

Film Review  
Anuradha Kunda

## ***Sweater: The New Woman in Bengali Cinema***



Sweater

March being in, women's issues are discussed, relocated, analysed and planned. Talking about recent Bengali films, we have to accept the approach towards womanhood has become an important and debatable issue, but it hardly breaks the stereotypes or pioneers the new wave feminism.

The most trendy thing in contemporary Bengali films is to project a woman in hot pants or in ethnic sarees, smoking and drinking up to her choice in public and personal places, using slangs, having premarital sex, changing boyfriends frequently and carrying a laptop, just to indicate that she works. Real workplace hazards are hardly exposed. The upper middleclass Bengali girl dons a gorgeous Banarasi, drinks and smokes in her personal space to get rid of her nervousness and ends up in becoming a bored housewife. These stereotypes offer no solace, no solution and the conflicts seem funnily unreal. It is a matter of regret that the lower middle

class women, who have developed a lot in the community level, have come up with farming, fishery, mushroom and vegetable production, are sending the girl child to the school in spite of many odds, have not yet become the subject of a film.

As modernism is a very ancient term and 'traditional' is the brand new, in thing, what we see on screen in the name of tradition is some stagnant presentation of age old rituals, ethnic attires and jewellery, men in designer kurta. All these are caged in an ancestral house that is more or less a mansion and the audience is spoon fed with the superficial grandeur of Bengali ambience. The plurality of true Bengali ambience, tradition and modernity is needed to be addressed, if filmmakers are serious about women's issues. But the woman as subject is limited within a certain space of middle class or upper middleclass sections of the society and that even is not sufficiently justified. Mere drinking, smoking and using

slangs have nothing to do with development at all, be it social or physical or mental.



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As I wanted to get away from all these, before turning back to contemporary scenario I lamely sat down to watch the movie *Sweater* as I got fascinated with the songs initially. *Sweater* is a small budget movie, set against the backdrop of the mountains. It could have been some other place also as thematically the film overcomes the space time barrier. As I started watching without any expectation, I had to watch it several times and each time I got astounded to find a beautiful plot blooming and it is finely related to the liberation of womanhood. At the same time it breaks the myth of traditional woman, forever in tears and promoting the sacrificial mode.

It all starts with sibling rivalry. It is better not to use the term 'rivalry' in fact as Tuku, the elder sister and the protagonist, played wonderfully by Isha Saha is too timid to get into rivalry with her talented younger sister. The film nicely captures the stereotype middle-class Bengali family structure, where comparison between the siblings obviously creates inferiority complex in the sister who is considered mediocre and constantly pressurised by the parents 'to be like the other one'. The film brings out the 'kichchu pare na' (she can do nothing) syndrome very quaintly. Tuku is shy, introvert, in love with a local guy who exploits her gullibility skilfully. The film maker avoids unnecessary mess ups and prefers suggestive dialogues to depict the relationships. The lover boy image is supremely carried out

by Sourabh Das, who speaks about big dreams and exploits Tuku emotionally. Reference to premarital sex is also hinted as the lover says that he feels like a virgin due to long absence of their meetings but the focus is not on introducing physical intimacy of the couple and unnecessary visualization but on the silent humiliation of the girl. The humiliation is carried to an extreme level when the groom's party comes and rejects her continuously. The younger sister, beautiful, talented and chirpy is not allowed to come across the groom's party. These usual middleclass practices are subtly infused. The younger one is the bipolar opposite of Tuku. Extrovert and intelligent, flirts with rich boys for costly gifts. The film remains finely balanced as there is no plucky feminism. A comprehensive approach is taken. As Tuku is a soft target exploited by her skilful lover, the younger one targets soft natured boys. A whole generation of young women is represented by the younger daughter who is apparently bold and progressive but ultimately proved to be a failure. Marriage, being the only goal for many youthful, educated women turns out to be illusive. The romantic lover boy has his points too. His sincere love is thwarted by the girl's materialistic greed. The film also challenges social vocabulary without any show-off.

At the same time sisterhood is present. The younger one asks her *didi* not to entertain the groom's party at midnight. The very effort of



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one woman to enthuse and motivate another one is continuously present in the movie.

The linear narrative takes a metaphorical turn

as the sweater episode ushers in. The groom's mother arrives at midnight as the train is late. The maid sleeps in the small drawing room and as the groom's party arrives, she hurriedly rolls up her bed and picks up the child. These details of middle class life make a wonderful ambience though the entire set up reflects the air of hill station home stays. The groom's mother asks the girl to make a sweater for her boy as she herself is an expert at knitting and she wants to share a comfort zone with her daughter in law. From the straight narrative pattern the film takes a metaphorical turn.

