

UNRAVELLING ANTARA:
A JOURNEY INTO FILMMAKING AND BANGLADESHI GENRE

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Bachelor's in Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Ethics Statement

I, Nuhash Humayun, hereby confirm that I have obtained all necessary rights and permissions to use and detail the content of the film *Antara* for the purpose of this thesis paper.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the entire production of *Antara* and the subsequent writing of this thesis. The safety and well-being of the cast and crew were prioritized at all times. Furthermore, I affirm that no animals or human beings were harmed in the making of the film. All decisions were made with a commitment to ethical standards and practices.

Blurb

Directed by Nuhash Humayun, *Antara* is a Bangladeshi psychological horror film that intertwines magical realism with the intricacies of marital drama. Every film begins with an idea—what sparked the inception of this story, and why was Bangladeshi horror chosen as its medium of expression? This thesis traces the filmmaking journey from initial ideation and screenwriting to the practical challenges of production and distribution in Bangladesh. It also denotes an intimate journey for the director, who co-wrote the script with his mother, Gultekin Khan—an act of collaboration that has become a story in its own right.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Bangladeshi genre, cinema, *Antara*, Pett Kata Shaw

Dedication

For my mother, Gultekin Khan.

And Aftab Ahmed, a good friend, dearly missed.

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Chapter 1:

Youth, Cinema, and Bangladeshi Horror

here in the grass
 what had art - their
 own, anyway - ever been
about, though, if not

somehow
 the movement
 around desiring

to know a thing
 and coming briefly
 to rest

in front of that
 thing's refusal
 to be entirely known?

Carl Phillips, 2025

I am not a morning person at all. Yet it is 7 am, and I found myself at the morning assembly of a high school in Dhaka. It is “Career Day” and the school has invited professionals from different career paths to inspire the students (who were mostly yawning and waiting for this to be over; no one likes assemblies).

There is a doctor, an IT specialist, and me, a filmmaker. I spoke for a few minutes about how I began filmmaking at the age of thirteen with my school friends. How it spawned a career of travelling the world, working with great artists, and even becoming a member of the Writers’ Guild of America. I told them about how I managed to sign with one of the biggest agencies in Hollywood, CAA, which represents everyone from Stephen Spielberg to Zendaya (this part got applause, probably because Zendaya is massively popular with the new generation).

Finally, there was a question-and-answer session. The teachers looked at one another with pride as over a dozen hands were raised to ask me questions. First question, from a lanky teenager, not much older than I was when I began filmmaking. With great enthusiasm, he asked, “Hey! I’m so inspired by the way you brought Iblis Shaitan to life! You know...the devil? Can you tell me more about the devil?”

Loud gasps from the teachers. I think the Islamiat teacher almost fainted. High school students emphatically asking about the devil was probably blasphemous. Answering this question requires context on how I began telling stories. How those stories evolved into an exploration of Bangladeshi horror. And how it all led me to dancing with the devil himself.

The Inner Child

Before the existence of iPhones, digital cameras were all the rage in the early 2000s. My mom had purchased one such “family camera,” and my life changed forever when I discovered this device had a very rudimentary video function. The camera could take one-minute videos. I was thirteen and did not have many friends in school. Experimenting with the camera and making “funny videos” became a pastime. With a ragtag group of misfit friends, we made parodies of popular TV commercials and our own renditions of Tagore’s iconic story, “Postmaster.” We would share the videos in school, passing them around on pen drives (this was a pre-*YouTube* era). Soon, the videos became popular. In a way, so did we.

We were reading Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Jahanara Imam’s *Ekattorer Diin Guli* in school. Our next video was a crossover where Jane Austen and Jahanara Imam met one another. Then, we created a Bangladeshi superhero. Next, a horror movie about a ghost who only attacks during Eid. Our biggest limitation was the one-minute restriction of the digital camera. I had to learn how to use Windows Movie Maker to stitch the videos together. I discovered some forms of videos stitch better than others: a “wide angle” stitches better with a “close-up” of a character instead of another “wide angle.”

Essentially, through trial and error, I discovered the art of editing, an integral part of filmmaking that they teach in film schools. I also found an aspect they possibly do not’ teach in schools - the joy of collaboration. The connections one makes through art, both with fellow artists and with the audience. I am sure every child has experienced a version of this - playing

make-believe. My friends grew up. Some are married with children; most have nine-to-five jobs.

I, however, never stopped tinkering with the camera. In a way, I never grew up. Filmmaking became my professional and personal source of joy. As I grew older, the darker shades of life seeped in. Depression, anxiety, and losing my father to cancer at nineteen. But the creative spirit saved me. No matter how tough adulthood became, filmmaking was my gateway to keeping my inner child alive.

Death of the Author

In 2017, I made my television debut with a psychological thriller called *Hotel Albatross*. The response was unfortunately disappointing. Yes, online critics and YouTubers were discussing my work, but from a specific lens. The headlines read, “Humayun Ahmed’s son makes filmmaking debut.” Of course, this is natural. My father was a celebrated writer and filmmaker. The very public mourning surrounding his death only cemented his legacy. I realised, to the public eye, my journey as an artist will forever be tied to my family. If I succeed as an artist, it will be because of my father’s genes or the privilege granted by being his son.

My career suddenly felt less like a blessing and more like a deal with the devil: gifted with a career in the arts. Doomed to be a footnote in someone else’s legacy. I also knew it would be foolish to hyper-focus on this aspect of my career. All I can do is create. How my work will be interpreted will never be in my hands. As Roland Barthes argues in his popular theory, death of the author, the very act of creating results in a severing of the voice from the origin (142).

I also felt the pressure to follow my father’s footsteps. Whenever I was interviewed for my work, the first question was always, “Why are you not telling your father’s stories?” The simple answer is I have my own stories to tell. However, I cannot deny a rebellious spirit to intentionally distance myself from his legacy to forge my own path. Much has been written about legacy and the weight of artistic giants that have come before. In Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, he argues a “strong poet” should engage in an

agonistic struggle with the legacy of other strong poets of the past. Influence is a form of anxiety, and often influences should be intentionally misinterpreted or distorted for a poet to find their own voice. Bloom writes, “When it involves two strong, authentic poets, always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation” (30). Bloom also warns in his preface that he does not mean a literal rivalry between the poet and poets of the past - “I never meant by “the anxiety of influence” a Freudian Oedipal rivalry, despite a rhetorical flourish or two in this book” (xxiii). My situation, however, is quite “Freudian Oedipal”, as I am wrestling with the artistic legacy of my own father.

The Yellow Brick Road

An epiphany struck me in 2019. A film I co-wrote and directed, called *Sincerely Yours, Dhaka* was invited to the Busan International Film Festival in South Korea. Walking on the red carpet felt akin to the yellow brick road in *The Wizard of Oz*. A whole new world full of wonder. At the premiere, I was welcomed by strangers who appreciated my craft. My first encounter with an international audience - they could not properly pronounce my name, but they complimented my film. To them, I was a stranger. There was no familiarity with my family or my father. No burden of a creator’s legacy on my shoulders. In that moment, I pondered the possibility of my art extending beyond Bangladeshi audiences. Specifically, an audience that is less concerned with my namesake and more invested in engaging with the art.

I felt reborn with a newfound purpose - exploring the international film scene as a Bangladeshi artist. With every new film I created from there on, I also explored international film festivals. I sought out international film programmes like the Sundance Screenwriting Intensive, becoming the first Bangladeshi to take part in it. I soon realised how under-represented Bangladesh is in the media landscape. I found myself in film festivals where the drop-down menu of languages did not include Bengali, and I had to request that they include it. This became my new burden, bringing Bangladeshi cinema to new corners of the globe.

This is, of course, a massive undertaking. No single artist can take it upon their shoulders singlehandedly. Yet I welcomed it. Unlike the weight of my father’s name, this was

a burden I chose. Thus, I set forth on the yellow brick road. One film, one festival, at a time. And it is this very journey that led me - not to the great Oz, but the devil himself.

Noah's Arc

Oftentimes, artists are unsure about what to do - but have a keen sense of what not to do. In my mid-twenties, I began to wonder why Bangladeshi cinema is not as globally celebrated as Indian cinema or Pakistani cinema. Of course, sheer scale is a factor: Bangladesh is a nation in its infancy, mustering on from one revolution to another. Comparatively, India has a robust film infrastructure. Yet, nations like Iran have widely celebrated films. Pakistan has been making beautiful art films that captivate the world. All within low budgets.

My very subjective analysis is that we suffer the burden of being the young sibling. I have two nephews, Neel, who is ten, and Noah, who is six. Noah nearly worships Neel and copies everything he does. Could this be Bangladesh in relation to our neighbours? Are we making Bangladeshi cinema or creating pastiches of what we see around us?

I brought this up with other Bangladeshi filmmakers, who suggested I was overthinking it all. And perhaps I was. Films cannot be made in a lab, after analysis and market research (I am sure many films are made this way, but that is not the kind of film I intend to make). Instead of asking what was missing from Bangladeshi cinema, I began asking, what would I love to see on screen? The answer, for me, became Bangladeshi horror.

South Asian Horror and Oral Traditions

Before exploring Bangladeshi horror, it is essential to contextualise it within the history of Bengali horror and broader South Asian horror. South Asian horror has long been rooted in folktales, religious beliefs and socio-cultural anxieties.

The predominant religions of the region are Hinduism and Islam. The Muslim belief in *djinn*s leans towards the supernatural. Hinduism's concepts of karma and karmic retribution also lend themselves to stories of mystical chance and fate. These are only small

examples of religious influences in horror of the region.

