

JIBON THEKEY NEYA (GLIMPSES OF LIFE, 1970): THE FIRST POLITICAL FILM IN PRE-LIBERATION BANGLADESH AND A CINEMATIC METAPHOR FOR NATIONALIST CONCERNS

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Abstract

The year 1970 was significant for Bangladeshi cinema. It was the time when the collective aspirations to construct a new national and cultural identity appeared on Bangladeshi screens, in tandem with the contemporary political situation. Just a few years earlier, in 1966, a new wave of a militant movement had swept over Pakistan when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced the Six Point programme. The Six Point, which was widely referred to as the Magna Carta of the Bengalis, drew strength from secular consciousness of the Bengali people and from the economic deprivation of East Pakistan. Slowly it cemented the struggle for a new nation. *Jibon Thekey Neyya (Glimpses of life, 1970)*, a film by Zahir Raihan, captures the crucial moment of Pakistani repression by presenting the national experiences and exploitation of Bengalis under the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan. This paper explores how the film, within a family melodrama, introduced a new cinematic style by transforming personal stories into collective and symbolic narratives. The paper argues that by presenting contemporary facts and the identifiable shared narrative of Bengalis through a metaphoric form of fiction, *Jibon Thekey Neyya* can be seen as the first instance of 'national cinema' in Bangladesh, even before its emergence as an independent state. The author also looks at how gender difference is constructed, interpreted and entangled with the concept of nation in the crisis moment of history.

Jibon Thekey Neyya (Glimpses of life, 1970) tells the story of a family where the dominant behavior of one woman makes others' life miserable. From her husband to the maid servant, everyone suffers from her violent behavior; yet, no one has the courage to revolt against her rule. Her power is signified by the dancing key-ring attached to her sari, which rings like a bell to announce her progress through the house. Her husband, who is a lawyer and amateur singer, sings on the roof-top to escape her draconian regime but she cuts him off: he never reaches the end of his song. Her two unmarried brothers, Anis and Faruk, are also under an exclusive control. Anis is an advocate by trade, and even though he finances the entire family, he does not possess any power to challenge his sister. The younger

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brother, Faruk, is a student involved in leftist political movement. He is the only person who sometimes argues with his autocratic sister; yet, he also succumbs to her regime.

The family eventually finds an outlet for their anger, making posters expressing their demands or equality and placing them on the walls of the house (Figure 2). The matriarch's response is to threaten to starve them, and force them to clean the walls of the house, erasing their own voices. It is her husband who ultimately identifies her key-ring as the locus of her power; if he can decentralize the symbolic keys, have those shared out into other hands, the situation will change. To this end, he got Anis and Faruk married. They married two sisters named Shathi and Bithi. The newlywed women are permitted to have some keys, and a share of the power.

Shathi and Bithi's brother Anwar is a political activist, repeatedly arrested for his dissent against the political administration. In his character, we see a version of the *Vivek*¹ character of *Jatra*: he is a cipher for 'Bengali nationalism', glorifying the history, beauty and tradition of Bengal. Faruk, the younger brother of the dictator lady, is also involved in the protests. In fact the struggle for freedom continues in this film on two parallel levels: one is in the home, and the other is in public, revealed as a movement by the Bengali masses where Anwar and Faruk also take part.

In *Jibon Thekey Neya*, through the story of the dictator and her defeat in a bid to take back her power, she tries to poison one of her sisters-in-law, for which crime she is ultimately imprisoned. The film director Zahir Raihan has connoted the contemporary political struggle under the dictatorship, and expressed the desire for autonomy both in private and public life. He tells the story of Bengali nation which is not only denied the basic rights of freedom of expression, but also exploited appallingly under the West Pakistani military dictatorship of Ayub Khan from 1958 to 1969. Against this backdrop *Jibon Thekey Neya* has introduced a new trope that transformed personal stories into symbolic collective narratives, to mobilize and inspire the masses, encouraging them to understand their oppression and to move forward to freedom. Alamgir Kabir writes, "In the

¹ *Vivek* means conscience, and is a generic character of *Jatra* who appears in any sequence to explain the psychological tone or feeling of a character or a scene by singing. Sometimes he even warns the character about their wrong doing. The influence of *Vivek* reflects on many famous characters written by Bengali writers or playwrights, for example, the *Dada Thakur* character of Rabindranath Tagore that is created in his many dramas, is having similar characteristics and spirit of *Vivek*.

film, through a metaphorically structured plot, Zahir Raihan not only epitomised the decade-long dictatorship of Pakistani militarist Ayub Khan but also provided the first filming expression to the rising tide of Bengali nationalism that became the living spirit behind the War of National Liberation less than a year later.”²

