

IN THE SILENCE BETWEEN THEM

What Jaya and Sharmin Says About Women, Labour, and Care



We speak of public leadership and representation, but rarely of domestic labour protections. We critique patriarchy, but seldom the hierarchies we replicate at home. Feminism, if it is to mean anything, must make room for the women who clean our floors and carry our fevers.

CYNTHIA FARID

Jaya and Sharmin—a film produced by Jaya Ahsan—is a quiet reminder of who we were and still are, five years after the pandemic struck. In this quiet, haunting two-woman film, the pandemic is never centerstage—rather the film avoids its dramatisation. There are no sirens, no scenes of hospital chaos, no feverish handheld camera work. Instead, the film offers what most pandemic stories avoid: the internal climate of a shared household. Time slows. Fear settles. News flits across the TV, unnoticed. Through understated rhythm, the film accomplishes something powerful—it keeps the focus on the emotional, relational toll of confinement, rather than its spectacle.

This is a film about what happens when two women—one a public figure, the other a domestic worker—are confined together by circumstances within a socially stratified structure. That this is a female-led production matters. It is unmistakably shaped by women's emotional intelligence and the directorial effort is worthy of praise. This is not a "strong women" story in the Marvel Universe sense. Rather, the film shows women absorbing, enduring, witnessing, and navigating unequal

relationships—not with men, but with each other.

The film unfolds within the walls of a single home in Dhaka. Jaya, a well-known actress, moves through her days in the slow drift familiar to many of us during lockdown. She types on an old typewriter once owned by her father. She listens to BBC radio and speaks wistfully of a time when people built their mornings around the news—often as a family, as opposed to the contemporary routine of solitary consumption of social media.

As these women navigate the Pandemic-induced confinement, their days repeat. So do their meals. Their silences through walks to the rooftop or looking out the verandah—spaces where the sky is the only reminder of an outside world—have been visualised by the Director with great affect.

Sharmin, the house help, cooks, cleans, answers the phone, and listens. She is, like so many domestic workers in South Asia, physically proximate but emotionally peripheral. The pandemic may have blurred class lines for some,

but not here. In this house, caregiving is constant and unequally valued.

The film resists melodrama. There are no monologues. No climaxes. Just accumulation—of days, gestures, absences, and unmet glances. Emotional tension builds not through confrontation but through withholding. This is a film that asks us to look not at what is said, but to comprehend the silences and emotions.

At its heart, the film showcases the asymmetries of care and vulnerabilities. Sharmin is expected to serve, absorb, and remain silent—even when the emotional temperature of the house spikes. At moments, Jaya reaches out—but her concern, though sincere, is shaped by the same structures that keep Sharmin at the margins. Even when care is offered, the terms are not equal.

There is a brief reversal when Sharmin becomes unwell, and Jaya takes on the caregiving role. But the structural lines never blur. Even in vulnerability, Sharmin insists on keeping her employer safe. It is a scene that reflects a deeper truth: domestic workers are expected to carry both emotional and physical labor.

One of the most powerful choices in the film is Sharmin's eventual exit (spoiler alert!). There is no confrontation, no moral arc, no sentimental music. She simply leaves—quietly, deliberately, without being told she is safe from the disease or asked to stay. In a film where movement is constrained, her departure becomes the only unscripted act—an assertion of dignity in a space where she was never fully seen.

This is where Jaya and Sharmin becomes a mirror—of our classed households, of the



emotional economies some women sustain without acknowledgement, of the silences that define both domestic work and middle-class fragility. In Bangladesh today, as debates are raging around women's rights, this film quietly but sharply re-centers a truth we often sidestep, that many "empowerment" narratives ignore social stratification. We speak of public leadership and representation, but rarely of domestic labour protections. We critique patriarchy, but seldom the hierarchies we replicate at home. Feminism, if it is to mean anything, must make room for the women who clean our floors and carry our fevers.

The film does not preach. It opens up space for reflection—on the inequalities inside our households, on the distance between care and recognition, and on the emotional toll of being near someone without ever being fully allowed to matter. The pandemic may have locked everyone in, but it did not flatten the hierarchy inside the house. At a moment when so much public discourse is being reduced to slogans, this film dares to say less—and in that restraint, it says everything.

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WHERE FOLK MEMORY LIVES

Inside Kurigram's Bhawaiya Museum



Bhupati Bhusan Barma, retired schoolteacher, renowned Bhawaiya singer and researcher, and founder of the Bhawaiya Academy in Ulipur.



Due to severe space constraints, Bhawaiya heritage items lie exposed and unprotected across the academy's verandas.

PHOTOS: S DILIP ROY

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In the lowlands of northern Bangladesh, where the Brahmaputra weaves its ancient path and songs echo across open fields, a quiet fight to preserve cultural memory is underway. Tucked inside a modest tin-roofed building in Kurigram's Ulipur upazila, the Bhawaiya Academy has been nurturing the roots of a rich musical and rural tradition for over three decades. What started as a community effort to teach folk music has grown into something far more ambitious: a museum of living memory.