The female supernatural entity *shakchunni* has its origins in the Sanskrit word *shakha* or bangles. The shakchunni, popularised in Mitro Majumdar's 1907 anthology *Thakurmar Jhuli*, is infamous for ruining the *Bamon*'s wedding by possessing his wife. Other interpretations position the *shakchunni* as the ghost of a widowed woman. Regardless, every iteration of the shakchunni is a female entity tied to a Bengali wedding. On the other hand, the *mechobhoot* craves haunts fishermen, craving their day's catch - a reflection of the Bengali livelihood of fishing.

While many of these stories have been anthologised and collected through literature, such as Lal Behari Dey's *Folk-Tales of Bengal* (1883) and Manilal Gangopadhyay's *Kankaler Tongkar* (early 19th century), folk tales and oral storytelling are also a rich part of South Asian tradition. Many such "ghost stories" are passed on from generation to generation on cold winter gatherings. In fact, the title of my horror film anthology *Pett Kata Shaw* is inspired by oral storytelling. "*Madhanna shaw*" is a letter in the Bengali alphabet, traditionally written with a line striking through the letter. This strike through has led to the letter being colloquially called "*pett kata shaw*" roughly translating to "shaw with it's belly cut." Somehow every generation learning Bengali knows this colloquial name, despite it not appearing in any literature or textbooks. The name also crosses socio-economic boundaries. Thus, "*pett kata shaw*" is exemplary of the power of oral storytelling tradition. Naming the anthology as such is an homage to the power of folk tales.

South Asian Horror in Cinema

Mythological and fantastical elements have been ever present in South Asian cinema, which falls more under the fantasy genre rather than horror. However, the Ramsay Brothers created a series of low-budget horror films from the 1970s to the 1990s in India.

Satyajit Ray, possibly the most famous South Asian filmmaker, also popularised horror tropes in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*. While the film is a fantasy-comedy, it features an elaborate scene of ghosts singing and dancing - featuring special effects, horror adjacent sound design and imagery such as the pentagram which has long been associated with the occult.

The new wave of South Asian horror includes Ram Gopal Varma's *Raat* (1992) and *Bhoot* (2003). More recent films like the Hindi-language *Bhul Bhulaiya* (2007) and *Stree* (2018) incorporate large scale elements like musical segments and humour which are Bollywood staples.

There is a commonality with all the horror staples throughout South Asian history. While there is South Asian horror cinema and Bengali horror cinema, Bangladeshi representation is largely absent in the visual medium.

Why Bangladeshi Horror?

To this day, I am asked in every interview why I chose horror as my new medium. The answer is simple: horror is the true Bangladeshi pastime. When cousins huddle up in the winter, they tell one another ghost stories. Grandmothers tell ghost stories to their grandchildren - and these stories paint a picture of ancestral villages and lakes.

In 2022, I created a series called *Pett Kata Shaw*. A retelling of Bangladeshi supernatural folktales. I also released a short film called *Moshari* - exploring a common Bengali fear...what lies on the other side of the mosquito net? Compared to my previous works, the success of these films has been meteoric. *Moshari* won the Grand Jury Award of the South By South West Film Festival and became the first Bangladeshi film in history to qualify for an Academy Award. *Pett Kata Shaw* won the Raindance Film Festival in 2022 and is cited by *The Daily Star* to have reinvented Bangladeshi horror, a genre that was previously "woefully underexplored" (Hamama).

But the awards, success, and cultural legacy of these projects are an afterthought. Choosing Bangladeshi horror as my medium involves a multitude of factors.

A. Birth of a new genre:

When the well-known tropes of horror cinema are infused with Bangladeshi specificity, a new subgenre emerges. Bangladeshi ghosts are unique. The *petnee* does not kill humans, it is after fish - stalking fishermen at night to capture their day's catch. The *jinn* hover around sweet stores, craving *mishti*.

Entities more interested in our food than haunting us - which speaks volumes to the Bangladeshi love of food or the region's historic poverty.

Instead of superficially imposing horror conventions in a Bangladeshi landscape, a deeper reflection on the thematic uniqueness of Bangladeshi horror can give birth to a new language of cinema.

B. Genre as a global language:

I have found *Pett Kata Shaw* in lists of must-see folk horror series. These lists are not compiled by Bangladeshis, nor are they curated by global cinephiles. These are horror fans - a unique fandom in itself. Horror fans seek out genre films from all over the world. There are fans of the Turkish horror film franchise *Dabbe* who have never seen any other Turkish cinema. Similarly, I doubt those recommending *Pett Kata Shaw* are familiar with Bangladeshi cinema at all.

The biggest hurdle international cinema faces is reading subtitles. But genre fans are culturally agnostic - they are not bothered by the challenge of diving into another culture or a foreign language as long as the film itself is scary.

Thus, creating Bangladeshi horror exposes us to a whole new untapped audience. The kind that does not visit arthouse film festivals. These are night owls, switching the lights off and turning on a foreign horror movie, hoping to be scared. And the other joy of horror - a horror film that fails to scare us becomes a fun time as well. We yell at the screen and mock the poor effects. Watching a bad horror movie is arguably a more enjoyable experience than watching a good one.

C. Freedom of Interpretation:

In *Moshari*, two sisters are haunted by shadowy monsters, yet somehow they are safe inside a mosquito-net. The film never clearly exposes the entity; the creature is hidden in darkness. When we screened at the Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival, a young Korean woman in the audience asked me if the monster was a metaphor for the white man. The colonial invaders of South Asia, who, much like mosquitoes, sucked our blood dry and drained us of resources.

When we screened in India, a reviewer wrote about *Moshari* as a powerful fable about two sisters escaping from sexual abusers. The monster, to this reviewer, was a metaphor for predators.

While every kind of film is open to interpretation, horror begs the audience to fill in the blanks. A monster hidden in shadow can be anything. We imagine the monster to be what we fear the most. Perhaps this is why a horror film can translate so well internationally: every culture fills in the blanks with its own fears. Every single audience member is their own Dr. Frankenstein, concocting their personal monsters from scratch.

D. High art vs low art:

When I was in production for *Pett Kata Shaw*, even my crew was unsure if the project would amount to anything watchable. While horror has a rabid fan base, it is also considered by many critics as “low-brow.” This is amusing if we consider horror’s roots in ancient folklore. Religion, at least the Abrahamic ones, is filled with horror stories - scaring believers with the imagery of hellfire. If we go even further back and open our imagination a bit, when our early ancestors, the precursors to Homo Sapiens, would see a beast in the wild, surely they sped to the rest of their brethren to spread the warning. It is possible that the earliest story we ever told was horror.

Of course, I can not cite hypothetical cavemen to give credibility to my horror films. In fact, I enjoy how critics never fail to mention “Despite not being a fan of horror, I enjoyed your piece!” or the much more dangerous “your work is so layered, I wouldn’t even call it horror” (a film can both be horror and layered). There is something freeing about making art that many consider “low-brow.” It takes the pressure off of artistic legacy. The presumption that my work will likely be insignificant is a necessary lens that can filter out anxiety, overthinking, and delusions of grandeur. The true horror is an artist who believes too much in himself.

***Pett Kata Shaw* and the Devil Himself**

Pett Kata Shaw was released in 2022, enjoying an international festival run as well as a Bangladeshi release. Each episode of the series focused on a different supernatural tale inspired by folk tales. One of the episodes, *Mishti Kichu* (Something Sweet), became one of my favourite stories I have ever told. Three years after its release, I am still met with questions about this story, its characters, and its bizarre ending that transcends horror and delves into cosmic science fiction.

Mishti Kichu is inspired by the common Bengali superstition: jinns wander near sweet shops at night. Many customers at sweet shops are actually supernatural entities in disguise. The story begins with Mahmud, a humble, sweet salesman with an awful memory. Mahmud forgets his wife Antara's birthday. He forgets customer orders at his store. His business and his marital life are both struggling. Until he meets a strange elderly Gentleman who walks with a cane, hungry for sweets in the middle of the night. Mahmud soon realizes the Gentleman is no ordinary man. In fact, he may not be human at all but a jinn taking human form. The Gentleman makes a deal with Mahmud in exchange for sweets. He gives Mahmud a gift, the gift of memory.

That night, Mahmud comes home a romantic. He wakes Antara up in the dead of the night, reminiscing about the beautiful saree she wore the day they first met years ago. He even remembers the exact number of flowers on her saree. She finds it sweet yet strange.

As Mahmud's memory improves, he becomes a savant. His once-empty sweet shop is now buzzing with customers who are curious about Mahmud's abilities - he remembers every book he has ever glanced at, even as a child. He remembers how many runs Ather Ali Khan scored in a cricket match decades ago.

While his memory strengthens, his ego expands. Mahmud insists that the Gentleman grant him even more gifts. He begins suspecting Antara of infidelity, remembering how Antara puts on lipstick every time a certain neighbour visits. The Gentleman gives Mahmud a warning, "Be wary of pride. How do you think I hurt my leg?" Apparently, the Gentleman once fell from a great height, which is why he must walk with a cane.

Antara starts investigating Mahmud's strange behaviour. She realizes the Gentleman visiting Mahmud is no ordinary jinn. He is the very jinn who betrayed the All-Mighty. Who

refused to bow down to humanity, and was banished from the Heavens. Now, he roams the earth, whispering evil to the ears of mankind. This Jinn is the devil himself. *Iblis Shaitan*.

But Antara's realisation comes too late. Mahmud is beyond saving. His memory is so vivid, he imagines the only time he was ever happy - he remembers the nine months he spent inside his mother's womb. But his memory keeps expanding - beyond the moment of his birth. He suddenly comprehends the beginning of time itself. Memories his mind is not equipped to comprehend.

Mahmud dies under the spell of his own madness. His body is found in his sweet shop. But before he passed, he used his colourful sweets to paint the cosmos itself on the shop's grimy walls.

