

Film

Nouka Dubi

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Inspired by Rabindranath Tagore, and adapted from Tagore's novel, Rituparno Ghosh's "Noukadubi-Boat Wreck" (Bengali, colour, 124 mins) is drama heightened, sometimes to the level of make-believe. The narrative is grounded in the moment-to-moment realities, and the plot alternate from dramatic indoors to action outdoors. Hemnalini (Raima Sen), a young girl from a prosperous family, with back to camera, is singing Rabindrasangeet, on a Tanpura. There is a mirror, before which she embellishes her beauty, and a crochet for embroidery. A voice over reads a letter from Ramesh (Jishu Sen Gupta), her lover, informing his search for a flat. Hemnalini's father (Dhrithiman Chatterjee) meditates before a photo of his departed wife.

Ramesh, a law student is late in arriving at Hemanalini's birthday party. Receiving an urgent message from his father, he has rushed to his native village. There is a proposal for Ramesh to marry a poor girl, Sushila, who is not educated, but intelligent and a good housekeeper. If the marriage fails to take place, widow mother and the girl would poison themselves. Despite being in love with Hamnalini, Ramesh is forced into the marriage by his father. Ramesh's anguish springs from the internal soliloquies. Immediately after the Hindu ritual marriage, Ramesh and Sushila set off for Calcutta in a boat. Director Ghsoh has shifted Tagore's 1903 story to the 1920s. A ten second blank screen, with the sounds of tossed water, thunder and cries, portrays a boatwreck. The seas and rivers return everything. Ramesh wakes up on a bank, and finds another newly married bride, Kamala (Riya Sen), whom he mistakes for Sushila. Voice over reading of a letter, is followed with tearing of a letter. Ramesh and Kamala set up home in a simple flat in Kolkata. The marriage is concealed from Hemnalini, and Ramesh hides a photo of Hemnalini, Kamala relates that she was an orphan raised by her maternal uncle. Ramesh feels there is something wrong, and remains aloof.

Traditional English ballads are sung at Hemnalini's residence by Akshay, a friend of Hemnalini's brother, Jogen, who is shortly going to England for Bar-at-law studies. On a stormy night, Ramesh visits Hemnalini and proposes marriage. Ramesh admits Kamala to a convent school. A teacher related to Akshay discovers Kamala's marriage to Ramesh. The brother, Jogen, suggests Hemnalini marry Akshay. Ramesh continues to stay in Hemnalini's mind, and marriage to Akshay does not take place. She is back to tanpura and Rabindrasanget. Ramesh and Kamala shift to Gorakhpur, where Ramesh practises in court. Kamala is happy with the neighbours. One day she chances to read an announcement in a Bengali Newspaper, of a search for a bride, Kamala, who was lost in a boat capsized. She removes all jewellery, rushes to the Ganga river and jumps. Mysteriously she fetches up in Varanasi, cared by sadhus. Some of the conversations in Hemnalini's house veer on the Bhawal sanyasi case, drawing parallels.

Meanwhile, Hemnalini and her father visit Varanasi. Hemnalini has delusions of Ramesh singing vedic songs on the river bank. There is a chance meeting with Dr Naliniaksha Charterjee (Prosenjit Chatterjee) and the father and daughter. Conversations on personal disappointments and sorrow, lead to intimacy between Hemanalini and Nalinaksha, as they walk the ghat steps. All injuries arise from sad events, somehow diverted by lights and fireworks on the river bank. Nalinaksha's lighted match brings a glow on Hemnalini's face. Kamala is working as a maid in

Nalinaksha's house. Nalinaksha still suffers from terror of boats tossing, where he lost his newly wed wife in a storm. Kamala cares for Nalinaksha. Hemnalini sends a letter to the doctor, stating that she cannot marry, which is read in voice over. Kamala has been shuffling Nalinaksha's books. One day Nalinaksha discovers the newspaper ad, tucked in the corner of Kamala's sari. Nalinaksha's mother cries, and the long lost wife, stays with Nalinaksha. On the river bank of Varanasi, Sushila's mother informs Ramesh that her daughter's dead body was found by the river. After long meanderings, Ramesh visits fever stricken Kamala at Nalinaksha's Varanasi residence. Later Ramesh visits Hemnalini's residence, where she is singing Rabindrasangeet.

Ritupamo Ghosh's "Noukadubi" follows calamities, mistaken identities, and the propensity of love in the immediate, available proximity. While choice and imposition are beaten by chance and fortune, Ramesh's failure not to recognise Kamala, as somebody else's bride, on the river bank after the boat capsizes, verges on a fairy tale. Boats encircling in the Ganga at Varanasi or shabby indoor walls inside Rameh's rented apartment in Kolkata and Gorakhpur are visual essays. Soumik Halder's camera misses mobility in fixed frame indoor chamber drama situations. Soliloquies and voice over readings of letters do not create precise resonances. A plethora of Rabindrasangeet songs makes the film a music video, without any effective guide to the melange of visuals, music and the present plot situation. The scenario does not separate identity and social determinism. The portrayals lack intensity and are too monolithic. Rhythm and sincere declaration of love give "Noukadubi" a value of the epoch.