

.....

Representation of Women in Bhaskar Hazarika's Feature Film *Kothanodi*: A Revisit to Assamese Folktales

Himakhi Phukan

Abstract

Folktales are the milestones of the culture and tradition of a race. The contribution of folktales to the development of language as well as literature of a race or community is immense. Assam is very rich in folkculture and it is a land of various tribes and ethnic groups who have a long tradition of oral culture till the present time. Bhaskar Hazarika's debut Assamese feature film *Kothanodi* (English: *River of Fables*) (2015) is based on the folktales of Assam. Hazarika adapted four tales from the popular book of Assamese folktales, named *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (1911) compiled by renowned literary figure of Assam, *Rasaraj* Lakshminath Bezbaroa. The four stories adapted in the film are: Tejimola, Champawati, Ou Konwari and Tawoir Sadhu. The stories of *Burhi Aair Sadhu* seem to be very popular among the children of Assam generation after generation. In *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, Bezbaruah gives happy endings to the folktales aiming at the interest of the children. But *Kothanodi* shows a darker, macabre side of the tales with a realistic twist. Though all the tales are separate from each other, Hazarika distorted and re-imagined them and has entangled (them) into one. *Kothandi* is female centric as all the stories revolve round on women characters. There is an evil stepmother, Senehi who tortures her stepdaughter Tejimola and bludgeons her to death with a *dheki* (rice grinder), whereas Dhaneswari, a proud, greedy and a rich woman marries her daughter Bonlotika with a python. Another miserable woman Keteki gives birth to a vegetable called *ou tenga* (elephant apple) while Malati, another poor woman has to sacrifice her three newborn babies at the suggestion of her husband's uncle. All these women represented in *Kothanodi* embody different characteristics like vengeful, greedy, compassionate, resilient etc. Although the tales are set in distant past of Assam, yet the issues depicted in the film are very realistic and related to the present day social problems of Assam including superstition, witchcraft, infanticide, child marriage, child labour etc. The paper tries to show the ways of representation of women, their position in the patriarchal society, and

.....

the theme of motherhood in the film.

Key Words: Folktales, Motherhood, Stepmother, Infanticide, Child Marriage, Child Labour

Literature and film have a close relation as the script and story of a film is no other than a fine piece of literature. There are a lot of films which are the adaptations of different literary sources like novel, short story, poem, folktale etc. Assamese-born writer and filmmaker Bhaskar Hazarika's debut feature *Kothanodi* is based on Assamese folktales. The four tales depicted in the film: *Tejimola*, *Ou Konwari*, *Champawati*, *Tawoir Sadhu* are adapted from the famous book of Assamese folktales named *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (1911) compiled by the well known Assamese writer, *Rasaraj* Lakshminath Bezbaroa. Bhaskar Hazarika reimagined all the tales and added more dark, macabre and realistic twist to them. He also tries to link all the tales by intermixing characters and scenes. Assam is a land of magic and sorcery and it remains mysterious for the people outside of Assam. Hem Baroa, a notable Assamese writer sums up the ideas of non-Assamese people about Assam: "She is known, outside her borders, mostly a land of witchcraft and magic, animism and wild tribes" (*Folklore of Assam* 41). Till today, Assam along with the North Eastern states seems to be mysterious to the rest of India. The film shows the culture and tradition of Assam very picturesquely. Although there are many film adaptations of Assamese folktales, *Kothanodi* is unique in the sense that unlike others, it is not only literal adaptation, but also it tries to highlight on some serious issues related to women and the social problems. The film is female-centric since all the central characters are female as well as mothers. The theme of motherhood is very dominant in the film.

This paper primarily aims to study the position of women in Assamese society as depicted in the film *Kothanodi*. It will also explore the themes like motherhood, child marriage, superstition etc.

