

Article

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## Santwana Bardoloi's Films: A Study



Santwana Bardoloi is one of the best film directors of Assam. She ventured into the world of cinema as director and screenwriter with *Adajya*. The film was released in the year 1996 and this film brought laurel at the 44th National Award. But even after receiving critical appreciation for *Adajya*, Santwana Bardoloi did not launch any film for nearly two decades. The people criticize her as a "one-film wonder". But she comes back with another national award-winning film *Maj Rati Keteki* (2017) after a sabbatical of 20 years.

Santwana Bardoloi's second directorial venture the 116 minutes long *Maj Rati Keteki* won a National Award as the best Assamese feature film. Adil Hussain played the protagonist of the film and he obtained a National Award with the jury's special mention for his performance. The painful saga of subalterns is the subject matter of the *Maj Rati Keteki*. Using parallel narrative, the filmmaker elaborated the content of the film. Eminent writer Bridget Baudinet

said that the parallel narrative denotes a story structure in which the writer includes two or more separate narratives linked by a common character, event, or theme. Applying parallel narratives, the much-acclaimed film *The Young Lions* (1958), *Nashville* (1975), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Traffic* (2000), *The Paradise Suite* (2015) are made. Indian films *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Mirzya* (2016), etc. are highly appreciated for well-structured parallel narratives. According to Linda Aronson, an Australian screenwriter, there are six types of parallel narratives. Flashback is one of the most used techniques of parallel narrative-based films. It is noteworthy that Santwana Bardoloi applied the double narrative flashback/thwarted dream flashback in *Maj Rati Keteki*.

In the film, celebrated writer Priyendu Hazarika (Adil Hussain) returns to his hometown Guwahati after a decade. The film travels back in time through flashbacks that transport the audience to

North Guwahati of the 1970s where Priyendu grew up and juxtaposes those years against the present day of Guwahati. The director vividly engraved the picture of the past and present times of the protagonist. The present narrative of the film covers the story of Priyendu, Sumana, a struggling writer, Bipul, a cunning book publisher, and his father Subhabarta Chaliha. Sumana assisted Priyendu in his all assignments. She submitted a manuscript of her novel to Bipul, the publisher. He promised her that he will publish her novel. But he intentionally delayed it. He wanted to exploit her. Sumana has been imprisoned in the web of Bipul. He knew the weak point of Sumana and tried to take advantage of her. Throwing her dream, she could not come out from the web of Bipul. Later, Priyendu and Bipul's father Subhabarta Chaliha freed her from mental anxiety through their inspirational anecdotes.

It is noteworthy that Sumana's character reminds us of Juhi Chawla's character of Aziz Mirza's *Yes Boss*. The conversation of Sumana and Priyendu reflected the dirty politics of the literary world for award. Subhabarta Chaliha played an important role in Priyendu's life. He was a former administrative officer. His literary works immensely inspire the readers. Priyendu was a great fan of Subhabarta Chaliha. Writer Chaliha penned his stories in his pseudo name. He rejected the awards he was far away from the limelight. Priyendu always wanted to meet him. But, like other readers, he also did not know his address. Once, Bipul threw a party and Priyendu attended it. In the Bipul's home, Priyendu suddenly met Subhabarta Chaliha, the father of Bipul in an isolated room. After a brief conversation with him, Subhabarta Chaliha handed over Sumana's manuscript and said it is outstanding. Subhabarta Chaliha rescued this novel from Bipul's toilet. After that, Priyendu introduced Sumana to a new publisher and he emancipated her from Bipul's conspiracy.

The filmmaker Bardoloi vividly presented another important context of the literary world through Priyendu. The important context is truth in autobiography. It is noteworthy that the tragic saga of isolation of the modern world has been beautifully presented in the film through the character Subhabarta Chaliha. This character reminds us of