After *Shaw*

Much like Mahmud's inescapable memories, the story of *Mishti Kichu* stayed with me. The story is a reinterpretation of a classic structure, the Faustian bargain. The "be careful what you wish for" story is archetypal. Yet contextualising it with Islamic imagery, set in a small Bangladeshi neighbourhood, breathes it new life. And of course, the stunning performances of Chanchal Chowdhury as Mahmud, Quazi Nawshaba Ahmed as Antara, and Afzal Hossain as our interpretation of the devil elevated the story beyond my imagination.

The characters of Mahmud, Antara, and the devil kept calling to me. I was itching to create a second iteration set in the same world. But with Mahmud deceased, the story needed a new protagonist. This evolved into the story of Antara, who, admittedly, was underdeveloped as a character, playing the role of a concerned wife, but also making significant discoveries in the story that forward the plot. I was curious about Antara's life after Mahmud's death. A life free of her troubled marriage, but perhaps riddled with new psychological dangers.

This germ of an idea became the basis of *Antara*, the spiritual sequel to *Mishti Kichu*. In this paper, I will delve into the strange, beautiful, and often chaotic journey behind the making of *Antara* - both as a writer and as a director. I will also detail the process of bringing

the script to life, visually in terms of cinematography and production design, as well as the sonic components like music and sound design. Antara's scuffle with the devil is quite different from Mahmud's. The devil has her trapped in a loop.

As I develop this thesis, I strongly empathise with Antara's predicament. Writing about one's own writing is an endless loop in itself. Much like Oroboros, the legendary Egyptian serpent infamous for swallowing its own tail in a periodical infinite loop. Regardless, I aim to be transparent, honest, and vulnerable as I detail this journey. As an artist, and as a serpent.

Chapter 2:

The Story of Antara

“Since childhood, I’ve been faithful to monsters. I have been saved and absolved by them, because monsters, I believe, are patron saints of our blissful imperfection, and they allow and embody the possibility of failing.

I think that perfection is practically unattainable, but imperfection is right at hand. So that’s why I love monsters: because they represent a side of us we should actually embrace and celebrate.”

— Guillermo del Toro (0:45)

I always begin my screenplays with a story outline. It is a helpful tool in the development process, yet an imperfect vehicle for doing justice to the story. The screenplay itself is not a piece of art. It is a blueprint, a set of instructions, for the making of a film. And an outline of that screenplay is thus, by definition, even more incomplete. Nevertheless, I have attempted to render the following outline of *Antara* with emotion and character dynamics.

Antara Story Outline

ACT I

At the beginning of our story, we meet an Antara very different from the woman at the end of *Mishti Kichu*. No longer in a dingy, lower-middle-class house. No longer in a worn-out saree. We find Antara in a luxurious mansion, akin to a colonial residence during the British era.

Every morning, Antara makes tea for her husband. Then, irons his clothes. Then, dusts their beautiful mansion. In the middle, she takes a break, having a short phone call, trading gossip with an unseen Bhabi. This repeats the next day. And the next. *Ad infinitum*. Yet Antara loves her routine life. She loves her chores, and she loves making tea for her husband (who always mysteriously disappears into his Writing Room).

Until one day, Antara’s perfect schedule is interrupted by a little girl called Maya, who was watching her from a window. Maya recognizes Antara. She claims Antara was

married to a humble sweetmaker. The day of his death, Antara disappeared. Antara finds Maya's story amusing. Kids say the darndest things. She recounts the silly tale to her husband, who coldly admits Maya's story is true. He is not really her husband; in fact, he is not even human - he is the devil. Chills run down Antara's spine. If her husband is joking, she does not like it one bit. The husband leads Maya to the streets, where she goes back to playing with the neighbourhood kids. Confused and curious, Antara follows. Maya's entertained by the husband's strange musings.

"Are you really the devil?"

"Well, I whisper things in people's ears. Those who are good don't listen. Then there are others who listen and do terrible things. Now, you tell me...who's the devil? Me? Or those who listen to me?"

"So...the devil lives in Bangladesh?"

The husband chuckles. "Where else would he live?"

As Maya goes off playing with her friends, the husband proves what he is truly capable of. He whispers something into a little boy's ear. The boy pushes Maya. Again and again, until she's off the playground and onto the streets. A truck runs over Maya. Antara rushes to help, but it is too late. She holds the little girl's bloody, mangled carcass and screams. Cut to the next day. Antara is making tea for her husband, smiling. She asks how his writing is going. As if she has absolutely no memory of Maya's death, or her husband's true nature.

ACT II

Antara's daily routine continues, except she begins noticing certain oddities. Strange markings on the walls. Notes left in the kitchen, as if someone's trying to tell her something. She even brings it up during her daily phone call with Bhabi. Bhabi is nonchalant, brushing it off as Antara's paranoia. Bhabi's tone, however, changes when Antara asks her, "Hey, Bhabi, how do we know each other? How did we even meet?" After a long silence, Bhabi hangs up.

Antara even knocks on the next-door neighbour's door, an elderly woman.

"Sorry to bother you, but how long have I lived next door? I can't seem to remember how I got here. Or when I got married...Maybe you'll think this is crazy, but I can't remember a

single thing before my marriage.”

The neighbour soothes Antara - “That’s perfectly normal, dear. Happens to all of us. We women often forget who we were before marriage.”

Yet every time Antara comes closer to solving her own mystery, she finds herself making tea for her husband the next day. No memory of what happened before. An endless Sisyphian loop of discovering only to forget. Antara begins observing her husband closely. They dine like kings, surrounded by live music. Antara asks him about his past. Her husband, suddenly melancholic, recounts his early days.

“Let me tell you about my first love. She was a true beauty. The first beauty. She had a partner, a man. They would roam around in the garden. But it didn’t matter. I came in between them. Like a snake.” Antara leans forward as her husband tells his tale, wondering if “the first beauty” is a reference to the first man and woman - the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent. “I’ve lived a long life. I’ve dined with kings and noblemen. After all this time, I asked myself. What do I truly want? It’s pretty simple. I want to write. I want to create. And I want a family. Then I found you.” Perhaps he means to be romantic, but it sounds sinister. Like he is playing puppet master.

ACT III

While Antara’s waking life is a void of memory, her vivid dreams reveal a different truth. Antara dreams of lying on a wooden boat amidst an endless ocean. She is not alone on the boat. There is a man who calls himself Mahmud. Mahmud claims he was her real husband. He warns her of the memory loop she is stuck in. Antara knows this is all a dream, but still interrogates Mahmud.

“Someone’s been leaving me clues all over the house. Someone’s trying to help me escape. Is that you?” Antara asks.

“No, Antara. It’s you.” Mahmud answers.

Antara awakens in the middle of the night. While her husband is still asleep, she searches the house for more clues, eventually discovering an old box. The box has a faded picture of Antara and Mahmud. Antara breaks down into tears, not realising yet that her

husband is watching. Again, before Antara can come closer to the truth, she finds herself memory wiped the next day. Again, making tea for her husband. However, this time, the memory wipe does not quite work. Antara, even as she makes tea, remembers the death of Maya. She even has faint memories of Mahmud. As if her memory is fighting back against whatever spell she is under.

Antara rushes inside her husband's Writing Room, believing it may have the answers she is seeking. But she was not prepared for what she found- a writing table, with every page empty. A child's crib, also empty. On that crib, a medical report. An ultrasound of Antara's body, showing a growth in her abdomen. Antara bursts into tears, wondering if she is pregnant with this entity's child. Unhinged and enraged, she lashes out at him. But her husband, perhaps unexpectedly, breaks down into tears. He tries to write every day, but the ink never leaves his pen. He tried to have a child with Antara, but all that it led to was a coagulated mass of flesh inside her. No life, no form, just flesh.

"I cannot create," he confesses. "He, the Almighty, did not give me the ability to create. But he gave it to you? Why? What makes you so deserving?" The devil boils with envy at humanity's one gift he can never have: procreation? "I get it; you're in pain. But why take it out on me? Why play doll with me?" Antara cannot control her rage. But he whimpers- "You can't leave me, even if you try. There's no point. Just give in. Stay with me. Be my wife. Learn to love me. I am inhuman. Make a human out of me," he begs. "It's not my job to make a human out of you," Antara coldly retorts.

Done with his games, Antara devises a plan to outsmart the devil. She sets the whole house on fire, specifically around his bed. The devil mocks her, saying fire cannot harm an entity born of flames. Then he notices the newspaper clippings Antara has taped across the walls:

"A child raped by her own grandfather"

"A teenager committed suicide after failing his SSC exam after pressure from his family."

"A man beats his brother to death over land."

Antara reads the headlines to him. "Your job is to whisper evil into the hearts of Man. But mankind does not need you anymore. They have perfected evil. The world has grown more rotten than you could have ever imagined. You are useless. You have no purpose. That's

why you're trying to settle down. That's why you're playing doll with me." Antara hits him where it hurts the most. His one true weakness. His pride. Falling for her trap, he blurts out the truth, revealing he never forced her into this memory loop. Antara is here of her own accord.

Antara is struck by an epiphany. All this time, she thought the devil had tricked her but it is possible that she had tricked herself. We see flashbacks to instances of Antara losing her memory: Maya dies in Antara's arms. Antara cries, holding her corpse. She begs to forget this awful image. The devil whispers in her ear and makes her forget. Flashback to Antara finding an old photo of herself and Mahmud. Antara can not handle the pain of Mahmud's memory. She insists the devil makes her forget.

Every single time, it was Antara who was telling the devil to wipe her memory. She was running away from the ache of Mahmud's death. Living a false life of her own accord. This realisation frees Antara. Surrounded by flames, she laughs and walks away. The devil cannot stop her. He cannot harm us unless we allow him to. He begs her to stay, surrounded by fumes. But Antara keeps walking. He even shape-shifts, taking multiple forms - he becomes the Bhabi who conversed with her over the phone. He becomes the old lady neighbour. All these characters are subtly manipulating Antara into staying in this false marriage were all manifestations of him.

