

Cinematic Crossroads of Indo-Portuguese Culture: Histories and Interculturality in *Antony Firingee* (1967) by Sunil Bannerjee

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Abstract

This paper explores the cinematic representation of Indo-Portuguese cultural intersections in Antony Firingee (1967), directed by Sunil Bannerjee. The film, based on the life of Hensman Anthony, a 19th-century Portuguese-descended Bengali kabiyaal (folk poet), becomes a compelling site for examining historical hybridity, intercultural identity, and colonial encounters. Through its narrative of cross-cultural love, religious conflict, and poetic assimilation, the film foregrounds the dynamics of cultural negotiation within colonial Bengal. Drawing on theories of interculturality and postcolonial memory, the paper investigates how Antony Firingee reimagines colonial histories through the lens of Bengali popular cinema and challenges monolithic constructs of national and cultural identity.

Keywords: Antony Firingi, Kabigaan, Kobiyal, Bengali Cinema, Hybridity, Firingi Identity, Indo-Portuguese History, Cultural Assimilation

Introduction

Cinema, as a medium of historical reflection and cultural imagination, plays a vital role in shaping national consciousness and representing complex intercultural dynamics. In the context of Bengali cinema, themes of colonial encounters, cultural hybridity, and identity negotiation are frequently explored through narratives that juxtapose indigenous traditions with foreign influences. One such cinematic intervention is *Antony Firingee* (1967), directed by Sunil Bannerjee, which dramatizes the life of Hensman Anthony, a 19th-century Portuguese man who assimilated into Bengali society and became a famed ‘kaviyaal’ i.e. Bengali folk poet. The film navigates the intricacies of intercultural interaction, resistance to cultural purity, and the tragic consequences of rigid social boundaries. His life and works had a profound impact on Bengal’s religious, literary, and intercultural spheres. The Firingi Kalibari, also spelled Phiringi Kalibari, associated with Antony Firingee is a historic Kali temple located on B.B. Ganguly Street (formerly Bowbazar Street) in Central Kolkata. He was a devotee of Kali, after marrying a Hindu widow and converting to Hinduism, he is believed to have either founded or patronized the temple. The present work examines the representation of Indo-Portuguese cultural hybridity, assimilation, and identity formation in *Antony Firingee*, positioning it within broader postcolonial and cinematic discourses. Sri Sisir Kumar Das, in his ‘History of Indian Literature’, discusses Antony as a rare example of cultural syncretism. Dr Sumanta Banerjee,

in ‘The Parlour and the Streets’, places Antony within the evolving landscape of 19th-century Calcutta’s popular culture. Scholars interpret Antony’s life as an instance of vernacular cosmopolitanism, where global and local identities intersect productively.

Plot Summary and Historical Background

Field	Details
Title	<i>Antony Firingee</i>
Directed by	Sunil Bannerjee
Written by	Sunil Bannerjee
Screenplay by	Sunil Bannerjee (Dialogues)
Based on	Hensman Anthony’s life
Produced by	Bhola Nath Roy
Starring	Uttam Kumar, Tanuja
Cinematography	Bijoy Ghosh
Edited by	Ardhendu Chatterjee
Music by	Anil Bagchi
Recording	Adhir Bagchi
Production company	B.N Production
Release date	6 October 1967
Running time	157 minutes
Country	India
Language	Bengali

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antony_Firingee_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antony_Firingee_(film))

Writer-director Sunil Banerjee’s *Antony Firingee*, which translates to Anthony the Foreigner, is a cinematic adaptation loosely based on Madan Bandopadhyay’s serialized novel *Kobiyal Antony Firingee* (1964). While drawing thematic inspiration from the novel, the film introduces significant narrative and character divergences. The film follows Antony, a foreigner who, upon arriving in Bengal, is drawn to the richness of Bengali language, culture, and music. He learns the language fluently and becomes involved in ‘kavigaan’, a form of poetic debate and performance. Structured entirely through a flashback, the film explores the protagonist’s cultural duality. Sunil Bannerjee portrayed the life and works of Anthony, and had Bengali actor Uttam Kumar in the title role. The film was noted for its music, composed by Anil Bagchi and lyrics by Gouri Prasanna Majumdar among others and earned Uttam Kumar an Indian National Film Award for Best Actor in 1968.

The film *Antony Firingee* is a fictionalized retelling of the life of Hensman Anthony (c. 1786–1836), a man of Portuguese descent, son of a Portuguese salt trader, who settled in Bengal and became known for his contributions to Bengali folk poetry. Though not born in Bengal, Antony became a household name in the cultural memory of Bengali folk traditions.