By presenting contemporary facts through a metaphoric form of fiction, the film portrayed the identifiable shared narrative and history of Bengalis. Applying Andrew Higson's account of national cinema it can be said that *Jibon Thekey Neya*, by “dramatizing their [Bengalis] current fears, anxieties, pleasures and aspiration,”³ became the first example of ‘national cinema’ in Bangladesh, even before the independence of the country in 1971. Incorporating a melodramatic narrative with a theatrical style of acting and using stock characters, this film was not without its flaws, but the patriotic sentiment it created through common codes, shared memories and collective rituals stimulated a desire for a free nation-state in the minds of Bengalis. This film, with its motifs, images, visual settings, themes, songs and characters displayed many cultural codes and metaphorical meanings to connote the collective concerns: the deprivation and subjection of Bengalis under the dictatorial rule.

The title music begins with the words *a country, a family, a key-ring, a movement, a film*, which appear on screen one by one as part of a slogan with the song *O amar shwapno jhora akul kora jonmovumi* (‘O my dreamy motherland who made me devoted to her’). In different Bengali or Sanskrit plays, the *Sutradhar* (narrator) gives an introduction to the plot and the characters of the drama to the audience. Here, the subtitles encapsulate the spirit of the *Sutradhar* and, like a dumb-show or chapter title, focus the audience's attention to these aspects of the film. This is also an echo of Brechtian placards⁴ in Raihan's work, which reminds us the fact that the director was also a leftwing activist. The film shows an interesting cultural dialogue with established Bengali theatrical forms. As the slogans play out here, we are shown images of the characters in photographic negative, fading into positive definition. The effect of the negative is to give the impression of figures, part of a collective narrative, rather than of specific characters. The Bengali group identity as precedent over the individual narrative is highlighted by the first frame of the film proper, after the title music

2 Alamgir Kabir, *Film in Bangladesh* (Dacca: Bangla Academy, 1979), p.45.

3 Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.7.

4 In Brecht's epic theatre, actor/actress sometimes holds a placard to give an introductory idea of the scene, episode or a character.

fades: we are presented with two hand-written Bengali words, *Amor Ekushey* ('Immortal Twenty First') on a poster (Figure 1). As next day is *Ekhushey February*,⁵ and Anwar is preparing some posters to carry them in the *Provav Feri*⁶ (the morning procession of 21st February).



Figure 1. The first framing of *Jibon Thekey Neya* with the two words *Amor Ekushey* ('Immortal twenty first')

As “common codes invite the audience to consider and understand themselves to be members of a given community,”⁷ in the first framing of this film by capturing those Bengali words *Amor Ekushey*, Zahir Raihan engages the Bengali audience with their emotive insignia of collective identity and pride: the Language Movement of 1952 in East Pakistan. In the backdrop of the 1960s and the 1970s when the political repression was at its worst under the military dictatorship of

5 *Ekhushey February* or 21st February is observed as the Language Martyrs' Day in Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). Since the Language movement of 1952, this date is commemorated annually in Bangladesh to remember those martyrs who sacrificed their lives on February 21, 1952 for the recognition of their mother tongue Bangla as the state language of Pakistan. UNESCO later declared this date as 'International Mother Language Day'.

6 *Provav Feri* is a ritualistic annual procession in Bangladesh to the *Shaheed Minar* (Martyr Monuments) which has been held on the first hour of every 21st February since 1953 to pay homage to the Language martyrs. In this procession, Bengali men and women walk bare foot to the memorials, breaking the silence of the night, they used to sing the song '*Amar bhaier rokte rangano /Ekushey February / Ami ki bhulite pari?*' (*Can I forget the twenty-first of February / incarnadined by the blood of my brother?*) by Abdul Gaffar Choudhury.

7 Philip Schlesinger, "The Sociological Scope of 'National Cinema,'" in Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (eds.), *Cinema and Nation*, 19-31, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.22.

the West Pakistani ruling authority, it was a skilful effort to boost up a patriotic resistance against the Pakistani state with the use of the Bengali script in the opening shot. Here it is worth recalling Willem Van Schendel's observation about the influence of the Bengali alphabet in different freedom struggle. In Schendel's words: "Each Bengali letter could be [effectively] used as a badge in the cultural guerrilla war."⁸ It needs to be noted that in this film the use of Bengali words take place several times as a means to express the aspirations for freedom and to protest, at home and in the state at large. When the family members protest against their personal, domestic dictator, they do it in Bengali. Raihan knowingly employs the symbolic power of Bengali script as an emblem of resistance. When he has finished making the posters with which the film opens, Anwar calls his two sisters Bithi and Shathi to rehearse the song of *Provat Feri*. Bithi places the *ghomta* (extension of the sari over the head), and starts singing the song; Anwar and Shathi also join in with the words, *Amar bhaier rokte rangano /Ekushey February/ Ami ki bhulite pari?* ('Can I forget the twenty-first February/ incarnadined by the blood of my brother?').