Epilogue

Antara dreams of Mahmud again. The two of them, on a small wooden boat. Floating in the unknown. Mahmud insists he is her true love. He asks her to stay in this dream forever.

"No, Mahmud. You have to go. I couldn't handle the pain of losing you, so I was living a lie. Please go. Leave, so I can feel pain again." For once, Antara chooses herself. She wakes up alone. No man next to her bed. Not the devil. Not Mahmud. But this is a solitude she welcomes. Perhaps even craves. Antara sighs in relief.

Fade to black as our story ends.

Chapter 3:

Character and Theme

“Without witnessing a beloved work’s actual creation, it’s impossible to know what truly happened. And if we did observe the process with our own eyes, our account would be an outside interpretation at best.

The stories about how work gets made and the rituals of the artists who make them are generally exaggerated, and often pure fiction.

So when an artist creates a work that comes together by an unseen hand, and that process is later analyzed, what we get is more storytelling. This is art history. Art reality is forever unknown.”

- Rick Rubin, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*, 2023

As I was crafting the narrative of *Antara*- moving from outline to first draft, revising the draft with producers, rehearsing it with actors, I saw patterns. My intention with the story and its themes became clearer. This is particularly true during the production process, when I am briefing my cinematographer, art director, and other heads of department. Sometimes those conversations are about tangible details like the choice of colour or a particular aesthetic. But they often become about mood, emotion, and underlying themes.

I remember calling Quazi Nawshaba Ahmed about reprising the role of Antara from *Mishti Kichu*. She was elated. Before even reading the script, she asked me what the story is about. We talked about grief, toxic relationships, and difficult pasts. We talked about *Mishti Kichu* being a story of a man who remembers everything. And *Antara* is about a woman who forgets everything. Through these conversations, I discovered what I was truly trying to convey.

It is like trying to explain a mathematical equation to a friend in high school. Perhaps you do a half-decent job of explaining it, but in the process, you develop a better understanding of the equation and/or the problem itself.

Genre Rooted in Reality

Narratively, *Antara* takes inspiration from the genres of gothic horror and magical realism, especially in its use of supernatural elements and genre conventions, such as anthropomorphising the devil.

Magical realism is a narrative style that blends the fantastical with the mundane. A fantasy novel or film may focus on the fantastical elements of the narrative, whereas a magical realist piece will treat the fantastical elements of the story as commonplace occurrences, creating a unique juxtaposition. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is often cited as a precursor to magical realism - when Gregor Samsa wakes up as a vermin, one of his first concerns is how he will get to work. Eventually, his coworkers appear at his house, concerned by his absence. Yet there is no explanation as to why the character transformed into an insect. It is treated as a banal occurrence. Similarly, in *Antara*, no explanation is given as to why the devil has taken human form. Antara is more concerned with her own psychosis rather than being perplexed by the presence of a supernatural entity.

To further ground the fantastical elements of the story, every supernatural occurrence in the film is grounded in reality. There are a multitude of themes, motifs, and allegories running throughout the film, but the most pertinent is the allegory of an abusive relationship. I can recall close friends who, at certain points in their lives, confided in me about the difficult nature of their romantic relationships. Yet, the next day, everything would appear fine. The friend would tell me never to speak of our conversation again. The idea of an abusive relationship being a loop of discovering a concerning pattern, then forgetting it the next day, became a potent allegory simply based on anecdotal experience.

Every way in which the devil traps Antara has a real-world counterpart. Antara confides in her friend, the Bhabi, as well as the elderly Neighbour, who turns out to be a version of the devil manipulating her. The devil also literally murders the little girl, Maya, who told Antara the truth about her past life with Altaf. Isolation is a common tactic used by narcissistic or abusive partners. By cutting off their partner's support systems, they will have no one else to rely on, thus creating a larger power imbalance.

The devil's role as a shape-shifter is also twofold. While he physically shape-shifts in

the story, he also does so emotionally. Often, he is a cunning manipulator, scheming to isolate Antara. Yet, when she confronts him, he becomes a vulnerable boy, full of emotion. Showing full awareness of all his flaws, he hopes self-awareness somehow excuses his actions. A false illusion of accountability. Another common manipulation tactic.

The devil's supernatural abilities also have limitations in our story. He cannot bend free will; he can only push characters into harming themselves or others. But the seed of intent must be present already; he can only nourish those seeds. This is also a common form of manipulation, weaponising someone's insecurities and grief for one's own advantage. And perhaps Antara's will was easier to bend, as by all accounts, she is a flawed character, an imperfect victim.

Unreliable Narrators and Imperfect Victims

Given that this story is about a supernatural marriage between a man and a woman, gender politics naturally come into play. I wanted to be deliberate about certain aspects of the gender dynamics in the story. This is not a morality play, and I had no intention of showing a black-and-white didactic story where women are victims and men are the assailants. Evil, or one where the woman is a pristine, flawless symbol of feminist hope in the face of patriarchal?

Antara is an imperfect victim. Yes, she falls prey to the devil's schemes. Yet the third act reveals that she was the one asking the devil to constantly erase? Wipe her own memory. She had full agency over forgetting her pain. While an abusive relationship is the most obvious allegory, it can just as easily be a story about substance abuse. Antara is escaping the harsh realities of her past through a substance or a mechanism to numb the pain of her past trauma.

Speaking of past trauma, even her relationship with Mahmud is layered with nuances of meaning. Antara goes to absurd lengths to forget the pain of losing Mahmud, as revealed in Act III- Antara whispers to the devil every day to make her forget Mahmud's memory, trapping herself in a psychological loop. Thus, she is losing aspects of her identity just to escape her grief. Yet, as we see in *Mishti Kichu*, she was also unhappy in that relationship when Mahmud was alive. While her grief is valid, the romanticized version of Mahmud she

sees in her dreams is also fictitious. Perhaps her idealised rendition of Mahmud is just as harmful to her as the devil is. All these elements make Antara a flawed and unreliable narrator.

I am opposed to narrating a didactic tale as the majority of Bangladeshi films have male protagonists and are helmed by male directors. Female characters in these stories exist to be love interests or femme fatales or to simply move the plot along. While the male characters have complex arcs, the female characters exist simply to catalyse those plots. Perhaps the character of Antara in *Mishti Kichu* can be criticised for being part of this pattern.

When a female-centric story is told, it is often an oversimplified story of “women’s empowerment.” Thus, the landscape of female characters becomes stereotypical victims or as stereotypical symbols of empowerment. None of which interests me as a storyteller. In *Aspects of the Novel*, 1927, E M Forster describes flat characters as simple and one-dimensional – often serving a single function in the narrative. Flat characters are predictable and unchanging. The version of Antara we meet in *Mishti Kichu* is a flat character. However, in *Antara*, she is multidimensional and full of contradictions, aspects of a round character. While Forster’s observations were for the novel, they apply to film as well. It is also important to note Forster believes both round and flat characters are essential for a story.

My goal is to tell a good story that compels me. Hopefully, it compels an audience too, and to create a complex, flawed female protagonist felt like the most compelling route for this story. While the storyteller’s goal is to tell a compelling story, society often mounts a social responsibility as well. Should artists also keep in mind the social, thematic, and political ramifications of their art? The Marxist point of view rejects “art for art’s sake” and instead views art as inherently tied to society and ideology - art cannot be divorced from its social and economic context and must be a conscious critique of the status quo.

My point of view on art is a combination of multiple ideologies. Art can be created simply for art’s sake, but it can never exist in a vacuum. The artist’s creation will, intentionally or not, have a place in societal critique. It is thus ideal for the artist to be aware of where their art falls in the spectrum of dialogue: is it adhering to the status quo or

challenging it? As Mexican poet Cesar A. Cruz aptly said, “art is meant to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed.” I also believe that, while art cannot be divorced from its social context, it must also compel the audience. The artist is also an entertainer. If an artistic work is rich with ideological intrigue but the work is not pushed to an achievable form of excellence, then it fails to serve its purpose. The analogy I often use relates to my nephew, Noah. Noah loves macaroni and cheese but has a disdain for vegetables. My sister has the perfect trick. She slices broccoli into the macaroni and cheese. Thin slices that make the dish palatable for her son. I view art similarly. The broccoli (a social responsibility) is essential, but so is the cheese (a compelling, entertaining device to mask the artist’s intention).

In which case, I would like to be optimistic. If a single person (regardless of gender identity) views this film and is impacted by the portrayal of a relationship in *Antara*, I see that as an achievement for the cast and crew. Perhaps an audience member will see the protagonist trapped in a hopeless loop and relate to that suffocation. Or perhaps they will see the machinations of the devil and come to terms with instances where they have been manipulative and controlling. In our film, these relatable patterns are exaggerated through magical realist narrative devices. The heightened portrayal of relatable phenomena may help audiences confront their own circumstances - the magic informing the realism. Maybe films do not directly change our lives. But perhaps films can give us the language and imagery to confront our own realities.

Sympathy for the Devil

I remember, as a teenager, reading John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. To be more accurate, I remember attempting to read it and struggling with the language. This only mystified Milton’s epic in my eyes. The language was archaic, yet hypnotic. I did not quite understand it at that age, but I was compelled by what it represents. The idea of reimagining the devil, the embodiment of evil, through a sympathetic lens. This may have been at the back of my mind while developing *Mishti Kichu* and *Antara*.

While it was pertinent to make Antara a complex protagonist, I also did not want to fall into the trap of a one-dimensional antagonist. Yes, our story’s interpretation of the devil is vindictive and controlling. But I was keen on exploring other dimensions of the character. If

we see Antara as an allegory for an abusive relationship, the devil represents the abuser.