Named after the legendary Bhawaiya singer who carried the songs of the north to global audiences, the museum now shelters nearly 2,000 artefacts that once defined agrarian life in Bengal. But far from a grand institution, the collection teeters under threat, crammed into overcrowded verandas and classrooms, slowly decaying from lack of space and funding. Still, from across the country, visitors come—drawn not just by nostalgia, but by a deep desire to connect with a vanishing way of life.

More than a hundred rare tools and instruments are on display: agricultural tools like wooden ploughs, yokes, and korsi (a farming implement), bull-driving sticks, korail kural (small axes), bakaas (bamboo shoulder poles), topas (bamboo hats worn by farmers), winnowing fans (kula and jhapi), and pestas—circular head supports used to carry heavy loads.

Traditional paddy processing items such as urun-gan and paat are exhibited alongside fishing gear like borsi, darki, deru, palo, and chak. Baskets for storing fish like khalai and jina, musical instruments like the dotara, sarinda, dhol, and banshi, and even

wooden sandals (kharam) are all preserved—many of which are mentioned by name in Bhawaiya songs, maintaining their original northern dialect.

At the heart of this endeavour is Bhupati Bhusan Barma, a retired schoolteacher from Duragpur High School in Ulipur and a celebrated Bhawaiya singer and researcher. Since 1993, Bhupati has single-handedly collected and preserved these relics of rural life. Having performed Bhawaiya across India and abroad, he envisioned a museum that would reconnect the modern generation with their roots—not just through music, but through the tangible heritage behind the melodies.

"These are not just items," he told The Daily Star. "They are reflections of our identity and history. People may hear the songs, but through these objects, they can see the life behind the lyrics."

Explaining the naming of the museum, he added, "We could do very little to honour Kasim Uddin during his lifetime. Naming the museum after him is our humble tribute to a man who gave Bhawaiya its rightful place on the world stage."

Yet despite its growing collection and cultural importance, the museum suffers from a critical limitation—lack of infrastructure. "We have no proper space," Bhupati lamented. "Artefacts are stored in classrooms and verandas. Many are damaged or at risk of being lost forever. We need a multi-storey building to preserve this heritage, but we simply don't have the funds," he said.

The Bhawaiya Academy's journey began in 1994, when then-chairman of Duragpur Union Parishad, Golep Uddin Sarkar, donated five decimals of land. With local and limited government support, a tin-roof structure was built and the academy began offering free training in five disciplines: Bhawaiya

vocals, dotara, sarinda, dhol, and bamboo flute. Bhupati and seven other volunteers conduct weekly classes every Thursday and Friday. Currently, around 40 students attend regularly, and over 2,500 have benefited from the academy over the years.

The Bhawaiya Academy has not only preserved artefacts and melodies—it has also transformed lives. Putul Rani, now a listed Bhawaiya singer with Bangladesh Television (BTV) and Bangladesh Betar, shared how the academy shaped her journey.

"The Bhawaiya Academy gave me a new life," she told The Daily Star. "Through the training I received here, I am now a performer on both television and radio. I'm regularly invited to sing on major stages across the country."

Putul also voiced concern over the preservation of the academy's collection:

"Bhawaiya is deeply intertwined with various traditions and objects that are now disappearing. Our mentor, Bhupati Bhusan Barma, has spent years collecting them. But due to lack of space, they're left on the academy's verandas. Proper preservation is urgently needed."

Jagatpati Barma, a music instructor at the academy, emphasised the passion driving their mission. "There are eight of us who teach music here—all on a voluntary basis. We train students in Bhawaiya singing and how to play traditional Bangla instruments. We are building artists with the hope of keeping Bhawaiya alive." He added, "But preserving the instruments and heritage linked to Bhawaiya also matters. And for that, we need patronage and support."

The museum now stands as a lone guardian of a fading legacy. If given proper support, it could become a cornerstone of northern Bangladesh's cultural preservation, inspiring future generations to take pride in their roots," he said.

Even the youngest learners understand the academy's impact. Prodipto Barma Tullo, a student in Class Eight, is already performing on stage. "I'm learning to play the dotara here. I've already been invited to perform at various events. I dream of becoming a renowned dotara player someday," he said, adding, "We don't have to pay any fees for training here. Many like me are learning free of cost."

Visitors to the Bhawaiya Academy often leave with a deep emotional impression—moved not just by the music, but by the cultural treasure trove that surrounds it. Shirin Khatun, a Bhawaiya singer visiting from Rangpur, was overwhelmed by what she witnessed. "I was deeply moved by the work being done at the Ulipur Bhawaiya Academy," she told The Daily Star. "The collection of heritage and traditional items here is truly historic. But it pains me to see them not properly preserved." She stressed the importance of protecting the legacy for future generations.

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