The song plays on over images of a morning procession. Barefoot masses wearing in white dresses, carrying flowers and placards, approach the *Shahid Minar* (Martyr Monument) singing this song. The swelling of the song evokes cultural memories of *Bhasha Andolon* (Language Movement) in the audience, drawing their emotions to an event of collective mourning and the remembrance of self-dignity. Similar to the pace of the moving masses we then see an intercut of a very low-angle tracking-shot of the *Krishnachura* (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*/ Red bird of paradise) trees are bowing down, suggesting their mourning for the losses of the lives of the Bengali Language martyrs. Anthony Smith argues that the role of memory is significant for the construction of identity. Smith is categorical in emphasizing the role of memory: "no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation."⁹ Smith's conception of the identity construction is also reflected in *Jibon Thekey Neyo* by the use of collective memories. Raihan recalls here the memory of the collective past of Bengalis, the Language Movement, to stir the sense of their collective identity. In order to construct the vanished past, Raihan brings in this sequence a set of codes which in Eric Hobsbawm's words

8 Willem Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.112.

9 Anthony D. Smith, "Memory and Modernity: Reflections on Ernest Gellner's Theory of Nationalism," *Nation and Nationalism*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1996), p.383.

are ‘invented tradition’¹⁰ to glorify the communal past - Bengali language, *alponas* (geometric flowery design), first song of February, *Shahid Minar*, *Krishnachura* trees, the bare feet of men and women, black badges on white dresses □ these in fact appear to signify the ritualistic practices of the Bengalis in remembering the 21st February. During the procession, Raihan frames both women wearing *shakhas*¹¹ and the faces of bearded men, to demonstrate the ritualized practices of the 21st February as non-communal sphere for the Hindus and Muslims in pre-Liberation Bangladesh.



Figure 2. The posters appearing on the wall are expressing the protest of other family members against the dictatorial dominance of the tyrant.

The emotional empathy and imaginary bonds between the Bengali audiences and the ritualistic remembrance of the Language martyrs created in the procession scenes is abruptly broken in the next sequence. This is a close tracking-shot of the symbolic key-ring, fastened at the end of the tyrant’s sari. The music changes, too: the shot is accompanied by the high-pitched, Western tones of a trumpet. The audiences are jolted out of a symbolized nostalgia created in the procession sequence by the entrance of the opposite, controlling force of the film: the domestic tyrant and her monopolizing power. This juxtaposition clearly leads the

¹⁰ Eric J. Hobsbawm, and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.7.

¹¹ *Shakha* is a white bracelet, made of conch-shell. *Shakas* are worn by married Hindu Bengali women as a symbol of their married life.

audience to consider the domestic narrative before them in terms of the dictatorial Pakistani rule. It is another Brechtian method, an *alienation* effect, for constructing the conflicting force by creating many contrasts to make the audience critically aware about its purposes and postures. Forceful denial of the *Provat Feri* of February is voiced loudly by this tyrannical character later in this sequence, when her younger brother Faruk returns barefoot from the processions:

- Woman: Where have you been in so early in the morning like a thief on bare feet?
- Faruk: As today is the 21st February, I went to a *Provat Feri*.
- Woman: 21st February? What type of thing is this?
- Faruk: Don't you really know what is 21st February?
- Woman: I don't need to know. It seems that like a barbarian you danced on bare feet on the whole street, didn't you? Listen, knowing that these types of thing I can't tolerate why did you go there? Remember, if you go again there, I'll close down your study!

