American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation

Expert Opinion Article

A Microcosm of the Monolithic: Dr. Santwana Bardoloi's *Adajya* (The Flight) as an Indictment of Institutionalized Oppression of Young Brahmin Widows

Dr Pranjal Borah*

*Associate Professor, Dept of English, Dikhowmukh College, Sivasagar , Assam. Email: mrpb1975@gmail.com

Abstract:
This paper examines Dr. Santwana Bardoloi's cinematic adaptation *Adajya* (The Flight, 1996), based on Dr. Indira Goswami's Jnanpith Award-winning novel *Datal Hatir Uwne Khowa Howdah*(The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker), as a trenchant critique of the institutionalized oppression of young Brahmin widows in Assam. Through the portrayal of three widows—Durga, Saru Gossainee, and Giribala—across generations, the film exposes the intersecting dynamics of gender, caste, and tradition within a patriarchal society. This study argues that Bardoloi's *Adajya* not only amplifies Goswami's literary indictment of Brahminical hypocrisy and gendered subjugation but also situates itself within the broader context of Indian feminist cinema of the late 20th century. By analyzing the film's narrative and visual strategies, this paper underscores its contribution to a democratic feminist critique of social norms that perpetuate widowhood as a state of perpetual marginalization.

Keywords: Brahmin widows, institutionalized oppression, feminist cinema, *Adajya*, Indira Goswami, Santwana Bardoloi, Assam, widowhood, patriarchy

1. Introduction

The cinematic adaptation of literary works often serves as a lens to magnify socio-cultural critiques embedded within the source text. Dr. Santwana Bardoloi's *Adajya* (1996), based on Dr. Indira Goswami's seminal novel *Datal Hatir Uwne Khowa Howdah*, exemplifies this transformative potential. Goswami's narrative is a multifaceted exploration of widowhood, tenant-landowner conflicts, and the intricacies of caste and gender hierarchies within a Brahminical framework in Assam. However, at its core, it is an unflinching portrayal of the systemic subjugation of young widows in a male-dominated society that cloaks its oppression in the garb of tradition. Bardoloi's film retains this thematic complexity while harnessing the visual medium to foreground the lived experiences of three widows—Durga, Saru Gossainee, and Giribala—whose stories collectively indict the monolithic structures of patriarchal control.

This paper situates *Adajya* within the resurgence of Indian women filmmakers in the late 1990s, a period marked by gendered interventions challenging hegemonic social rhetoric (Datta, 2000). Drawing parallels with contemporaries like Aparna Sen's *Yuganta* (1995), which explores a woman's dilemma between profession and domesticity, *Adajya* delves into the experiential realities of widowhood across generations. Through a close reading of the film's narrative and its socio-historical context, this study posits that Bardoloi crafts a poignant feminist critique that resonates with democratic ideals of agency and resistance.

2. The Thematic Complex of Widowhood in *Adajya*

Goswami's novel is not reducible to a singular thematic strand; it weaves a tapestry of social conflicts—land disputes, caste dynamics, and gendered power struggles. Central to this complex is the plight of widows, whose lives are circumscribed by Brahminical norms that dictate austerity, isolation, and subservience. Bardoloi's *Adajya* distills this essence, presenting widowhood as both a personal tragedy and a systemic injustice.

The film's three protagonists—Durga, Saru Gossainee, and Giribala—embody distinct yet interconnected facets of this oppression, their stories unfolding within the claustrophobic confines of the *sattra* (a Vaishnavite monastic institution) and its attendant social order.

2.1. Durga: The Pathetic Prisoner of Tradition

Durga, the elderly widowed sister of the *sattra's adhikar*, epitomizes the desolation of widowhood compounded by familial rejection. Cast aside by her husband's kin as an inauspicious presence, she seeks refuge in her brother's household, only to be relegated to the status of a "poor relation." Her existence is marked by strict adherence to widowhood's prohibitions—vegetarianism, seclusion, and ritual purity—yet her spirit yearns for recognition and autonomy. The prospect of a pilgrimage to Puri and Prayag, where she intends to immerse her husband's ashes, becomes a fleeting hope of escape. However, when her meager possessions, including gold trinkets, are stolen, Durga's aspirations collapse, condemning her to a moribund existence. Her deteriorating health and

eventual plea to die at her husband's ancestral home underscore the pathos of a life stripped of agency, dignity, and purpose.