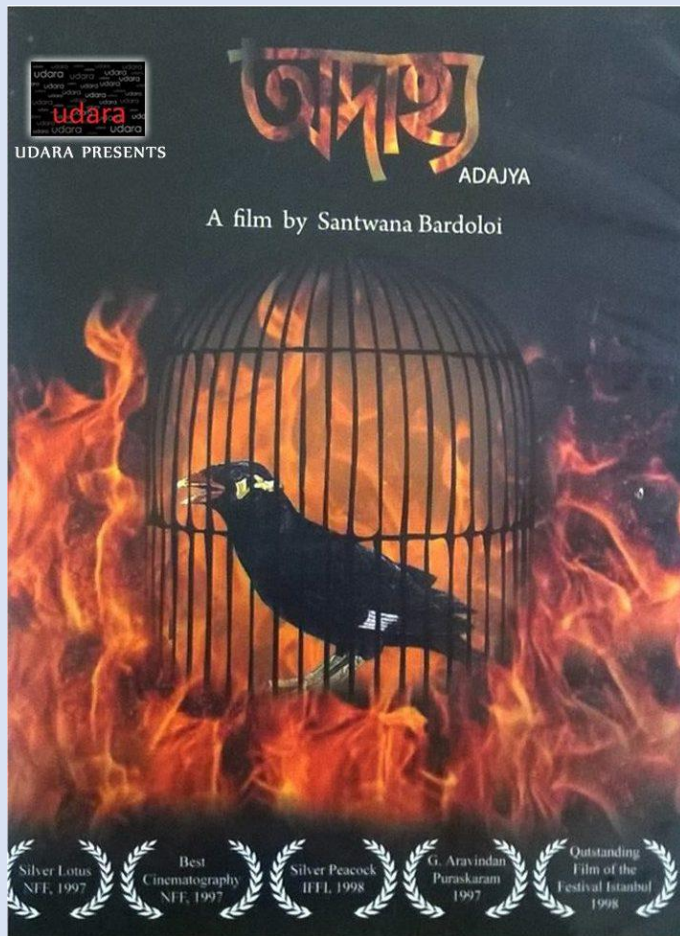
well-known Assamese writer Sourabh Chaliha. In an interview, once Santwana Bardoloi was asked about the influence of Sourabh Chaliha in creating the character Subhabarta Chaliha. The filmmaker replied that it was purely coincidental.



The past narratives of the film consisted of a few important incidents of Priyendu's childhood. One of the most influential incidents of Priyendu's childhood was the death of Bhola, a good friend of Priyendu. Bhola was a caretaker of Mr. Das's home. He was tortured immensely in the Das's home. Bhola wanted to be free from all kinds of torture and wished to go to his own home. But he was not able to go to his home due to a crisis of money. Priyendu wanted to free him from the situation. So, he provided him some money from his savings to go home. Unfortunately, Bhola was not able to reach his home as he died in an accident.

Priyendu's neighbor an old man's (Kulada Kumar Bhattacharya) loneliness influenced him very much in his childhood. The old man's son along with his family lived in America. The saga of the old man's solitude is beautifully portrayed in the film. The old man lived in his house with Kancha, a caretaker. Kancha was emotionally involved with the old man. So, one day, the old man accepted him as his family member, and he got rid of loneliness pain. The pain of loneliness is a huge problem of modern life. The filmmaker imposed a positive approach in the saga of

the loneliness pain. This positive approach makes the narrative very attractive.



Priyendu's neighbour Farida's story also impacted him very much. Farida was a pregnant woman. She did not visit a doctor due to her financial crisis. She took some unscientific homemade medicine. As a result, she died of pregnancy-related complications. Once Farida approached Priyendu's mother and requested her to give some money for her treatment. But Priyendu's mother was not able to provide the amount as she had not enough money. When Farida died in front of Priyendu's mother, then she felt guilty. She thought if she would have been able to help her then Farida would get a chance to live. The inner conflict of Priyendu's mother has been beautifully engraved in the movie.

Farida had a special bonding with Priyendu's little sister. Farida always taught her to be courageous. Once a shopkeeper tried to rape Priyendu's sister. Farida's lessons encouraged her to take a bold step. As a result, she overcame the situation. This incident also influenced Priyendu in childhood. Through the teenage love story of

Priyendu's elder brother and Papori, a Brahmin girl, Priyendu observed how caste and creed affected human relationships.