Now the focus shifts to sweater metaphor and Tuku takes it as a challenge as she is tired of her non-existent condition. She is taken to her aunt who is a professional in knitting. Shrelekha Mitra uses a cerebral acting as she is supposed to play the saviour. Gradually Tuku learns to knit a sweater exactly like her would be mom-in-law but more than that she learns self-respect and dignity. The knitting experience takes her through the lives of other survivors and finally she learns to knit as she wants to do it and not just to please the patriarchal mom-in-law. Nothing is loud. There is no propaganda. A silent revolution takes places within the inner selves of the two girls. The younger one's over confident smartness to 'make the boys chase her' gets shattered as the boy who once loved her truly now says that he can't marry a girl who exploits him for gifts only. Harshness is carefully avoided and there is no jerk. The film slowly shows the upside down of patriarchy and feminism. Set against the typical patriarchal and hierarchical family of Tuku, is the small family of her aunt, who is taunted at by her own big brother. 'You will not understand as you do not have kids of your own.' But there is no sentimental humdrum on part of the aunt, neither any fuss or sadness on being childless. The couple's wonderful chemistry is reflected in their mutual actions. They are modern in true sense and also their happiness and adjustment, de-centres the myth of the 'melancholic childless couple'.

Coming to the knitting classes we find refined turns, subtle psychological games, gender sensitization and sort of Bengali romance which is terribly missing now a days. The knitting classes are thoroughly enjoyable to watch. Ryan breaks the myth of typical masculinity, the girls are normally dressed and each has her own individual mannerism. Tuku grows up in the process.

The songs have lovely lyrics, bearing the quintessential Bengali romanticism. The Tagore song '*Era sukher lagi chahe prem*' seems to be the cornerstone of the film as Tuku grows up to be a strong individual, championing feminism in its real sense. It is refreshing to watch a close-knit film, firmly woven and spreading warmth in spite of all negativity. Some sort of gap is felt. The journey to the hills seems absurd as Tuku and family themselves live in the hilly regions. Or it may be from one hill station to another one. The living arrangements clearly reflect the homestay environment and Banerji cabins are hardly available now a days. Apart from these inconsistencies the film has a strong theme that speaks of tender human values that are getting lost day by day. Gender discrimination is seriously dealt with as the '*kichchhu pare na*' syndrome slowly spoils the family health. Tuku's father (played by Kharaj Mukhopadhyay) provides the comic effect and some buffoonery as the bride's father is always the butt of ridicule but occasionally he shreds off the motley and speaks blatant truth 'If I were a woman, my marriage would never take place, even I cannot do anything'. That is the harsh middleclass evil, a girl should be accomplished in order to get married. The boy has no such obligation. These basic problems are hardly dealt in with. The director Shiladitya Moulik deals with a traditional problem in an original way. The open-ended conclusion retains modernity and marriage is not projected as the only ultimate for women. Self-love is important and this one Bengali film has tried

to bring in the concept of the new woman in both Tuku and her aunt by decentering the myth of submissive and sacrificing womanhood. That is good enough to compensate the few deficiencies. The film speaks sense. That is important and more such sensible films are welcome to retain the magnificence of Bengali cinema.

The films that speak of liberation do not need cheap gimmicks which overburden most of the movies. After Satyajit Roy's *Kanchanjanga*, Tapan Sinha's *Nirjan Saikate* or Mrinal Sen's *Ekdin Protidin*, the place of the liberated female in Bengali films had become aesthetically and intellectually strong. A long-time span separates contemporary movies from that of the maestros. Specially with post post-modernism having entered in all areas of art, and android phones having captured the greater portion of human life, the strength and concept of the new woman demands new dimensions. It is good to see that *Sweater* happily focuses on willpower in a woman and reconciles it with self-love and dignity that might be a lesson for a generation, of course without any propaganda, be it religious or political or social. No tag of ste-

reotype has been attached to the womanhood of Tuku. The rejection episodes at the end are necessarily a little dramatic but never melodramatic. The new woman finally learns her own choice and earns respect. Tuku's decision to refuse the humiliating marriage proposal and to reject the manipulative lover give her the air of freshness and firmness that the final Tagore song embodies. '*Era sukher lagi chaher prem, prem mele na, shudhu shukh chole jay/ era bhule jay/ kare chere kare chay...*' (These folks seek love for pleasure and never find love/ They forget whom they want .....). The new woman is born and *Sweater* spreads lot of warmth. It speaks sense.

### **Sweater**

Director: Shieladitya Moulik

Based on: Wool Kanta by Joeeta Sengupta

Starring: Ishaa Saha, June Maliah, Sreelekha Mitra, Kharaj Mukherjee

Music: Ranojay Bhattacharjee

Release date: 29 March 2019

Running time: 118 minutes

Country: India

Language: Bengali

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