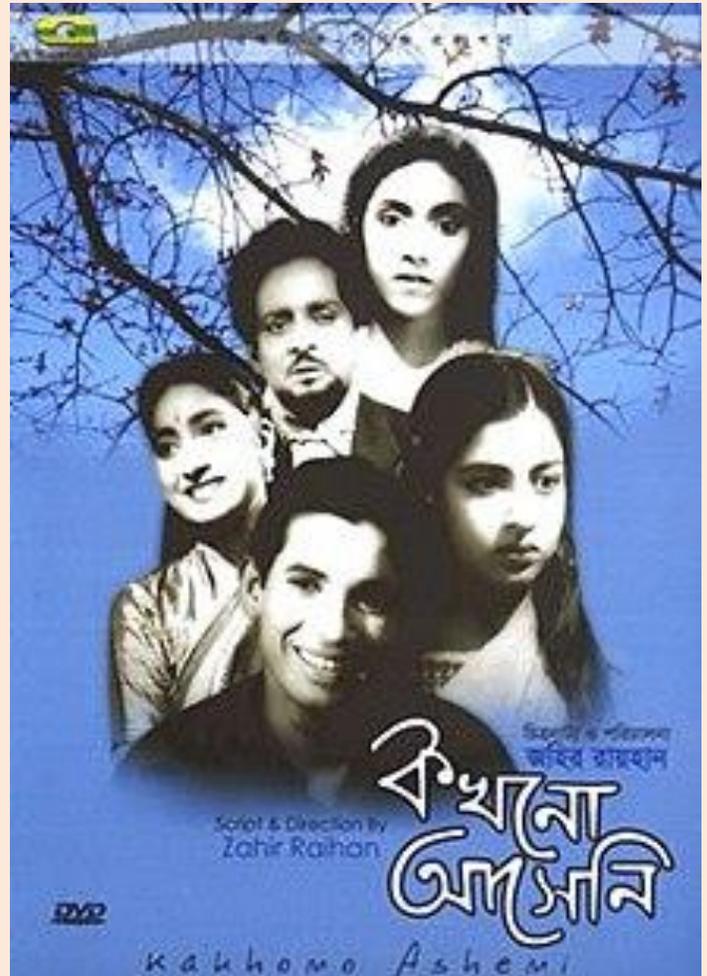
In light of 50 years of independence in Bangladesh, I take the opportunity to pay my tribute to the legendary and extremely talented film maker Zahir Raihan.

There is a lot to discuss about Zahir Raihan, from his creative vision, to his courage, to his ability to use social issues into his art. However, what I am very fond of is the representation of women in Zahir Raihan's film. It is very interesting. There are, of course, reservations from the film critics and researchers in Bangladesh that the women in Bangladeshi cinema are always shown from male point of view. Film scholar Kaberi Gyen says, "The construction of women in the Liberation War films was begun within the framework of ideal women of the pre-liberation film industry of East Pakistan, which was essentially the face of domestic women. Though it was the film that showed the nation fulfilling its aspiration to become an independent country, this calling was not meant for the three women of the film. The framework of sons preparing for the country's liberation war, not daughters, continued in the post-liberation films".

It's not that I necessarily disagree with this fact but I think the representation of women in Zahir Raihan's film was different than in most others. Some unconventional roles can be seen given to the women protagonists of his films. The way he viewed women in the context of that society and timeline is remarkable to me. The few films which are significant in the history of Bangladeshi cinema and also in Zahir Raihan's filmography feature women in prominent and complex roles.

His first film *Kokhono Asheni* (1961) was critically acclaimed but a commercial failure. The film is a depiction of the society at that time. It is a symbolic film or a metaphorical film. Zahir Raihan's political point of view and communist thoughts inspired this film. It is a story of the struggling middleclass people who must always fight for survival. At the same time, it is parallelly a story of the bourgeois people who exploit poor people for their gain. In this film there is

