

Chandrabati Kotha

A Tale of the First Feminist Poet of the Sub-continent

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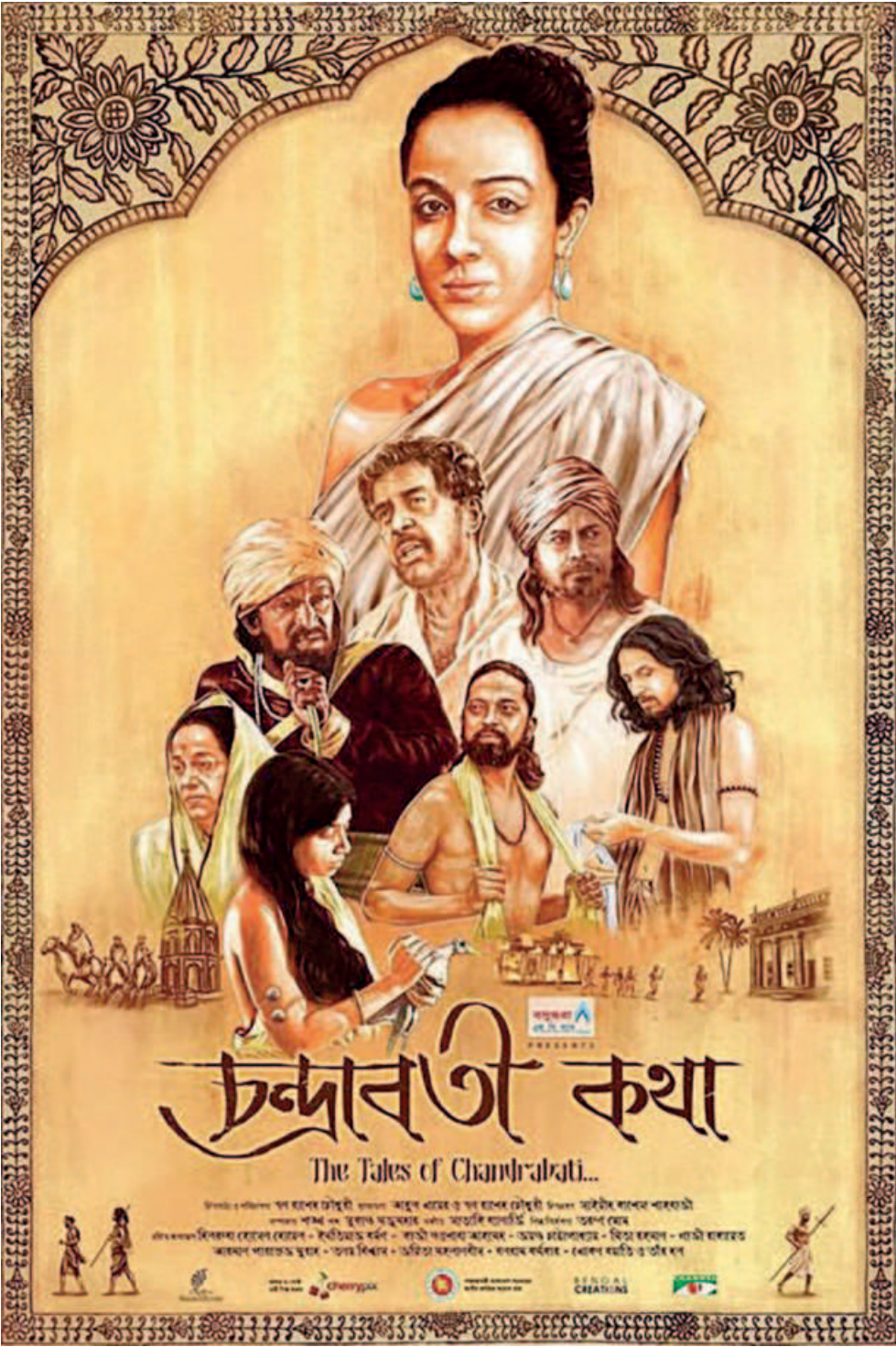
ABDULLAH AL MAMUN

In a time when Bangladeshi film industry is grievously experiencing the dearth of powerful narrative and proper storytelling; be it commercial or historical or any other genre, *Chandrabati Kotha* (The Tales of Chandrabati) directed by N. Rashed Chowdhury shows some light for the industry. His courageous attempt to portray the life of the first feminist poet of Indian sub-continent, Chandrabati, took more than five years of pre-production works including research work, collecting ballads from a particular region of Bangladesh, Kishoregonj, etc. makes the film worthy of grabbing people's attention particularly for academics and for those who are lovers of historical genre. Finally, it was released in October, 2021.