The influential incidents of Priyendu's life indicate that the characters who are exploited and who want to be free from the exploitation influenced Priyendu very much. He tried to emancipate them from their worse situations and wish to make them happy. This is his philosophy of life. The director established Priyendu's philosophy at the very beginning of the film through an image. Priyendu's one friend kept a duck in his courtyard and tried to feed water. But the duck did not drink the water from the bowl. So, Priyendu's friend became frustrated. Priyendu observed his friend's frustration and the pain of the duck. After that, Priyendu approached his friend and freed the duck in a pond. Seeing the duck's ecstasy, the friend overwhelmed with joy. Priyendo liked to do this kind of great work for people. He freed Sumana from Bipul's conspiracy. In childhood, he wanted to free Bhola from his painful life. After all, Priyendu had a soft corner for oppressed and exploited people of the society. The whole content of the film is a saga of oppressed and exploited people. In other words, this film can be considered a tale of subalterns.

The title of the film is very significant. Generally, people believe that Keteki, a bird, expresses her sorrow at midnight. As all are sleeping, nobody can feel the sorrow of the Keteki. Like Keteki's painful voice, nobody in our society is ready to listen to the voices of subalterns'. But Priyendu is a very sensitive person. He can feel the pain of oppressed people. So, he tried to emancipate them from tortured life.

Generally, many filmmakers ignore the development of minor characters. The screenwriter and director Dr. Bordoli fairly established the minor characters of the film along with the major characters. In the childhood saga of Priyendu, we are introduced to Tuman, the elder brother of Priyendu, Papori, etc. The filmmaker does not forget to tell their present status though their adulthood's life has not been traced in the film. We know that Tuman became a professor and Papori started her life as a politician.

After all, the film director Santwana Bardoloi minutely crafted all the characters of the film.

We have found some minor drawbacks in the film. For example, When Mr. Das came to admit Bhola to a school, then he explained to Bhola in detail why he admitted him to the school. Mr. Das always ignored Bhola. Always brief conversation occurred between Mr. Das and Bhola. Only to inform the audience what kind of Mr. Das's motive was, the filmmaker Bardoloi presented the long dialogue of Mr. Das. But it is not realistic. It is correct to say that Anurag Saikia's background music brings life to the film. The background music is used thoughtfully and correctly.

Santwana Bardoloi's first directorial venture *Adajya* was released in the year 1996. The director Bardoloi beautifully portrayed the cultural austerities and patriarchal sentiments of the upper-class Hindu Assamese society and its strong orthodox outlook towards women. The national award-winning film *Adajya* stars Tom Alter, Trisha Saikia, Bhagirathi, Triveni Bora in pivotal roles. *Adajya* literally means "which cannot be burnt". The film is based on Indira Goswami's famous novel "Dontal Haatir Uiye Khuwa Haoda" (The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker). The filmmaker did not pick up the whole story of the novel for the film. The filmmaker emphasized the tragic saga of three widows- Durga, Giribala, and Sarogusani. These three widows were the members of wealthy *sattradhikaar*, a chief of Sattrā (a unique socio-religious and cultural organization of Assam). Durga was the sister of the *sattradhikaar*. She was a typical caste-Hindu widow. She wanted to go to Kashi for her late husband's last rites. But she did not fulfil her desire as her gold ornaments were stolen. Sarogusani was the widow of the brother of the *sattradhikaar*. She was trying hard to manage her late husband's estate. But the manager she trusted most betrayed her. Giribala was the daughter of the *sattradhikaar*. She was young and beautiful. She tried to break all the rules of the society which were

imposed upon her. She once submitted herself into the arms of a British Scholar Mark Sahib. As a result, the orthodox and male-dominated society compelled her to choose self-immolation.

Noted academician Prof. Asha Kothari Choudhury says in her research paper "Rewriting Women – Revisiting Women's Narratives in Film: *Adajya* and *Joymati*" that in "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker", the novelist continues her documentation of the sociological scenario of the time until the tragic death of Indranath, who is sketched out as among the first of the educated rationalists in the land. And though Indira Goswami's book also narrates the same choice by Giribala, the film makes the death-by-fire scene resonate through its idea of a pre-scripted performance wherein Giri reclaims her connection with the book; her death is both transgressive and a liberating act of will. Bardoloi ends the film with the shot of a female writer (back to the audience) capping her pen and moving out from darkness into daylight that reveals her to be a modern Giribala with a caged bird, once again destabilizing the idea of liberation, modernity, and the female writer.

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