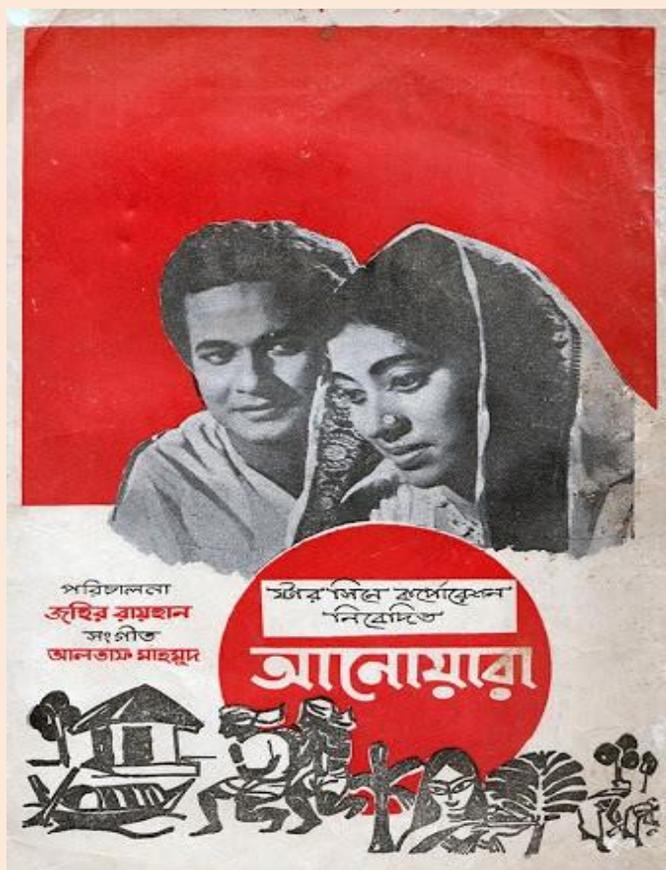
a rich man, Sultan who collects art and artifacts from around the world. He lords over a young woman named Marium, who is also a mere beautiful artifact to him. Marium represents youth, culture and beauty but is trapped under the tyrannical rule of rich and powerful people. The hero of the film is an artist who lives in the same house where Marium is captured. Marium falls in love with him and she thinks the artist can free her from her life as a captive.



Poster of the film *Kokhono Asheni*

To me it is a very interesting story which depicts the condition of the powerlessness of women, regardless of their capabilities, in the society or in the political domain during that time. Marium's frustrated desire for freedom feels almost supernatural. This is established early on in the film as story starts with two sisters committing suicide in the same house where Marium lives in captivity and again, with two families dying in poverty in the house. It begins to feel like it

is the curse of Marium who cannot get out of her situation. Sometimes in the film we see a woman from the back and the viewer's inability to see her face establishes the mysterious nature of the persona. It feels as though there is a ghost or an unfulfilled spirit of a woman, who also happens to kill the other women in the life of Marium's lover, her only hope of escaping Sultan's clutches. This depiction is not only unique but quite effective in establishing the need to be free. *Kokhono Asheni* is never included in the list of films of Zahir Raihan which have strong female representation but to me, as a metaphorical film it has characterised Marium quite powerfully. To me, Marium is the main protagonist of the film. It was also a very contemporary plot with a surreal treatment which was ahead of its time and stands out when compared to mainstream films made at that time in Pakistan and India.



Poster of *Anwara*

Anwara was released in 1967. This was adapted from the novel 'Anwara' by Muhammad Najibur Rahman and was a great commercial success. Muhammad

Najibur Rahman (1895-1978), was one of the poets who founded the base for fiction in Bangladesh by assimilating the thought process of the Bengali Muslim society during the first two decades of the 20th century. It was a very popular novel. Muslim life, culture and society was depicted quite well in the film, just like in the novel. The titular role of the film *Anwara* was played by the renowned actress Shuchanda. Anwara's mother is dead and she lives with her stepmother who wants her to get married as soon as possible to an old man so that she may get rid of her. One day, however, she meets a very rich, young, and good looking businessman by the name of Nurul Islam and gets married to him instead. This marriage did not make either's family happy. Nurul also has a stepmother as well as a sister at home. They wanted to exploit him for his wealth but it became difficult when Anwara stepped into his life so they started plotting against her. But Anwara proves to be perfect as a wife and also as a daughter and sister-in-law for his family. Anwara respects her in-laws, follows their instructions and refuses to engage in backtalk no matter what. This makes her mother-in-law increasingly unhappy. In the meantime, Nurul Islam gets sick so he is unable to run the business. Anwara tries her best to save his life. She sells all her jewelry and takes care of her husband day and night. As part of plotting against Anwara, her mother-in-law sets a trap. She asks Anwara to go to the forest in the middle of the night to collect herbs from a fake hermit. The herb turns out to be poisoned and Nurul Islam nearly dies and later Anwar gets blamed her for having an affair for which she went to the forest in the middle of the night while her husband was lay dying. Though this is a very typical role model of a woman in a rural area in this subcontinent, there are some interesting aspects of the representation of women in the film. First of all its a woman centric cinema. The central character is a woman, as is the main antagonist. Anwara is a very simple girl but she steps out of the house alone in the middle of the night to save her husband's life and without thinking about herself. The film depicts a quiet courage in its main character, with her ability to do all the housework,

tolerate her in-laws animosity without stopping herself and her determination to save her husband despite danger to herself is powerful but subtly portrayed. The Anwara in the novel is aptly brought to life in the film. To me, it is another very strong women-centric film of Zahir Raihan's. The film is also very well made. It was highly praised by the East Pakistani audiences and also the critics.