Set in the 16th century, this period drama explores not only the elegiac life of Chandrabati but also tries to capture the contemporary social and political life where several plots go hand in hand. The story begins with ballads of a contemporary famous bayati (an age-old Bengali village minstrel storytellers) Nayanchand Ghosh found in *Mymensingh Geetika* (Ballads of Mymensingh)- performing his lyrics based on Chandrabati's love-life. However, her love-life ends in tragedy with the betrayal of her childhood lover Jayanand who is also a poet. He leaves her on the eve of marriage for another woman. From thins point onward, her life takes turn to another direction, a life of seclusion that probably paves the way to think deeply about life and connect herself with the sufferings of Sita in the *Ramayana*. Heavy-hearted Chandrabati, the daughter of veteran poet Dwij Bangshi Das who is the composer of *Manasa Mangal*, decides to spend the rest of her life in the devotion of God Shiva and write her own version of *Ramayana*.

Previously apprenticed under and trained by her own father in the composition of lyrics, this first Bengali feminist poet is seen in the movie questioning the presentation of Sita in the epic- Sita forced to prove her chastity through walking on fire- that is why her version of *Ramayana* becomes a story of Sita instead of Ram metaphorically representing years of subjugation of women. Director of this movie N. Rashed Chowdhury in one of his writings about this movie says, “According to some experts, Chandrabati’s version of *Ramayan* is actually *Sitayan*! It hardly talks of Ram; rather becomes an elegy of Sita.” Apart from weaving the journey of Chandrabati, other plots including portrayal of the Devans of that time and the life of the followers of Vaishnavites are also found narrated in the performance of the bayatis that makes its audience a part of the journey and takes them back to a 400 years old Bengali riverine village. However, the story of Dewans seems to be loosely connected with the eponymous character of the movie.

Produced by government and Bengal Creations this 105-minute long biography stars Dilruba Hossain Doyel as Chandrabati, Imtiaz Barshan as Jayananda, Jayanta Chattopadhyay as Dwij Bangshi Das, Gazi



Rakayet as Dewan, Arman Parvez Murad as Qazi among others. Brilliant performance both from the veteran actors and the junior rising stars adds another dimension. Particularly, Doyel's role as Chandrabati is more of acting and giving expressions with few dialogues provides a realistic depiction of the central character.

Excellent music composition by Satyakee Banerjee, a folksong artist from Kolkata, creates an ambience more connected to the soil, giving the spectators an opportunity to have an authentic taste of the medieval rural Bengali music.

Upon watching this movie, one realizes that the illustration of the story against the backdrop of sixteenth century and presentation of characters with local

language in their tongues was the most challenging task for the director. But the movie maker triumphs over this difficult test and shows his craft with stupendous cinematography, costume design, and exclusively the delivery of dialogue in dialects. In short, it can be said that this biographic drama added a new dimension to the history of Bangladeshi movie for it will invoke creative people to dig deep the riches hidden under the soil. Therefore, watching this cinema is simultaneously experiencing a significant time and feeling the root.

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Remembering Dr. Halima Khatun on her 4th death anniversary on July 3

MOON DREAM

HALIMA KHATUN

I could make a kite
From the petals of my heart
To be flown by my son
As a magic carpet,
Instead of an elegy
Lamenting my death.
Though the moon cannot die
Let it be my epitaph
On the petals of the sky
Written with the stars.
Or the gospel of Buddha
That I might leave with him
And be an eremite,
Then he could touch
The mystery of my hair
And make it a switch
Turned into a wish,
To stop the thunder of guns,
That annoys meditation,
Killing Bidyapati and the moon.

I could not reach the moon
Because it was under my pillow
Or behind his brow covered with thought.
I dived into the bay
To gather lost moments,
Distilled with the honey
Oozed from mermaid dreams.
The moon became the pearl,
And clouds petalled oysters,
To be merged with the wings
Of the peacock night.
He could not drink the coffee
Because it was my blood
Served in the skull of Bidyapati.
Sad moments turned to shadow
Devouring the mermaid,
Like Hemingway
To be shot by his own gun.
He went down the stairs
Caged in my ribs,
And wanted to dance
Accompanied by the
Drumbeats of my heart.
Frozen into a dream of deathless life
My heart missed a bulb
Which could withstand love,
And shot into a red dahlia.

(Oct. 1981)

Halima Khatun was a Bangladeshi activist, writer and academic. She took part in Bengali Language Movement in 1952 along with other activists including Rawshan Ara Bachchu. She was the recipient of Bangla Academy Literary Award in 1981 and Ekushey Padak posthumously in 2019.



WHAT HE DID

HASAN MARUF

He joined the army at eighteen; a soldier through and through. He was tall, sturdy, ruddy-faced, and almost always urbane. Mahmud was my neighbour for nearly five years. He had moved from barely inhabited hilly terrain of Khagrachhari to the city of a heightened breeding place, old Dhaka. His decision to leave the vacuous and soulless life of the barrack could be being closer to his own children- all of them were assumed to be in their primes.