The goal became one of making him complex, nuanced, a deeply complex character imbued with elements of both evil and humanity, at times, almost completely sympathetic, even pitiful. This character has lived a near-eternal life. He has the supernatural ability to shape-shift, and yet he walks with a cane. This is either an act or implying he is weighed down by age or physical ailment. Or it the one thing about his shapeshifting appearance he cannot change - the pain of falling from paradise. The pain of losing his closeness to the Creator.

The devil has decided to settle down and have a family after a life of whispering evil into the hearts of mankind. Perhaps his decision to settle down is rooted in loneliness - he has been abandoned by his Creator and has no companions on earth. He also appears to be self-aware of his manipulative ways, as he tells Antara in Act III, "I am inhuman, make a human out of me." While he acknowledges his need for change, he is simultaneously unable to change his ways.

He is also filled with envy. Created by the Creator, he is yet doomed to never create. He watches humans make art or give birth. Yet he cannot write a single word. The symbolism of the empty crib and empty pages in his Writing Room is intentional. His pen that never produces ink is not only a marker of creative emptiness, but signposts his maddening impotence.

His impotence as a character was crucial in crafting a complex male antagonist in the story. A commentary on men who too fall victim to patriarchy in having to ascribe to roles as husbands, fathers, providers, and lovers. In his warped, problematic worldview, he is not in fact trapping Antara. He is giving her a wonderful mansion. He is giving her a life; her previous husband could not provide for her/never gave her. He believes these material gifts compensate for the emotional hell he has put her through. The film never reveals if the devil is capable of intimacy, love or tenderness. His obsession with Antara could either be love or born from loneliness or a form of mid-life crisis. The film never answers this question, but leaves it upon the viewer.

I am also aware that ascribing these characteristics to the devil risks him becoming a sympathetic character whom the audience relates to instead of Antara, but as a storyteller I feel sympathetic elements help create a more compelling antagonist.

A compelling story needs a compelling antagonist. A compelling antagonist should have their own worldview, however flawed, a lens through which they are right and the world is wrong. As they say, the path to hell is paved with good intentions. And for the devil, this path is an all familiar road he not only wanders, but leads others into.

Chapter 4:

Screenwriting and Collaboration

What makes a good director? I once posed this question to the National Award-winning producer Esha Yusuf. Her answer was simple - directing is a two-step process. First, convince someone to pay to make your film. Second, use that money to surround yourself with people who are better than you. A cinematographer who can frame images better than you can and a musician who can do things musically you can not.

For *Antara*, the first step was fairly simple. A new Bangladeshi streaming platform, *Chorki*, produced *Pett Kata Shaw*. They were just as interested in producing and financing *Antara*, granting me full creative freedom. The second step was a challenge. “Surround yourself with people better than you” is not as straightforward as it seems; it is not as easy or simple as hiring a great crew with excellent resumes. It requires an inward journey, especially the “better than you” part. First, I had to ask: “What is wrong with me?”, “Am I not ‘good’?” What are the areas where I need help? What are my weaknesses as a storyteller? As a filmmaker?

Of course, it helps that I am constantly insecure about my craft. But that is the genius of filmmaking. A painter who does not paint is not a painter. But a filmmaker can be a mediocre writer and still find a better writer to collaborate with. This chapter details the various collaborators who brought *Antara* to life from preproduction to production, as well as the challenges faced by each key collaborator.

One of my biggest challenges during the writing phase was the male gaze. Coined by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, the male gaze is a film theory that states visual media frames women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective. The male filmmaker can unintentionally frame female characters through the male gaze, resulting in characters conforming to a patriarchal idea. Given the film’s focus on marriage, control and abusive relationships, I questioned if I am the right person to tell this story.

Authorship and Cocreation

There is much debate on authorship with regards to film. Auteur theory, a concept in film criticism that emerged in the 1940s, positions the director as the sole author of a film. The auteur is the primary creative force behind a film and all collaborators serve the auteur's vision.

On the other end of the spectrum is Michel Foucault's essay *What is an Author?* which challenges the notion of the author as a singular creative force. Foucault instead argues the author is a sociocultural and legal construct. The idea of authorship historically emerged with the development of property rights and copyright laws. Thus, the author is less a person and more an "author function" (Foucault 205).

Personally, I find Foucault's argument and auteur theory on two extremes of a spectrum. From my experience as a director, I would argue my own role as a filmmaker as between the two ends of the spectrum, leaning closer to Foucault's stance. Unlike Foucault, I do not deduce the role of an author as simply a construct; the creative vision of the director certainly shapes the film itself. Furthermore, Foucault himself clarified his argument does not extend to all forms of artistic creation. Thus, it may not apply to film. Auteur theory, on the other hand, applies to filmmakers with such an identified visual style and repeated motifs that a singular form of authorship is present across all their films regardless of who the specific collaborators are for each film. I do not ascribe that quality to my own films as each of my films are moulded and reshaped significantly through the unique combination of collaborations for that project. My films are the result of co-authorship - shared by each collaborator from the cinematographer to the sound designer. And of course, the writer and co-writers.

Co-writing *Antara*

After finishing the first draft of *Antara*, I knew something was missing. The use of repetition, the unreliable narrator as a framing device, and the subversion of genre conventions all felt well developed even in the initial draft. But the dialogue was not ringing true. I was struggling to capture Antara's voice. Also, the film being in Bengali, I quickly

acknowledged another weakness - my Bengali vocabulary is not as robust as it needs to be to write the dialogue for the devil. A good story with poor dialogue is simply a bad story. I was desperate to amend this.

Storytelling is the nurturing of our inner child. Perhaps my inner child took over, as my first instinct was to call my mother. I was travelling at the time, and my mother was in Bangladesh. The time zones were difficult to manage and coordinate, but I stayed up late nights narrating the story to her and brainstorming the dialogues together.

My mother, Gultekin Khan, is a highly accomplished, published poet. I soon realised screenwriting has more in common with poetry than prose. Poetry is sparse. While what is said is vital in a poem, what is unsaid is just as important. When you look at a poem on a page, there is a lot of space. The use of the space gives the poem a shape. The same is true in a screenplay, a highly structured format where often less is more. While I initially consulted her for her command of Bengali, I was pleasantly surprised by how immense her contribution became. She would take different scenes and write her own versions of them. Then, we would read them over the phone. The ear is a good critic. As we read the lines, we realised what rings true and what needs work.

Suddenly, Antara and her sinister shape-shifting husband were coming to life. There was also a beautiful irony in our collaborative process. When I was in kindergarten, my mother would help me with my homework. Decades later, we are doing homework together again. We quickly developed a comfort zone in our collaboration. I could be honest with her about the requirements of certain moments, and she would appreciate the challenge:

“Mom, this line is good. But I want it to be snappier. I want the pace of this scene to be faster. Maybe there is a simpler way of saying this.”

Once the script was written, the collaboration did not end. When rehearsals began, she would constantly ask me if the actors were doing the dialogue justice. If I am being honest, this was my favourite part of developing the film: seeing my mother giddy with excitement about my filmmaking process. One day, she simply said, “You know, Nuhash, I get why you do this. It’s just so fun. Writing a script and then bringing it to life. Seeing all the pieces come together.”

It is difficult to put into words how special this moment was for me. My mother was always instrumental in my filmmaking journey. She bought the family digital camera when I was thirteen, the very camera I used to make my first short films. My father was an incredible storyteller. He and I would watch countless movies that shaped my love for the visual arts. It is beautiful, actually. My father made me fall in love with films, and my mother helps me make them. But the path has not always been easy. There was friction between me and my mother in my late teens as my love for filmmaking grew. She saw me prioritizing filmmaking over my education. It is difficult for a mother to see their child choose an unpredictable career path with no certain prospects. And it was difficult for my rebellious, teenager-self to see her as a person who meant well. To me, she was a barrier in the way of my creativity.

Fast forward to 2023, when we are writing *Antara* together; my teenage self could have never imagined this moment. To have your family understand your artistic craft is a rarity in itself. But to have them become a part of your creative act is a gift.

Distilling the Male Gaze

As *Antara* developed through this collaboration, I felt the story changing. My mother's experiences, mannerisms and point of view as a writer seeped into the storytelling. As I was wondering if this story is mine to tell, I finally had clarity. Now, this story was not "mine" anymore. A co-ownership developed. My mother imbued the character of Antara with a complexity that was personal to her. Even the character of the devil was reshaped with dialogue and colloquialisms that were "commonly said by men in their attempt to manipulate women," she described.

I did discover, however, that bringing on a co-writer with a different point of view was only the first step in distilling the male gaze. Jumping forward to the production of the film, I recall struggling with directing a particular scene. It was the last scene of *Antara*, where the titular character wakes up to see her bed is empty and she is no longer tied down to any partner, be it Mahmud or the devil. I had instructed the actor, Quazi Nawshaba Ahmed, to smile with a deep sigh of relief in realising her character is finally alone and independent. From a technical standpoint, this was a simple scene, yet we struggled for hours to get the perfect shot. Something about the expression felt artificial and inauthentic. We took a break

from the shooting schedule and I took Nawshaba aside, asking her how she felt about the performance. From this private conversation, I realised my direction was becoming prescriptive by asking Nawshaba to smile in this scene. Instead, I requested her to follow her instincts instead of relying on my direction. When we resumed filming, Nawshaba gave a breathtaking performance by making an unexpected choice. She sighed, but looked firmly. With a newfound confidence. Then, she looked up, directly into the camera, as if Antara was breaking the fourth wall and looking into the audience - discovering a new aspect to herself.

The collaboration with my mother helped me discover that questioning the male gaze would be an ongoing process, from inception to script to production and beyond.