Zahir Raihan's Hindu Mythological (partly coloured) film *Behula* (1966) is also worth noting. Zahir Raihan was inspired by the huge success of folklore based film *Rupban* and made *Behula*. Behula is a figure in Bengali Hindu folklore. Though the religious purpose of these works is to eulogise the Hindu goddess Manasa, these works are better known for depicting the love story of Behula and her husband Lakhindar. Behula continues to fascinate the Bengali minds be it in Bangladesh or West Bengal. She is often seen as the archetypal wife, full of love and courage. Behula is regarded as the epitome of a loving and loyal wife in Bengal. Manasha, on the other hand is all rage and unhappiness due to rejection by her father Shiva and her husband, denied full godhead by her mixed parentage.

Manasa's aim was to fully establish her authority as a goddess and to acquire steadfast human devotees. Manasa is depicted as being kind to her devotees, but harsh to people who refused to worship her. To get to her goal, she had to achieve the worship of Chand Saudagar who was extremely adamant and took an oath not to worship Manasa. Behula married Chand's last son Lakhindar. Manasa killed him like she did all of brothers but Behula floated on water for nine months with the dead body of her husband and to ask the gods for his life. She succeeded. At last, Chand Saudagar yielded by offering a flower to the goddess, however reluctantly. This gesture made Manasa so happy that she resurrected all of Chand's sons and restored his fame and fortunes. She is worshipped to this day. Raihan's choice to this story was a bold one as it approaches the representation of women in a unique way. It is a story of two very strong women to

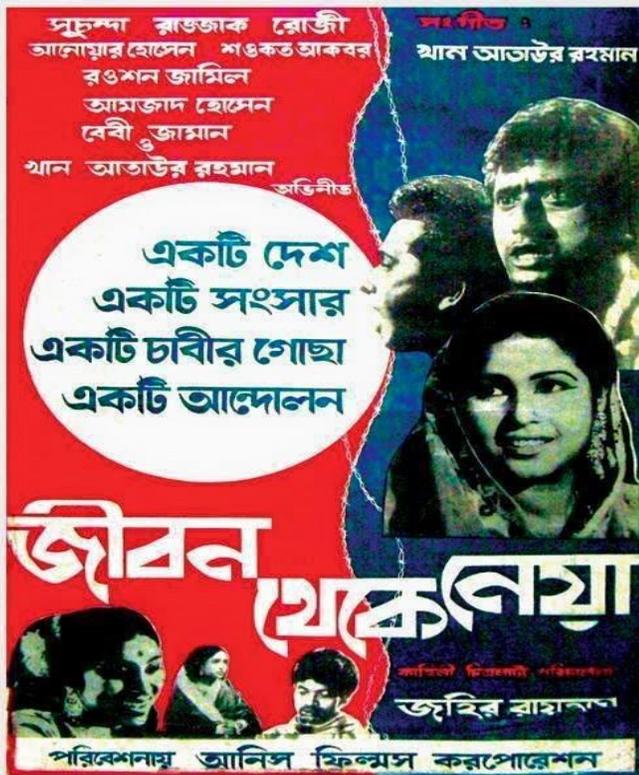
uphold their legacy. The cinematography and choreography were very beautiful in Zahir Raihan's *Behula*.



Actress Rawshan Jamil who played an autocratic, bad-tempered woman in *Jeebon Theke Nea*.

Finally I am mentioning *Jiban Theke Neya* (1970), a feature replete with political overtones, where he denounced the country's despotic rule through an allegorical narrative. It was the first film made in East Pakistan that portrayed the politically volatile situation of contemporary society. On the level of form, the film also made a departure from tradition by deploying documentary footage, real photographs of mass protests, paintings depicting the sufferings of Bengalis, placards containing political statements, historical and cultural symbols of Bengali resistance against the Pakistani government, patriotic and rebellious songs, and consciousness-raising dialogues. An autocratic, bad-tempered woman controls family members-her husband, two brothers and the servants which symbolize the political dictatorship of Ayub Khan in the then East Pakistan. Both stories run in parallel. The use of a female character in this scenario

is also very unique, especially at a time when women in films were wives, mothers or incentive for male characters. Outside, the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) rise in political protest, and inside, the family members raise their voices against the tyrannical woman. The two brothers get married and the situation gets more complicated when the sisters-in-law plan to gain control instead, by obtaining the keys of the house. *Jeebon Theke Neya* has been described as an example of "national cinema", using discrete local traditions to build a representation of the Bangladeshi national identity. It is considered a milestone for Bangladeshi cinema and also a classic.



The Poster of the film *Jeebon theke Neya*

Zahir Raihan dreamed about equality. As part of his communist ideology he dreamed about such a country where people will get equal rights. He dreamed of an independent country. Women were also included in that. His artistic mind tried to create interesting and different illustrations of women on the screen. I would like to leave you with a fact about the director's life. Shumita Devi, who played Marium in Zahir Raihan's first film *Kokhono Ashini* fell in love with Zahir Raihan and they got married. While this marriage did not last, later Zahir Raihan fell in love with the actress played the role of Behula, Shuchanda and he got married a second time. These two women, therefore, played vital roles in not only his films but in his life.

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