“I have six,” he once told me. “Seven,” he corrected himself a second later. Two from each of his three ex-wives and one boy whom he had picked up during an eviction mission in Bangladesh Myanmar border when his platoon was making their way through the fur-flung jungle of Ukhyia when there was a state of emergency in Rakhine state in a series of besmirching battles between Rohingya and Myanmar Army. The village had been raided just a few days before they got there. “There were severed and burnt bodies strewn everywhere,” he proclaimed. Some people were still trying to salvage whatever they could. He drifted onto a discarded flotsam when a little girl crawled up, speaking inaudible Arakanese and crying, asking him to take the sickly nine-month-old baby she held in her arms.

He took the baby; fed him some dry food, and a few days later he handed the child over to the mobile Red Cross team. He also registered the baby as his own giving the baby a Bangladeshi moniker “Babu Miah.”

He was a career soldier; he had been in



the UN mission to Africa, Middle-eastern Asia, and other missions. But he couldn't reminisce about those memories in a buoyant mood. He had seen the good, the bad, and the ugly side of humanity for the umpteenth times.

Every morning, I would hear him working at his backyard as the music played from his tape recorder, always local folksong. I would usually see him working on household chores, his old tape recorder; tinkling with things, taking them apart, and putting them back together. One evening, he played something from Lalon's mystic melody. A galaxy of memories fizzed through the beam of his conscience and it took him into a state of surreal stupor. The music seemed to pour salt into his unvoiced wounds as he crooned, — “O the woe-fraught bird in the cage... How do you fly repressing all your rage?”

More often than not, he and I would bask in propitious camaraderie on the

weekends talking through an opening in the wall that had separated our properties. Once in a while, his old comrades would traipse all the way to Tathari Bazar to come and visit him. But as far as I remember in those five years he had been my neighbour, his kids never came to visit him.

Mahmud would sometimes tell his kaleidoscopic range of stories, often recalling his childhood and his teens. How he signed up to be in the army the day after he passed matriculation simply because he didn't want to go to school anymore.

I thought of inviting old Mahmud to come and join for an adda fuelling feast. My kids always enjoyed chatting to him; he was sardonically funny yet quite affable with them. However, he was nowhere to be seen.

One sluggish Friday noon, as my family and I came back from Jumma prayer, I had prepared to marinate the beef to cook in the backyard. I thought of inviting old Mahmud to come and join for an adda fuelling feast. My kids always enjoyed chatting to him; he was sardonically funny yet quite affable with them. However, he was nowhere to be seen.

His old bicycle was parked in the front doorway; the bicycle he'd been working on was in the backyard along with the little tape recorder. I could hear music

streaming out from the garage. I called out to him but I didn't hear a response.

Knocking on his front door, and upon getting no reply, I surveyed around to the wooden door on the side of his house but it was locked. Tidying up the backyard, and cleaning the temporarily built fireplace, I went back to my house and set about my business.

My wife was inside the house taking a nap and my kids were in the living room playing and watching Friday matinée show on television. As I started to dredge up the makeshift hearth, expecting him to bob up with one of his friends, suddenly I heard a groan. At that moment, I decided to peep through the door hole.

There he was on the floor. He had fallen from a chair under his workbench. I called out his name, but he didn't respond. I tried to pry the door open. Then, I shattered the window in, removing the craggy board and unlocking it from the inside, I rushed to his side.

On his workbench was a gun, a bottle of aspirin, and a bunch of old pictures. He had slit his wrists with his old switchblade. Blood was diffused everywhere, his pajamas were draped in it. As I bent down, my white sandal suddenly became soaked in the crimson liquid. I panicked for a second and that's when he turned his head slightly and hissed, “I'm sorry.”

“I got to call for help.” I could feel myself faltering like a flickering flame of a white-hot candle.

“No” he spluttered; his breath came in ragged, shallow gasps, memories of the past swarmed all over him as the music of Lalan Shai's “*Somoy Gele Sadhon Hobe*

Na” was rending asunder from the old radio that hung on the other side of the wall.

“It's too late” Mahmud murmured. “I'm alone; my family's far away...” he added. “All my dostos (buddies) are gone; I saw them die before me. The things we did—the things I did—are heartless, deleterious, and unforgivable.”

“Don't say that” I retorted as I held his hand. His hands were inert, rough, cold, and wan now.

“The things I did,” he repeated. “I'm sorry for the things I did,” apologizing to me as if I had been a haunted victim of his tortuous past.

My cell phone was in my pocket as I was still in delirious doldrums. I could feel my voice breaking, my eyes welling up. He sparked into one last smile, through the thick mustache, and muttered “I'm sorry” one last time.

I stood up, transfixed; my legs were shaking and I saw the gun wasn't loaded. But he had taken gluts of aspirins as if he could not withstand the choice of having an easeful end.

Photographs of him and his old buddies from his military days lay cluttered on the floor. In one of these pictures, I could unerringly recognize a much younger Mahmud. Next to the photographs was a pile of letters in envelopes with different names. It seemed he wanted to go slowly, unnoted, and unsaid; luxuriating in his last moment with Lalon Shai.

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