Every race and society has its own folklore. Just like language stands as the identity marker of a race or a country, similarly, folklore works as the indicator of the culture and tradition of a race or a society. It carries the rich tradition, rites, belief system, habits and behavior of a race. It is the reflection of the cultural heritage of a race. Folktale is one of the important parts of the folklore. Folktales refer to the traditional narratives usually anonymous in nature circulated hereditarily from one generation to the other in the oral form. They are the storehouse of knowledge and moral lesson. Assam is very rich in folktales and here it is known as "Sadhukotha". Bhaskar Hazarika adapted some popular Assamese folktales in his film with a little modification incorporating some of his own thoughts. He presented the Assamese culture bringing various local things: dress, food habit, belief system etc. that make the film very realistic. In *Buri Air Sadhu*, Bezbaroa ends each tale with a happy ending aiming at the interest of the children whereas Hazarika turns the tales more grim and macabre. Originally, the tales are separate from each other but in *Kothanodi*, Hazarika

.....

intermixes all the four tales and entangles into one. Some of the characters overlap across the various scenes. For instance, Tejimola's father enters into the story of Keteki, trying to solve the mystery of *ou tenga* whereas Tejimola's friendship with Bonlotika blends two tales, *Tejimola* and *Champawati*. *Burhi Aair Sadhu* contains thirty (30) stories all total and it remains the most popular and widely read book among the children of Assam since its first publication in 1911. *Kothanodi* is directed by Bhaskar Hazarika and its script is written by the renowned Assamese writer, Dr. Arupa Patangia Kalita. It won the Asian Cinema Fund's Post Production Fund Award for 2015. The film also won the Best Feature Film in Assamese Awards in 63rd National Film Awards. The setting of the film is rural Assam, focusing the river oriented people. The mighty river Brahmaputra which is the lifeblood of Assam appears throughout the film. The very title of the film, *Kothanodi*, in English, *River of Fables* symbolizes the significance of river in Assamese culture or it may mean the richness and abundance of folktales in Assam. Although the film is set in the long past, still the themes it highlights such as infanticide, witchcraft etc. are very relevant with the present day problems of Assam where the significance of *Kothanodi* lies.

Kothanodi exhibits the four eerie acts: a murder of a daughter, a rebirth, an unusual wedding, and an acquittal. The film is the amalgamation of macabre, irrationality and magical realism. So, when it is seen for the first time, the eyes get stunned with fear. In the story of "Tejimola", the cruel stepmother Senehi hates and tortures her stepdaughter Tejimola in the absence of her husband. Tejimola's father Devinath who is a merchant (Adil Hussain) goes for business trips frequently. Once, Senehi, taking the advantage of her husband's absence in a distant trip plots to murder Tejimola so that she can get free from the shackle of the stepdaughter. She beats Tejimola so ruthlessly that no one can imagine such cruelty from a mother figure. She pummels Tejimola with a *dheki* (rice grinder) to death accusing falsely. Whoever learns about the story of Tejimola, the very image of stepmother as cruel, ruthless and bitter is immediately built up in the mind. Indeed, it is the famous story of "Cinderella" which embodies the utmost cruelty of a stepmother and subsequent triumph of the eponymous female protagonist. Thousands of variants of "Cinderella" tale are known all through the world. The tragic story of "Tejimola" is very popular among the children of Assam but ironically, no one wishes to name his/her daughters as Tejimola. The tale of "Tejimola" is chiefly regarded as a tragedy and a myth of unbearable suffering of a stepdaughter, still there is a resistance under-laid in the tale. The reincarnation of Tejimola again and again can be seen as a kind of resistance against the evil and it manifests the wise-saying that a man can be destroyed but not defeated. Presenting this tale, the film questions the idea of motherhood and the ideal figure of a mother. The issue of child labour is also brought into the fore in *Kothanodi* as it is shown that Tejimola is forced to do all the household drudgeries by her stepmother at a very young age. In *Kothanodi* a slight addition is made to the original tale by the entry of a ghost like figure to the scene and Senehi's midnight meetings with him who acts

.....

as the co-partner in the act of murder of Tejimola.

