

Reviews



Film Review

Coralyn V. Davis, prod., Carlos Gomez, dir., and M. S. Suman, writer.
Sama in the Forest

United States, 2023, 77 minutes, color. <http://cinemanga.org/news/sama-in-the-forest/>

The stories and rituals told and enacted by humans everywhere are a key component of defining our identities, aspirations, and dreams as well as our challenges and boundaries. Based on the well-known story “Sama” and its associated annual ritual Sama Chakeva from the Mithila region of northern India, *Sama in the Forest* explores issues of changing gender norms through an innovative and compelling mingling of storytelling, art, and theater.

In Mithila, a cultural region that spans the India-Nepal border in northern Bihar, girls and women frequently tell the story of Sama, a tale that celebrates the brother-sister tie that is so important to women across northern India. Given the historical and current predominance of arranged marriages and often strained relations between a woman’s natal and affinal families, the brother-sister link is a vital connection for sisters disconnected from their core kin. Disconnected from her kin in her affinal family due to rules about visits and communications, a woman’s brother often is her only connection to her natal family, and when things go wrong in her marital home, her refuge.

The other dominant theme relates to the rules governing female behavior, especially mobility outside of the home, as it relates to a family’s respect and place in society. This film, produced by Coralyn V. Davis of Bucknell University while on a Fulbright scholarship in the northern Bihari town of Madhubani, is an innovative portrayal of that tale, its associated ritual, and issues of changing gender behavior in a conservative region in modern Bihar.

The core story is simple: the god Krishna, here married, has a son and a daughter, Samb and Sama. As a properly devoted and loving sister, Sama takes superb care of her brother Samb, making sure that he gets to school, that he is fed properly, and that he is well taken care of. He reciprocates her love, but as he matures, he leaves Krishna’s palace for foreign places. Sama too matures and wishes she could move out of the confines of the palace as her maids and others do. At one point she says: “I would like to feel what the world outside is like.” Eventually she quietly leaves the palace to venture into the forest, a wild place where normal rules and norms do not apply. There she picks flowers and eventually begins to care for a sage in deep meditation under a banyan tree. She cleans his space and provides food.

Watching her is Chakeva, the sage's son, a kind and loving young man. Soon they meet and fall in love. But watching them is Chugla, a servant in the palace who, like all servants, thrives on gossip. He soon tells Krishna that his beloved daughter is not only wandering in the forest every morning but is friends with a strange boy. (Chugla, one narrator tells us, hopes that once Sama is compelled to remain in the palace, he can win her for himself). One narrator says that she doesn't know which came first, Chugla (the name) or Chugli (*cughli*), the Hindi-Urdu term for gossip. As the film continues with its focus on the real world of twenty-first-century Madhubani, gossip emerges as a strong driving force in controlling women's behavior. As women move into the modern world, they are no longer isolated in their homes but visible on the streets and in schools and jobs. Several narrators remind the viewer that a woman's every move outside the house is watched by thousands of eyes, and the respect of the family is dependent upon its women's behavior.

Furious at learning of Sama's time in the forest, Krishna turns both Sama and Chakeva, along with all the sages and ascetics living there, into birds to fly in the forest forever. Returning home, Samb discovers what his father has done to his beloved sister and vows to meditate for ten thousand years if needed to regain her human form. Meanwhile, Chugla is vilified for his evil gossip, but he sets the forest on fire to force the love birds out. The villagers respond by encircling the forest and push Chugla back whenever he tries to escape. Samb's meditation is successful: Sama and Chakeva regain their human forms and marry.

The uniqueness of this telling is its presentation. Davis, filmmaker Carlos Gomez, and writer (and Mithila native) M. S. Suman combine storytelling, traditional theater, and the renowned Mithila art form to tell the story—and eventually the associated ritual. Key moments are told via theater, but storytelling and associated comments on values and norms dominate, with a mixture of some five main female tellers, ranging in age from those in their late teens to those possibly in their eighties. These include the three middle-aged teachers at the Mithila Art Institute, Davis's main affiliation in Madhubani. Several men also tell their concerns and stories. This mixture of voices both provides variety for the viewer and validity of the values being discussed across ages, gender, and social position. Equally important is the introduction of Davis, Gomez, and Suman and their roles in situ early in the film.

A fall ritual (Sama-Chakeva) celebrating the brother-sister tie is the focus of the latter portion of the film. A wicker basket is filled with clay figures representing the characters in the story as well as the forest, presented with a clay base and long straw topping. Gathering in households or small community groups, the girls sing of Sama and Chakeva and voice obscenities and abuse to Chugla. The forest is then set on fire, and Chugla's mustache and hair are ritually burned. The ritual ends with the girls' brothers breaking their "bird" Sama figures to free her once again. This will give the brothers long lives and prosperity.

While the first portion of the film concentrates on the core story told through the various forms and multiple voices, the latter portion focuses on issues of change, particularly girls' and women's gender roles. Sama's trips to the forest become one young woman's desire to study in a college some distance away. One male artist complains that the girls should not be out at night for their ritual. He also laments his inability to take his wife "out" with him, as it is not safe and one bit of gossip would ruin his family's reputation. A teenage girl says that it is not good for women to travel as their needs

can't be met. As she notes, boys and men can sleep on a footpath while women need better accommodations. The old times when women were purposely kept oppressed and secluded in family compounds are gently compared to more modern times when girls are educated and moving about. One young woman explains that people were sad when a girl was born and they didn't want to even educate her as she'd be leaving their family soon. In contrast, she explained that a boy's birth led to immediate discussions of how they'd spend the dowry obtained when he married.

This is a rich offering with multiple points of entry and themes. In a time of rapid change, it retains a focus on women's mobility, education, and male-female relationships. Other forms of female oppression and violence to women are absent, but given the tenor and mood created here they are rightfully ignored.

This film is slow paced and also captured in haunting soft background music and interludes of rural scenery, but the varied forms of storytelling and the multiple voices, who this viewer began to relate to rather quickly, were highly effective and not boring. Yet for classroom use, it is long—most probably two sessions. I think some significant cuts would be beneficial, but clearly were not the goal of this team. On the plus side, the cinematography is superb—the image of Chugla watching the lovers in the forest is forever stuck in my brain. Despite this, the content is such that there are multiple points of discussion. For example, when talking about a girl's possible relationships with boys, the narrator goes on a riff about Krishna's dallying with seventy thousand milkmaids (*gopīs*) as an example of the inequality of rules for men and women and lamenting Krishna's unfair treatment of his daughter. In addition to presenting a changing society challenging entrenched societal norms with wonderful commentators, it is beautiful, compelling, and truly ingenious.

Susan S. Wadley
Syracuse University