Chapter 5:

Visual Departments of Production

“My movie is born first in my head, dies on paper; is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use, which are killed on film but, placed in a certain order and projected onto a screen, come to life again like flowers in water.”

-Robert Bresson, 1975

The art director scours thrift shops for the right prop. The costume department covers fabric in coffee stains and dust so the clothes feel lived in. The cinematographer argues with the gaffer on how to light the scene. A film is less like a symphony and more like a smoky factory post-Industrial Revolution - specialised departments working in isolation, with little involvement with the other divisions. All within tight deadlines, an impossible lack of resources, and a financier breathing down everyone's neck, looking for means to streamline production.

Of course, it is the director's job to shine light into this smoky factory. The director's key role is to have a vision and communicate it across every department. The role of a writer/director such as myself becomes more complex. The “writer-me” and the “director-me” are almost two different people in one body, a Jekyll and Hyde scenario. Writer-me weaves page after page of dialogue. Director-me looks at these pages and rips them in half, instead looking for a single visual moment that can convey the emotion all those pages of dialogue can not.

The goal is to bring the words of the script to life as visual storytelling. This requires interrogating the script as well as interpreting it. It also requires aligning all the visual departments under a single creative vision.

Department Structure

The visual storytelling of the film is determined by the following distinct film departments. Each department has its own chain of command. At the top of the hierarchy of decision-making is the HoD or Head of Department. The HoD has full authority over their team of assistants and technicians. For instance, Cinematography is a separate department, led by the Director of Photography (DoP). The DoP will collaborate with the director on the

choice of lenses and cinematic vision. The DoP then conveys this to his team of gaffers, lighting technicians, assistant cinematographers, etc. If there is a change in lighting required, the director should not directly communicate with the gaffer, but convey it to the DoP, who is in charge of his own team.

Thus, a single film becomes a web of hierarchy much like an administrative office or factory. The need for a distinct vision becomes even more critical given this rigid mechanical structure, so that the essence of the film is not lost in translation in each step.

Visual Departments

The key departments for translating the script into visual storytelling include:

Production Design, which is a combination of two separate departments, **Art Direction** and **Costume Design**. For larger productions, the Production Designer is a separate role who designs the aesthetic of the film, and then communicates this to the Art Director, who collects and builds props to bring that vision to life. For *Antara*, a Production Designer was outside the scope of our budget.

Hair and Makeup is a separate department that may seem self-explanatory, but also requires keeping a meticulous track of each character's hair and makeup in every scene. Films are usually shot non-linearly. Scene 5 may be filmed on day 1 and Scene 4 on day 3. This department also takes photographs of every character's hair. If a strand of hair is on a character's forehead in Scene 4, it should be present in Scene 5 as well.

Prosthetic Makeup is a separate, specialised department handling unique cases of makeup like special effects. When the character of the Little Girl is seen dead, Prosthetics adds fake blood to that scene to make the death believable.

Cinematography is a vital department, and a great film requires an almost spiritual connection between the director and the cinematographer/DoP.

Hiring the right HoDs for a project is just as crucial as casting the right actors. The HoDs are creative and technical as well as administrative leadership roles. They must be masters of their craft with technical skills, while also being easy to work with, level-headed leaders who can boost morale for their own departments.

Aesthetic Blueprint

If I had to choose a single word to describe the aesthetic of the film, it would be anachronistic. I want the house Antara lives in to feel like a zamindar house, almost a mansion. At night, this mansion should feel Victorian, evoking gothic imagery and Edgar Allan Poe. A house filled with candles and paintings, possibly without electricity.

Yet Antara receives phone calls from her neighbour. As I was writing a script, I imagined a classic red telephone from the 90s. Not a cellphone in sight. Speaking of the 90s, I find Bengali television dramas from the 90s fascinating. Imagery of the traditional wife who makes tea for the husband and takes care of the house.

Production Design

Keeping with the collaborative spirit of film production, I asked key HoDs to detail their experiences working on *Antara*. Rainirr Borshon, the art director of *Antara*, details his process:

Antara was a particularly critical journey as it was largely about believing and feeling the story. Especially since *Antara* is a psychological horror story, making the preproduction physically and mentally challenging.

I also tried to include some hidden clues in the story; this was a personal touch I wanted to add to the film, regardless of whether audiences pick up on it or not.

For instance, the magazine that Antara reads has a cover I personally designed. The

fictional magazine is called *Lokokoth* (folk tale), which is a nod to *Pett Kata Shaw* as well as the tradition of folk tales these stories are inspired by.

The magazine cover even has a tagline, “It’s about time.” To me, this represents Antara’s eventual rebellion against the status quo. The cover was also slightly torn - an intentional choice. The torn portion reveals another page, revealing a birdcage, symbolizing Antara’s situation. Both her mansion as a cage and her own mental state.

Even the pages inside the magazine were meticulously designed, like a horoscope section with each question acting as a trigger for the character. When Antara speaks to Bhabi over the phone, she stands in front of a large painting. The paintings also have clues that can help an audience unravel the story. Biblical paintings depicting heaven and hell, or paintings with astronomical elements.

There are elements in Borshon’s quote that I was unaware of until now, which only illustrate the importance of these departments. The art director must collect or build every prop the characters interact with. Copyright also becomes an issue; if a real magazine is used, the producer will have to obtain written permission from the owner of that magazine. The best solution, therefore, is to build certain props from scratch.

I was aware of Borshon designing the magazine himself, but I did not know all the clues he left in every prop. When the art director has a clear understanding of the core story, they can find unique ways to implement the story - even in a page of a magazine that is perhaps on screen for mere seconds. The definition of props is not just limited to items the characters hold. In any scene involving food, the art department become chefs. From Borshon:

In the dinner scene, I tried to give the food a nauseating appearance. When serving fish, I used a fish called kuchia mach, which looks closer to a snake than a traditional fish. This appears in the scene where the devil speaks to Antara about his first love, a reference to Eve. Even mentioning how he came in between Adam and Eve like a snake.

I also asked Borshon about the most challenging scene in *Antara*. He spoke of the climax,

involving real flames:

The most challenging scene was Antara setting the house on fire. The house we filmed in was ancient. We had several safety precautions in place, even creating emergency exits in case the fumes became intolerable. It was a balance between the safety of the artists and crew while also ensuring the director is satisfied with the scene. *Antara* was all about detailing, and I tried my best to do that as much as possible.

Borshon's quote on finding balance between the director's intention and the crew's safety is fascinating. The demands of a director often go against what is possible. It is the responsibility of the HoDs to achieve that vision in the safest, most reasonable way. Film is a dance between limitless imagination and the bounds of reality. Somewhere in that dance, we find the middle ground.

Costume Design

The ideas for costume design evolved through development. Initially, we ideated a black, grey, and white colour scheme for *Antara* with our costume designer, Edila Farid Turin. However, closer to production, we realised the devil is playing doll with Antara. We eventually gave the character colourful costumes, patterned blouses. Her sarees were draped traditionally, evoking the 90s.

Turin worked closely with the Hair and Makeup department, determining what Antara's hairstyle would be for every scene. As the story progresses, the character's hairstyle goes from prim and proper to messier and chaotic.

For the devil, we experimented with a lot of costume ideas such as larger than life designs and the colour red or black to symbolise evil. These ideas felt like clichéd choices. We eventually landed on an all-white aesthetic for the devil, complemented with muted shawls. White represents purity, in stark contrast with the character, yet in line with his intention. The devil is presenting himself as reformed and pure. We took inspiration from the outfits of Rabindranath Tagore, as the devil is also posing as a creative (yet failing to achieve it).

The costume is also closely linked with the performer. Afzal Hossain, who plays the devil, makes interesting character choices in every scene. His character is expressive, larger than life. Contrasting a larger-than-life performance with muted white clothing brought an interesting balance to the design of the character.

Cinematography

Xoaher Mussavvir, the Director of Photography of *Antara*, speaks of his emotional journey in visualising the project. Collecting anecdotes from the HoDs, I realised a pattern. They always begin with the emotionality of the story before mentioning any technical challenges. Regardless of the outcome of the film, I am elated to see my HoDs process the story through a visceral, emotional lens first. It is proof that the director is not the only filmmaker working on the film. Every member of the crew is tasked with the role of the filmmaker. Tasked with transforming the emotional into the tangible:

Working on *Antara* was a deeply personal journey for me. As a Bengali man, I've always felt like we're caught in these cycles of understanding, and this project really mirrored that for me. It also gave me a chance to reflect on the struggles of my mother and so many other women in our society. I truly hoped that essence came through.

The biggest challenge was translating those complex layers of emotion into something visual. We tried to keep everything as simple and natural as possible, much like the passage of time. The sun rises and sets every day, and yet each day feels different, even though it looks the same. That's the delicate balance we tried to capture: the profound yet simple nature of time.

And then there's the dinner scene, where Nawshaba's character almost takes on a regal aura, symbolized by that subtle crown. It was a powerful shift in dynamics and highlighted the underlying strength of the character.

With such talented actors as Nawshaba and Afzal Hossain, the best thing we could do was give them space to shine and just let their performances speak for themselves.

In the end, how much of this made it onto the screen is for the audience to decide, but the process was truly special, and I hope it resonates.

Xoaher's philosophy of giving space to the actors is an often overlooked part of the cinematographer's responsibility. The camera does not just capture light and beauty. The camera is a tool to capture performance. A cinematographer can devise a complex lighting setup that, instead of enhancing the performance, hinders it. Xoaher's process on *Antara* was flexible, lighting the scenes so that the actors could move around freely from room to room. The camera became invisible. A fly on the wall. Every technical aspect was in service of capturing the most authentic performance.