Meanwhile, in another village a rich and greedy mother Dhoneswari (Seema Biswas) marries her daughter Bonlotika to a python in the hope that the serpent will bring her wealth which proves to be fatal to her daughter. Indeed, she is jealous of the fate of her co-wife's daughter Champawati whom a deity, in disguise of a python, brought abundance of wealth. Greed makes man blind and it happens with Dhoneswari. She puts forward her dear daughter to die terribly in the grasp of a wild python. Her greed turns into her enemy. Here, the role of Dhoneswari as mother is subjected to criticism. In another scene, a weaver named Keteki and her sufferings due to the grudge of the patriarchal society is portrayed. The miserable life story of Keteki is that she gives birth to a vegetable called *ou tenga* (elephant apple), instead of a baby of human flesh and blood. Patriarchal society always accuses women in the case of childbirth regarding the matter of girl or boy child which practically or according to the medical science, is beyond the wife's ability. Suspecting that Keteki is a witch, her husband drives her out from home as well as from the village to suffer alone. The *ou tenga* follows her everywhere she goes and the village children make fun of it but she never pays heed of their teasing. Coincidentally, the merchant Devinath, i.e. Tejimola's father meets Keteki in the course of doing business with her. He tries to unfold the mystery of the *ou tenga* and together they try to draw the child out of the vegetable and finally there is a rebirth of the Keteki's offspring as a beautiful girl child which gives her unbounded pleasure fulfilling her craving to be a mother. The rebirth of Keteki's offspring is a kind of miracle in the film. This tale shows the problem of witchcraft and superstition still exists in some of the remote parts of Assam. In the fourth scene, another mother Malati (Asha Bordoloi) resolves to rescue her newest born from the grip of her husband Poonai (Kapil Bora) and his *Tawoi* (uncle). The *Tawoi* of Poonai foretells that the baby boys would be ominous for their lives and he suggests Poonai to bury them after their birth. Poonai has immense faith in his uncle and he does nothing without taking permission from his *Tawoi*. According to the instructions of *Tawoi*, Poonai murders his three boy children one after another. As a mother Malati's heart aches sacrificing three of her newborns and her patience has almost crossed the limit when she gives birth fourth time to a girl child that she resolves to save her newest born at any cost. No mother can tolerate the act of sacrificing her offspring again and again whereas Malati stands as an ideal enduring extreme cruelty and injustice. Patience is always rewarded and the couple, Malati-Poonai's Patience also gets rewarded. At last, *Tawoi* gives blessing to the girl child after testing her in his odd way and tells them that her name is Bhagyawati and she will bring blessings to their life. Thus, *Tawoi* has been proved as well-wisher for them. In this tale, we come across the glorification of girl child which may be deliberate on the part of the director as in the original tale; there is no mention of the birth of the girl child Bhagyawati.

The representation of women characters in *Kothanodi* seems to be unusual but noteworthy as the film questions the age-old notions about femininity and maternal figure.

.....

Here, motherhood is depicted not as ideal, affectionate and selfless. In the story of “Tejimola”, the stepmother is not only cruel but also inhuman as her act of infanticide is heinous as well as hateful. For Dhoneswari, wealth is more important than the life of her daughter. On the other hand Keteki and Malati, as mothers suffer a lot. Their hearts are abound with maternal love and care. But they are too weak to raise voice against the patriarchal figure. Keteki cannot procure love from her husband because she cannot give him the right inheritance. So, she is blamed as a witch. The film sheds a little light upon a very sensitive and recurring social issue of Assam i.e. witchcraft. Witchcraft has been practiced for a long time among the illiterate and superstitious people in the rural parts of Assam. Witch-hunting occurs times and again in the present day also. Some awareness programmes have been organized by the government and NGOs to stop such type of primitive and savage acts. Recently, the government of Assam has passed the “Prevention and Protection from Witch Hunting Bill” in 2015. Patriarchal domination is not shown prominently in *Kothanodi* except in the case of Keteki and also Malati to some extent. The other two mothers, Dhoneswari and Senehi are rather deviant characters. At the end, *Kothanodi* celebrates the joy of femininity. The rebirth of *ou tenga* as a girl child and Malati’s fourth girl child as the harbinger of blessings are symbolic of the importance of girl child which in a way criticizes the negligence of girl child in India. The idea of patriarchy is not found as prominent in the film as women characters are given more space throughout the film. Thus we see the valorization of women in *Kothanodi* through the presentation of the unconventional acts by the mother figures. Moreover, the position of women in Assam is believed to have more liberty in household matters as well as in the sphere of society and it is successfully represented in the film.

Works Cited

Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Burhi Aair Sadhu*. Guwahati. Bina Library, 2002. Print.
Das, Jogesh. *Folklore of Assam*. New Delhi. National Book Trust, 1972. Print.
Kothanodi, Dir. Bhaskar Hazarika. Perf. Adil Hussain, Seema Biswas, Zerifa Wahid, Urmila Mahanta, Kopil Bora, Asha Bordoloi, et el. Metanormal Motion Pictures, 2015.
Utube.

<http://scroll.in>FilmandTv>Grim Fairy Tale>
<http://thewire.in/12252/the-river-of-fables- Kothanodi>
www.apotpourriofvestiges.com