Her attitude toward the 21st of February enhances her difference from the other Bengalis in the household. Perhaps to emphasize the lady dictator's isolation from the rest of the family, Raihan did not give her a name, unlike all the other characters within the film. Her robust appearance has such characteristics that any Bengali would be able to metaphorically associate her with Field Marshal Ayub Khan. To enhance her metaphoric image as a dictator to most dynamic effect, two consecutive sequences, conveying opposite aspects of her character, are shown one after the other. First, we see her as a *Banganari* (traditional woman of Bengal), serving her husband food; the shot begins with a backwards zoom from a *hat pakha* (hand fan), which she is waving towards her husband, generating a peaceful breeze towards him, and towards the audience as well. Next, after a slip whereby her husband admits that he once saw her as *dajjal* (wayward), the mask slips, and her real face is revealed. She throws a bell-metal bowl, creating an alarming diegetic cacophony, out of which begins a collage of shots of different kitchen objects flying in from different angles. During this sequence we also see a jumping koi fish, connoting life without water under the dictator's rule. In this way, Raihan uses objects and sounds to translate the tyrant's *dajjal* nature – which is much more sinister than the term might make it seem. This juxtaposition technique is employed several times in the film. For example, immediately after the death scene of Madhu, the caretaker at Anwar's home, we see the birth of Muktee, Faruk and Bithi's daughter, gesturing to a new hope. The juxtaposition of the two events: Madhu's death and Mukti's birth, represent that Bengalis are encouraged not to drown in their grief, but to grab a new hope, the new chance of freedom.



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figures 3, 4 and 5: The juxtaposition and collages of freeze frames to depict and contrast the notions of love and hate.

Jibon Thekey Neyya, for most of its parts, fits in the genre of melodrama, as it seeks to engage the audience's emotion through use of music, songs and common codes. Following melodramatic mode, this film also employs gender relations and issues of a family to explain nation-state ideology. Again, Raihan employs the pattern of creating contrasts, offering disruptions in the illusionistic nature of melodrama. Thus he extends a critical involvement of the audience. To emphasize one of the most dramatic moments, when the key ring shifts to Shathi and Bithi's hand after their marriage, Raihan utilizes freeze frames denying the flow or logic of continuity editing. This technique is also used to highlight the profound ecstasy of their married life. By avoiding the conventional Bengali film style, where lip-synch song-and-dance sequences are used to construct the love scenes and fantasies, Raihan uses a few freeze frames and some zoom in operations to illustrate the love sequence after Shathi and Bithi's marriage, along with soft background music, without language. 'Hate' is introduced by way of the same cinematic techniques as 'love': by freeze-frame with extreme close-ups of the tyrant, her furious gaze intercuts with freeze-frames of the lovers (Figures 3, 4 and 5).

The close-up shots illustrate the gaze of the tyrant and deny the perspective of a conventional narrative film where cinematic images solely position the audience as the subject of the gaze. Here we see an antipathy has been offered by the gaze of the tyrannical lady that distracts the audience from their conventional drive for pleasurable viewing and rather draws their attention towards a critical judgment on what they are going to watch (Figures 3, 4 and 5). The subject, the narrative structure and some visual effects of the film might make it seem to be a classic melodrama, but Raihan, in Brechtian fashion, requires more responsible ways of viewing of the audience. He creates series of critical distances between the audience and the narrative.

Again, it is also noticeable that the critical mode required from the audiences of *Jibon Thekey Neyya* mostly appeals to the patriarchal, nationalistic sentiment to fight or die for the nation. The mother icon is employed to personify the nation. From the title music to the end credits, there is an attempt to reinforce anti-colonial thrust and a resistance by the Bengalis by positioning the mother as the image of the nation invaded by the enemy, the Pakistani dictator. In Anwar's reply to Madhu's anger about his constant references to country and soil, a nationalist discourse is clearly articulated by portraying an adored nation using the mother allegory, when he comes with Shathi, Bithi and Madhu to their village.

Anwar: Madhu, this soil is mine. This soil belongs to my land. You, me and all others were born on this soil [...] This soil which is so adorable and sacred is similar to my mother. I don't want to let this golden soil of my golden land be violated and that's the reason why I always speak about my country, about the soil of my land.

Just after this speech, Anwar kisses the soil and then, to heighten the emotional content of this sequence, the evocation of a strong powerful image of sublime mother-nation, the following famous song by Tagore starts upon and is sung by Anwar, Sathi and Bithi:

Amar sonar Bangla, ami tomay bhalobashi, (My Bengal of gold, I love you)
Chirodin tomar akash, tomar bathash, amar prane bajay basi (Forever your skies,
your air sets my heart on a tune as if it were a flute)
O ma, Fagune tor amer bone ghrane pagal kore, (In spring, O mother mine, the
fragrance from your mango groves makes me wild with joy,)
Mori hay hay re (Ah, what a thrill!)
O ma, aghrane tor bhara khete ami ki dekhechi madhur hasi (In autumn, O mother
mine, in the fully grown paddy fields I have seen spread all over sweet
smiles).....