Light, Movement and Shadow

Make no mistake, cinematography is also highly technical, involving a mastery of craftsmanship. Xoaher also speaks of the specific challenges of lighting and movement:

On a technical level, my main idea was that the visuals should feel like memory; fragile, repetitive, and never fully reliable. So with lighting, I kept it naturalistic but unstable. Daylight was always diffused through curtains or softened so it felt muted, almost timeless, like morning and evening could blur together. At night, I relied on practical lamps, but I shaped them to leave large portions of the room in darkness. That way, the home, which should feel safe, always carried this quiet hostility.

For movement, I was very restrained. Most of the time, the camera is still, or it moves so slowly that you almost don't notice until the tension creeps up on you. Those slow push-ins, especially on *Antara*, were meant to feel like inevitability, like the frame itself was closing in on her. When her psychological state cracked, I introduced tiny handheld shifts, not enough to call attention to themselves but just enough to make the audience feel unstable along with her. And across the episode, I repeated similar framings in the same spaces with slight variations, to echo the loop she's trapped in.

Lensing was about turning a familiar domestic space into something uncanny. I often used wider lenses in the 24–35mm range for interiors, because they stretched the geometry of the house and made ordinary rooms feel distorted. For *Antara*'s

close-ups, I shifted to longer lenses, 50–85mm, with a shallow depth of field. That let me isolate her, keep her face sharp, but let her surroundings dissolve like her world was slipping out of reach. For the husband or the Shaitan, I leaned a bit wider, letting the environment wrap around them, so their presence always felt connected to and in control of the space.

Dinner is Served

I find it fascinating that both Borshon and Xoaher, completely unprompted, speak on the challenges of the dinner scene. Borshon focuses on the food served, while Xoaher emphasizes the play of light and shadow. The scene itself is simple. Two characters are chatting while eating. Yet multiple departments are at play, thinking deeply about technically and emotionally executing the sequence. Much like a real dinner, the guests focus on the food. Enjoying it, critiquing it. Perhaps with little understanding of the chaos and engineering that is happening simultaneously inside the kitchen:

The dinner scene is where all of this came to a head. The table was lit unevenly: Antara in softer, wraparound light with shadows threatening to creep across her face, while the Shaitan had harder, sculpted contrast. I let the practical lamp anchor the realism, but I shaped the falloff so the room felt carved into menacing pockets of light and dark. The camera starts in a neutral two-shot, but as the tension rises, it slowly creeps toward Antara, almost imperceptibly. On her, the long lens isolates her completely; on him, a slightly wider lens keeps the space alive, bending toward his presence. Even the compositions were symmetrical at first, then subtly unbalanced to reinforce the shift in power at the table.

So all the technical elements, light, movement, and lenses were grounded in realism, but tilted just enough to make the familiar unsettling. That is what I wanted the audience to feel: that horror does not come from something outside; it comes when the safe and ordinary suddenly betray you.

The First Audience

Per Esha Yusuf's advice, the second step of the two-step directing process is hiring people "better than you." This becomes vastly easier with a compelling story that resonates across every department. Yes, the HoDs are technicians, craftsmen, and leaders. They are also the first audience to ever read the script.

Before the audience ever watches a film and reacts to it, the departments sit down and listen to the director's narration of the story. The director's role thus becomes not only engaging the eventual audience of hundreds or thousands, but also engaging the HoDs. If a story cannot make a room full of crew emotionally vulnerable, that story may also fail to resonate with a larger audience.

Chapter 6:

Music and Sound Design

I mentioned my first attempt at Bangladeshi horror was *Moshari* in 2022. What I did not mention is how vomit-inducing it was to watch the initial editing of the film. I was thoroughly disappointed seeing how bland the film felt. The problem was that I was seeing instead of hearing. With all the talk of visual storytelling, it is easy to overlook film as an audiovisual medium. Especially with horror, music and sound design are critical in establishing the mood of the film.

Mood is important in every kind of film, but particularly in horror, the audience has an expectation that must either be met or subverted. Horror films are not stories of comfort. They are designed to disturb us. The goal is to make the audience uneasy. And through that unease, thematic and emotional epiphanies may creep in. It is resonance through dissonance. And both resonance and dissonance are aspects of sound.

Background Score

The lead composer for *Antara* is Avishek Bhattacharjee. I have worked with Avishek on multiple projects over the years, developing a helpful shorthand. Avishek plays over seventeen musical instruments, which is an incredible resource. In 2025, composing music digitally has become commonplace. With the increasing dexterity of AI, the future of music may not involve even a digital composer. However, having real musical instruments in a film's score adds texture and unevenness. It brings humanity to the sound. Avishek expands on composing music for *Antara*: "I used a combination of two raags. A more uplifting sitar piece written in raag khamach. As well as raag purbi, used when Antara descends into chaos."

A raag is a fundamental melodic framework in Indian classical music, acting as a structured collection of musical notes with specific rules for their use. More than just a scale, each raga is a comprehensive melodic mode designed to evoke a specific emotional state, or *rasa*.

But Avishek's musical score also extends beyond the use of raag into more experimental ways of using Indian classical instruments:

I used the *esraj* heavily in *Antara*. The *esraj* is a relatively recent bowed string instrument originating in India, a modern variant of the *dilruba*, which was developed over 300 years ago. The *esraj* has been popularised thanks to the music of Rabindranath Tagore. Yet our *esraj* is not conventionally played. There are no raags, no melody. I used the *esraj* to create chaos instead of harmony.

Avishek also found ways to evolve the music of *Antara* while keeping technical connections to *Mishti Kichu*. The music in *Mishti Kichu* was played in the B scale, while *Antara* is in scale C. "If we ever do a third iteration of this story, I would love to set the music in C sharp," Avishek muses. "Going 12 notes lower from one story to the next. As if every story is going deeper into the subconscious.

The Grand Piano

While the entire background score for *Antara* is rendered using Indian classical elements and often distorting them, a single scene of the film deviates from this. In the final scenes, Antara has a dream where she has a final encounter with the memory of Mahmud, her husband from *Mishti Kichu*. When Mahmud begs her to stay in the dream, but Antara pushes back, there is a piano piece playing in the background accompanying Avishek's *esraj*.

This piano piece is composed by Rakat Zami, our co-composer. As this piano transitions from the dream and continues into the final sequence, where Antara is alone, by choice, it felt fitting to use a more modern instrument that underscores the shift in her character. Rakat expands on the use of a piano:

The scene already had an ethereal soundscape because of the dreamlike ocean. I wanted to complement the soundscape using a piano. The piano is one of those instruments that's quite tangible, and modulating it can lead to fascinating results.

I used a real piano. Wood and string vibrating together create imperfections. The real piano is almost human; every key responds differently to touch. A software can do the

job, but a real piano is alive. It was not tempoed, I just watched the scene, had a specific emotion in my mind. A bit of melancholy, a bit of sadness, underlined with hope. The emotions I observed from the scene, I just played what felt right to me on that specific scale. The chord choices are a reflection of those emotions.

It starts there, then cascades and builds with soundscapes in the back, which are used to reinforce the core instrument, which is the piano. Then it creeps into a proper piano line at the end of the scene when Antara is awake, and we are back to reality.

Repetition is key. Note: choices are intentionally repetitive. Just one hook that glues the viewer to the scene, and the music adds in just enough without taking the attention away from what's visually present.

Rakat's emphasis on complementing the soundscape and adding just enough music but not too much to take attention away from the visuals is the key difference between composing a background score for a film as opposed to a song or an instrumental standalone piece. Much like a script, the background score is not a finished piece in itself but is meant to accompany the film. Musicians without film scoring experience often are not aware of this. The goal is not to make the most interesting piece of music possible, but the piece that balances the story the most. Speaking of soundscapes, music is actually secondary when it comes to the auditory experience of a film. The soundscape or sound design comes first.

Sound Design

Sound Design is the crafting of the auditory experience of a film. Every footstep heard in the film, every gust of wind, or clanking of plates forms the sonic experience. When a character gulps, the gulp may be exaggerated or muted. The rattling of furniture may be heightened for dramatic effect. In developing *Antara*, I realised a separate story must be told through the use of sound, especially to convey Antara's mental state. A large part of this has been using repetition. Every time Antara is seen making tea for her husband, the clinking and clanking of her spoon is exaggerated - and that exact sound is repeated several times in the

film. The sound of the spoon should feel like a trance - both for Antara and the audience, much like Pavlov's dog salivating at the sound of a bell.

I asked our sound designer, Rajesh Shaha, to elaborate on the technical challenges of achieving the sound design. He let me know he would rather speak of his philosophy in sound design instead of noting technical challenges. "The days of complaining about challenges are over. We must focus on the future and think bigger." Rajesh's meditative focus on the philosophy and storytelling behind every sound used in the film is what makes him an exceptional collaborator:

Sound designing *Antara* was more like a philosophical journey rather than technical work. *Antara* is a multi-layered story that dives deep into an abusive relationship between a man and his wife. I wanted to portray those moments and philosophies in my design. My journey with the film was to discover and capture what our characters are going through rather than what's happening on the screen. Another challenge for me is to portray two worlds through sound, one inside the house and the other outside the house. Inside the house, our characters are living the same life every day, but outside the house, the world is literally going through its normal speed.

I wanted to portray The devil as a powerful being, that is why every time he entered the screen, the ambient sound used to change into a more sinister form. His footsteps carried weight. His stick, while hitting the ground in a clock-like pattern constantly reminded us that we're stuck in his loop. When we started the film, the environment was more happy, but as the film started rolling, it became dark, and finally towards the end, when Antara finds herself back to freedom again, the ambient sound becomes jolly, full of beautiful bird sounds.

Projects like these are what we sound designers wait for. Projects that make us think and explore more into our inner mind are what we strive for.