2.2. **Saru Gossainee: The Illusion of Independence**

Saru Gossainee, a young and beautiful widow from a prosperous lineage, presents a contrasting yet equally tragic figure. As a Gossainee overseeing multiple sattras, she exudes a semblance of independence, managing her estates with the aid of Mahidhar Bapu, her trusted agent. Yet, beneath this façade lies a profound loneliness, exacerbated by dwindling revenues and social isolation. Her unspoken affection for Mahidhar—a relationship she restrains within the bounds of propriety—reveals the tension between her desires and the repressive norms of widowhood. Bardoloi's nuanced depiction of Saru's fantasies, such as her vision of Mahidhar as a divine figure akin to Shri Ramchandra, highlights her internal conflict. The revelation of Mahidhar's betrayal—swindling her wealth and stealing Durga's trinkets—shatters her illusions, culminating in her emotional collapse upon his death. Saru's narrative exposes the fragility of autonomy within a system that denies widows emotional and economic security.

2.3. **Giribala: Rebellion and Self-Immolation**

Giribala, the headstrong young widow and sister of Indranath, emerges as the most defiant of the trio. Forced into an unhappy marriage with a neglectful husband, she returns to her parental home after his death and a miscarriage, only to face further humiliation. Her encounter with Mark, an American missionary researching Assam's history, ignites a spark of resistance. Their intellectual collaboration and mutual attraction challenge the *sattra's* rigid conventions, culminating in acts of transgression—Mark sucking venom from her snake-bitten foot, Giribala consuming meat during a Shraddha feast. These incidents provoke communal outrage, leading to her confinement and eventual summons by her in-laws. In a climactic act of agency, Giribala seeks refuge with Mark, pleading for liberation from her oppressive community. When he hesitates, she chooses self-immolation over subjugation, entering a burning hut during a ritual expiation and embracing death as a final protest. Her suicide underscores the ultimate cost of resistance within an unyielding patriarchal structure.

3. ***Adajya* (The Flight) in the Context of Feminist Cinema**

The late 1990s marked a resurgence of women filmmakers in India, whose works interrogated traditional gender roles and societal expectations (Datta, 2000). Bardoloi's *Adajya* aligns with this movement, echoing the explorations of filmmakers like Aparna Sen, whose *Yuganta* critiques the disintegration of relationships amid social violence. Unlike Sen's urban focus, *Adajya* situates its narrative in rural Assam, amplifying the regional specificity of widowhood's burdens.

Sangeeta Datta notes that the new cinema of the 1970s and 1980s sought to explore women's subjectivity and civic roles, a legacy that *Adajya* extends by foregrounding the intersection of gender and caste (Datta, 2000, p. 79).

Dr Bardoloi's visual and narrative strategies—such as the stark contrast between the widows' austere lives and their suppressed desires—reinforce the film's feminist stance. The climactic scene of Giribala's self-immolation, in particular, serves as a powerful metaphor for the destruction wrought by oppressive norms. As Manoj Barpujari observes, "The poignant way and subtlety the director adopted to establish her statement made the film a democratic feminist critique" (Barpujari, n.d., p. 106). By refusing to offer resolution, *Adajya* compels viewers to confront the enduring injustices faced by widows.

4. **Conclusion**

Adajya stands as a cinematic testament to the institutionalized oppression of Brahmin widows, amplifying the thematic richness of Goswami's novel through Bardoloi's deft adaptation. The film's portrayal of Durga, Saru Gossainee, and Giribala reveals the multifaceted nature of widowhood—economic deprivation, emotional repression, and social ostracism—within a rigid patriarchal and caste-based system. By situating these narratives within a broader feminist cinematic discourse, *Adajya* challenges the orthodox value systems that reduce women to "a suffering lot" (Barpujari, n.d., p. 106). Giribala's fiery rebellion, in particular, encapsulates the film's indictment of a society that offers widows no agency but death. This study affirms *Adajya*'s enduring relevance as a critique of gendered subjugation, inviting further exploration of regional cinema's role in feminist scholarship.

References

1. Barpujari, Manoj and Kalita, Garima (ed.): *Perspectives on Assamese Cinema*, Guwahati Cine Club, Guwahati, 2007, p.106.
2. Barpujari, Manoj: *Jytotiprasador Pora Jahnu-Jwngdao Aru Onyanyo(As),* Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 2015.
3. Cowie, Elizabeth: *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, Macmillan Pvt. Ltd., London, 1997, p.19.
4. Datta, S. (2000): 'Globalisation and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema'. *Social Scientist*, Vol. 28, No. 3/4, Mar. - Apr., 200028(3/4), p.71-82
5. Ghadially, Rehana (ed.) : *Women in Indian Society: A Reader*, Sage Publications, New Delhi,1998, p.16.

6. Goswami, Mamoni Roysom : *Datal Hatir Uwne Khowa Howdah*(As),Chandra Prakash, Guwahati, 1988 .
7. Singh, Indubala: *Gender Relations and Cultural Ideology in Indian Cinema*, Deep & Deep Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2007, p. 90.
8. Thornham, Sue (ed.*): Feminist Film Theory: A Reader,* New York University Press, New York, 2006 ,p.115