Figure 6. The offspring of Bengal in its beautiful landscape are singing in a ritualistic way, glorifying the image of mother nation.

With its intense sounds, rhythms and melody, this song is followed by a sequence of beautiful landscape visuals of golden Bengal. By capturing a group of wide angle shots, Raihan places the characters in diverse compositions in different natural landscapes of Bengal, connoting the ritualized gaze and devotion of the

offspring of Bengal to the beauty of their mother land (Figure 6). To stir the nationalistic sentiment and a sense of imagined community, Raihan selects a powerful song that became the national anthem of Bangladesh after its independence. Thus it becomes very clear that throughout the visuals, narrative, songs, sounds and compositions of this film, Raihan's wishes to create the identity of Bengalis; and to shape the perception of Bengali nationalism.

Although the narrative of *Jibon Thekey Neyo* largely focuses on the role of a woman, her role is chiefly allegorical, and there is no representation of revolutionary women. The sequences of street processions, movements and protests inside a prison cell are featured solely as the spaces for the male (Figure 7). We do not see a single woman. Women are restricted to the domestic arena where they appear in the traditional roles of woman as sister, wife and mother, fighting with each other to get the ultimate power of a household.

The female protagonists Shathi and Bithi are constructed with aspects of the middle-class, modernized Bengali women, acquiring university education, permitted to sing Tagore songs, and allowed to participate in cultural events and festivals. After marriage, all their efforts and aspirations are devoted to their home. As Partha Chatterjee observes, Indian middle-class women of the late nineteenth-century were provided with an education to acquire the skill of being perfect in the spiritual space of the home.¹² Here we see the construction of middle-class women with almost the same cultural essence. Occasionally, they come out from the home and join a national event like *Provat feri* of February 21, where they carry flowers and sing. However, they never participate in the critical situations of the nation.

The anti-colonial struggle is framed as an event for glorifying the participation and sacrifice of men, where Anwar and Faruk fight bravely and Madhu dies for the mother nation. In contrast, females' roles revolve around the home and their virtue depends on their quality of keeping and maintaining the home-space, which is further underlined in the dialogue between the husband of the 'tyrant' and a matchmaker. Due to an unfulfilled urge to have a good wife who makes the home peaceful, the lawyer husband expresses his resentment and blames the matchmaker for being dishonest in not finding a good wife for him in the manner of the old Bengali saying: *Shangshar shukher hoi romonir guney* (By the virtue of

12 Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 247-249.

woman the domestic life becomes happy). So, the ways in which women are constructed in *Jibon Thekey Neyya*, firstly in the conception of mother nation and secondly in traditional roles, both follow a patriarchal paradigm.

On this point one needs to consider the context of the period in which this film was made. During the shooting it faced attempts by the authorities of Rawalpindi to stop the production.¹³ Therefore, facing a hostile and conflicting situation, Raihan revised the story line and many times had to improvise the shooting on set. The Pakistani authorities' opposition to this film appeared again when it was certified for exhibition. The Dhaka branch of the Central Board of Film Censors hesitated to issue a 'U' certificate and passed it to the higher authorities at Rawalpindi for further clearance even after many tickets had been pre-sold for its planned release on April 10, 1970.¹⁴ This incident triggered a spate of fierce protests among the audience who demanded its release. On April 11th, the authorities finally decided to issue a 'U' certificate. Although the Pakistani authorities could not stop the film's release in the face of mass protests, they took their revenge with the help of collaborators on January 30, 1972 when Zahir Raihan was disappeared. His brother Shahidullah Kaiser, an eminent writer and Bangladeshi intellectual, in 1971, was also killed by the Pakistani forces.



Figure 7. A street procession scene of *Jibon Thekey Neyya*, exclusively led by men.

13 Alamgir Kabir, "Bangladesh Cinema: A Critical Note", *Sharanika*, February-March, 1989, p. 21.

14 Kabir, *Ibid*, p. 21.

In conclusion, *Jibon Thekey Neya* strategically places the national situation in a family plot under a dictatorial rule and serves as a model for political film making through its repertoire of metaphors for Bengalis. This production testifies to the fact that a film can be simultaneously stylistic and political, symbolic and realistic, domestic and national. By exploring the aspects of narrative film making Raihan employs an allegorical style to portray the history, memories, values and the existing political scenario of pre-Liberation Bangladesh on a cinematic canvas. His goal was to strengthen the identity of Bengalis, a nation without a state, and to mobilize a national consciousness to move forward to achieve freedom and to “glide [them] into a limitless future.”¹⁵

15 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.12.