Our reaction to viewing a film is usually complimenting the brilliant actors, or engaging with the story. Understanding the filmmaking process can bring nuance to our appreciation of the craft. This includes the craft of sound design, the artists who are ruminating on the sound of every footstep in the film.

Chapter 7:

Directing Actors and Principal Photography

"Acting is behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances."

- Sanford Meisner, 1987

The production of *Antara* was turbulent. We filmed in the middle of 2024. Political turmoil and weather conditions meant postponing the filming multiple times, as well as large gaps in production. The locations for a film are divided into interior and exterior scenes. We were forced to wait months after filming the interior scenes before we could resume the exteriors. This led to unexpected logistical problems: we had a tight window to film the exteriors. Afzal Hossain, one of our key actors, had a completely different beard length by the time the exterior shoots began. We explored options of using prosthetic beards, but none of them looked visually believable.

Instead, we had to use visual trickery to bridge this gap in film continuity. Afzal Hossain suggested he wrap his shawl around his face, revealing only his eyes for the exterior scene. This became an ingenious solution that only adds to the mystery around the character of the devil. This is also the joy of working with actors. They offer unexpected solutions to logistical problems. They bring humanity to an incredibly technical process.

Creating Space

Directing Quazi Nawshaba Ahmed was less about giving instructions and more about giving the performer the space necessary to discover the process. Nawshaba was incredibly collaborative during rehearsals and preproduction. We had long conversations about the character and story, delving into text and subtext. Yet during production, Nawshaba was reserved, speaking as little as possible. I later realised this was her artistic process in developing *Antara*. She was creating the emotional space necessary to breathe life into the character. The cast and crew, once they better understood her process, did their best to create space as well. Especially Afzal Hossain, who would congratulate and compliment Nawshaba

after every scene. The two of them would brainstorm their creative choices in isolation, without even revealing them to me.

The joy of directing actors is discovering how unique every actor's process is. This joy can also become frustration. There were multiple child actors working in *Antara*. Directing them was vastly different. I had to feed them every line from behind the camera to help them remember. We had to tell them exactly where to look, where to pause. A simple scene would take hours. Instead of creating space, we had to allow time.

Production Stills



Image 1: Antara (Quazi Nawshaba Ahmed) and her husband (Afzal Hossain) having a conversation. The art direction and cinematography are on full display.



Image 2: Afzal Hossain as the husbanddevil, adorned in white. His cane has a subtle sculpture of a goat, imagery identified with Satanic sigil of Baphomet in the 19th century.



Image 3: Quazi Nawshaba Ahmed's quietly powerful performance as Antara



Image 4: The prop magazine created by art director Rainirr Borshon.

Chapter 8:

Release, Distribution and Aftermath

The reception of a film may be quantified from reviews from critics and recognition from film festivals and collectives. In a perfect world, none of the above would matter, but only the feelings of the artists involved. However, tangible markers of reception remain important in the world we live in. Fortunately or unfortunately, film is intertwined with capitalist machinery.

Writing a poem, or a novel or a play requires scraps of paper and a pen. A film, even an independent low-budget short film, requires substantial financial resources. And it is largely impractical (and usually impossible) for the director to self-finance every project.

Traditional markers of success are helpful tools not just for the film being made, but for future films. It is also a powerful symbol of validation for the cast and crew. If a single member of my team can negotiate a higher fee or become part of a larger production thanks to their award-winning, internationally recognized, well-reviewed work on my film, that is the true success of our collaboration.

INTERNATIONAL RECEPTION

Below is a list of International Premieres for *Antara*, as well as quotes from critics and global outlets:

SXSW Film Festival, World Premiere, March 2025

Indian Film Festival of LA, Los Angeles Premiere, May 2025

Raindance Film Festival, UK Premiere, June 2025

Neuchâtel International Fantastic Film Festival, Switzerland Premiere, July 2025

Fantasia Film Festival, Canadian Premiere, July 2025

Bengali New York Film Festival, New York Premiere, July 2025

Indian Film Festival of Melbourne, Australian Premiere, August 2025

SXSW Sydney, Sydney Premiere, October 2025

The festival reception opens the film to reviews from international critics and film journalists. Below is a selection of quotes discussing the film:

With *Antara*, the series returns to its strongest footing. While it initially evokes comparisons to Chanchal Chowdhury's segment in *Pett Kata Shaw*, it stands firmly on its own, unraveling a mystery that is both engaging and haunting. The protagonist's weak memory serves as a central enigma, and while the resolution may be somewhat predictable for those who recall *Pett Kata Shaw*, it remains a highly rewarding experience. Social commentary on some orthodox beliefs, such as arranged marriage, the role of women in society, is lovely and vulnerably packaged in the tale.

-Bloody Flicks UK

This segment follows, and to some extent reframes, the biblical pathology in which Satan lures Eve to explore the operations of patriarchal control and submission, or in modern parlance, the “trad wife” aesthetic that has captured a particular corner of the internet — an alt-right crowd unabashedly buying into some outdated beliefs forcing women to do nothing but keep house.

-Movies We Texted About

Antara is portrayed by Quazi Nawshaba Ahmed. The Bangladeshi actress is an absolute gem waiting to be discovered, something that will hopefully happen soon, as her talent is a true force to behold. She not only carries the narrative wonderfully, but also has a tremendously powerful presence that makes it impossible to divert your attention to anything other than her story.

-Cut To The Take

A Pinch of Salt

If I am honest, I am less swayed by positive international reception with every waking day. This is not false modesty. When Moshari was selected at the South by South West Film Festival in 2022, I was elated. But as time goes by, I try to be careful not to put too much

weight on international attention. I believe it is vital for Bangladeshi cinema to cross boundaries and reach international audiences. But for my own sanity, this reception cannot be the source of my artistic validation.

Before joining BRAC University, I briefly attended college at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, USA. The international college experience did not suit me; I felt depressed and isolated. When I returned to Bangladesh and joined BRAC instead, there was a feeling of being a pariah. As if there is an air of greater respect in going to an institution in the West (regardless of the reputation of that institution). It took me a while to unlearn my own insecurities around this.

While we must achieve excellence around the world, we cannot be crippled by the need for international validation. The former helps us grow, but the latter becomes a neo-colonial cage. This is true for education, the job market, and even the film industry. If a film is local enough, specific enough, international attention should organically follow. That attention should not be something an artist chases. If we are true to our art, the attention will find us.

Subjective Discourse

While it is easy to take international attention with a pinch of salt, stomaching the Bangladeshi reception is a tougher pill to swallow. An argument at home feels louder than the validation of strangers outside. All this to say, the local reception to *Antara* has been anecdotally positive. Local critics and film blogs appreciated the story's themes much like international reviewers.

The one aspect of the reception that has been completely unexpected, however, is how local audiences conflated the story of *Antara* with the personal lives of the creators behind it. The fact that my mother is a co-writer on the film became a topic of discussion - something I appreciated at first. Soon, however, reviewers began interpreting *Antara* as a story of rebellion my mother has written about her relationship with my father. They drew parallels that I did not intend on - The devil being a writer who goes to a Writing Room every day, for instance.

As I had mentioned in the introduction, I enjoy being a stranger in international scenes, but my artistic identity in Bangladesh remains tied to my family, specifically my late father's influence as a Bangladeshi writer and filmmaker. With *Antara*, these separate identities became further welded together.

These reviews were positive. They highly praised my mother for speaking her truth through this story and explored multiple parallels between my family and the story being told. Yet I found this discourse disturbing. There is already a shortage of female-led stories in Bangladesh. And a greater shortage of stories told by female writers. While this discourse was highly appreciative, I find the subtext problematic.

When a man tells a story, it is somehow a product of his imagination and intellect. Yet when a woman tells a story, is it simply a retelling of her own personal struggles with character names and details changed? I wanted to avoid an oversimplified story of an empowered woman against a villainous man. I suppose I am disturbed by this particular line of discourse, as it oversimplifies the story, as my mother labels my father as the devil. Which is rendered absurd if I consider how I developed the core outline for the story before my mother joined the project.

Of course, every story comes from the writer's personal truth. I am sure there are layers of her truth in *Antara* as well. And I also cannot control the narrative around the film once it has already been made. The film will have its own life when it is in the audience's hands. I must relinquish control.

Aftermath and Final Musings

The discourse led me to ruminate on the subtext of the film. I developed the core outline for *Antara* before my mother came on board to elevate the story. While the story is as much hers as it is mine, the devil was always a part of it. I wondered if there is truth to the discourse relating the film with my family. Why was it so crucial for me to ensure the antagonist of the story has emotional complexity? I stumbled upon feelings I myself was not aware of when developing this story.

In *Antara*, the devil is a writer who holds his Creator in high regard. Yet feels resentment after being banished by Him. The devil wants desperately to be an artist, yet is inadequate. It is a gift he has not been given. This causes him pain, and he projects that pain to those around him. He seeks control over every aspect of his life and the lives of others.

I realised how closely this mirrors my own insecurities as an artist, as well as my complex relationship with my father. My father, an artist, was held in such high regard that I fear never being able to escape his shadow. An artist so revered in Bangladesh, attaining near godlike status amongst his fans. The same fans who worship him yet antagonise me for not living up to his standards. A father whom I both adore, respect, yet also often resent for the shadow he casts - and for leaving me while I still had so much to learn from him.

I, too, yearn to achieve greatness as an artist, yet often sit in front of an empty page, wondering if I will ever achieve enough. So I try to control every aspect of my life that I can. My entire profession is one of control. Controlling every department of film production. Yelling “Action!” then yelling “cut,” controlling my actors take after take until I am happy. The performers must say their lines over and over. Stuck in a near-endless loop. The writers form the text. The subconscious forms the subtext.

To this day, I wish to ask my subconscious what it intended - am I the devil? And can devils change?

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