His marriage to Nirmala, a Hindu widow, defies deeply rooted caste norms and religious taboos. Through their union and his active participation in Hindu rituals, Antony embodies cultural assimilation. However, this blending is not universally accepted. As a 'feringee', a term used to denote foreigners, especially Europeans, Antony remains a target of social suspicion and religious intolerance. His tragic life story, marked by social resistance and the eventual death of his wife who was allegedly burnt alive by orthodox Hindus became the subject of the 1967 Bengali film *Antony Firingee*.

The climax of the film is both tragic and symbolic: Nirmala is burned alive in a temple by religious extremists who refuse to accept her marriage to a foreigner and her involvement in Hindu customs. Antony is left a grieving poet, symbolizing the painful limits of intercultural integration in colonial India. The narrative functions both as a historical allegory and a cultural critique, highlighting the fraught terrain of hybrid identity in a society grappling with colonial and caste hierarchies. In this film, Antony is portrayed not just as a historical figure but as a symbol of cultural hybridity and emotional integration into Bengali society.

The Tradition of 'Kavigaan' and the figure of the 'Kabiyal'

Antony Firingee, who settled in early 19th-century Bengal and became one of the most renowned 'kabiyals' or poet-performers in the history of Bengali 'kavigaan'. Despite being an outsider, Antony immersed himself deeply in Bengali culture, mastered the Bengali language, and began composing devotional and secular verses. His transformation from a European to a Bengali cultural figure is both historically fascinating and symbolically powerful in the context of intercultural assimilation. Antony Firingee's emergence as a 'kabiyal' represents a unique intercultural phenomenon in colonial Bengal. Through 'kavigaan', he transcended barriers of language, religion, and race, and became a symbol of cultural convergence and poetic dialogue in a deeply hierarchical society. Etymologically, 'kavigaan' refers to a genre of performative poetic contest popular in 18th and 19th-century Bengal, where 'kabiyals', improvisational folk poets engaged in lyrical duels combining music, wit, and prosody. These performances, usually held in public spaces, reflected both popular entertainment and social commentary (Banerjee, 1989). Antony, a foreigner by birth, mastered the Bengali language and became a respected 'kabiyal', composing devotional songs, particularly in honour of Goddess Kali. His emergence as a 'kabiyal' illustrates how performance traditions served as platforms for intercultural interaction and self-fashioning. Scholars like Sumanta Banerjee argue that 'kabiyals' were

often ‘vernacular intellectuals’, using popular art forms to express philosophical or socio-political critique (Banerjee, 1989, pp. 73–75).

Hybridity and the ‘Feringee’ Identity

The term ‘Feringee’ encapsulates Antony’s dual status, at once foreign and deeply assimilated. His transformation from outsider to cultural participant reflects what Homi K. Bhabha theorizes as the ‘Third Space’ i.e. a liminal zone where hybrid identities are negotiated, and cultural meanings are produced through translation and mimicry (Bhabha, Location 37–39). Antony is not merely a mimic of Bengali customs; he becomes a carrier of Bengali folk art. His identity is neither wholly colonial nor completely indigenous—it is a hybrid construct forged through lived intercultural experience. Bhabha’s notion of mimicry i.e. ‘almost the same, but not quite’, helps explain Antony’s position. While he gains partial acceptance, he remains as the ‘other’, never entirely belonging to the Bengali Hindu social structure (Bhabha, Location 86). The film dramatizes this in scenes where Antony is simultaneously celebrated for his artistic prowess and ostracized for his racial and religious identity. His success in ‘kavigaans’ highlights his cultural fluency, but his foreign origins and inter-caste marriage undermine his social legitimacy.

Cultural Assimilation, Resistance, and Tragedy

The film intricately portrays the difficulties of cultural assimilation. Antony’s marriage to Nirmala becomes a contested space where love, religious identity, and social norms collide. His adoption of Hindu customs and rituals such as Durga Puja and temple participation is presented as sincere, yet society remains unwilling to erase the boundaries of caste and ethnicity. This tension is reflective of postcolonial cultural hybridity, where assimilation does not always lead to full inclusion. Scholars like Robert J.C. Young argue that hybrid identities are inherently unstable and often provoke societal resistance (Young 25). In Antony Feringee, this resistance takes a violent form: the burning of Nirmala represents the symbolic purging of perceived impurity. Furthermore, the film critiques both colonial power and indigenous conservatism. While Antony’s foreignness links him to colonial outsiders, his exclusion is rooted in the very caste-based and religious orthodoxy of Indian society that resists inclusivity. His tragedy is a reminder of the high cost of crossing social and cultural borders.

Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity Formation

Antony learned Bengali to the point that he could spontaneously compose ‘pada’ i.e. poetic verses and participate in verbal duels during ‘kavigaan’ performances. His compositions, especially devotional songs in praise of goddess Kali, earned him admiration among local Bengalis. This mastery helped him transcend the boundaries of race and religion, and gain legitimacy in a highly local, caste-bound poetic tradition. As a ‘kabiyaal’, Antony’s participation in ‘kavigaan’ was not merely artistic but also a symbolic act of cultural assimilation and resistance. He challenged established societal norms by competing with native Bengali poets, composing Hindu devotional songs despite being of Christian birth, marrying a Hindu Brahmin widow, Saudamini, defying rigid caste and religious norms.

Set during a time of pre-British colonialism but made in post-independence India, the film invites reflection on the evolution of national identity. Partha Chatterjee suggests that Indian nationalism developed by separating the ‘material’ i.e. the Western political modernity from the ‘spiritual’ i.e. the traditional culture (Chatterjee 6–8). *Antony Firingee* challenges this binary by showing how an outsider can embody the spiritual and cultural values of Bengal more authentically than its orthodox gatekeepers. Antony’s character thus becomes a symbol of inclusive nationalism a vision of India where cultural belonging is defined by practice and contribution rather than bloodline or birth. The tragic ending tempers this vision by suggesting that nationalist identity, if not pluralistic, remains exclusionary and fragile.

Important Scene Analysis in *Antony Feringi*



Source: <https://www.bengalfilmarchive.com>

In *Antony Feringee*, several key scenes stand out in their exploration of colonial encounters, cultural assimilation, and identity formation. One such significant scene is Antony's initial arrival in Bengal, which sets the tone for his interaction with Bengali society. The way this scene is framed and developed offers profound insights into the film's larger themes of interculturality, hybrid identities, and the fluidity of cultural boundaries.

Scene 1: Antony's Arrival in Bengal

This is a crucial moment in the film that establishes Antony's role as the outsider within Bengali society. As a Portuguese man, his physical presence and attire immediately mark him as a foreigner, and his unfamiliarity with the Bengali language and customs further accentuates his status as an outsider. However, the film slowly subverts this idea as Antony's interactions with the Bengali people deepen. The moment of his arrival, while initially marked by alienation, foreshadows the film's treatment of colonial and postcolonial identities. To represent the 'Cultural Confrontation', Antony's foreignness is evident in the way the local people view him. His first encounter with the Bengali society is marked by curiosity and suspicion. This scene serves as a microcosm of the larger colonial dynamics at play. The physical divide between him and the indigenous people, marked by his European attire and language, highlights the stark differences between the colonizers and the colonized. To depict the 'Initial Resistance', the resistance from the local people, while subtle, shows the tension between colonial presence and indigenous customs. The discomfort with Antony's presence signifies the early stages of intercultural exchange, where differences are not easily reconciled. His outsider status becomes the basis for his cultural journey throughout the film.



Source: <https://www.bengalfilmarchive.com>

Scene 2: Antony's Transformation and Cultural Assimilation

As the film progresses, Antony's gradual transformation from a foreigner to a more integrated member of Bengali society becomes evident. A key scene that encapsulates this transformation is when Antony begins to adopt the local customs and language. This is particularly visible in his interaction with the Bengali woman he forms a relationship with, where he starts to understand the social and cultural norms of his adopted community. To show the 'Adoption of Bengali Culture', Antony's learning of Bengali language and customs marks the beginning of his cultural assimilation. In this scene, his adoption of local attire, language, and sensibilities indicates his immersion into the Bengali way of life. However, his efforts at fitting into the community are met with mixed reactions. To understand the Hybrid Identity' the pivotal moment of cultural exchange is embodied in Antony's performance in Bengali cultural practices. He starts to blend Portuguese cultural elements with Bengali ones, reflecting the hybridity that characterizes postcolonial identity. This scene is significant because it demonstrates how the colonizer is not only a source of cultural imposition but also an active participant in the negotiation and reshaping of identities.



Source: <https://www.bengalfilmarchive.com>

Scene 3: Antony's Internal Struggle and Resistance

Despite his gradual assimilation, Antony never fully sheds his colonial identity. A crucial scene that underscores this tension is when Antony experiences an internal struggle, questioning whether he truly belongs to Bengali society or if his identity is forever tied to his Portuguese roots. This conflict is explored through his interactions with the Bengali characters

who, while accepting him in some ways, continue to view him as a foreigner. To represent 'Resistance and Ambivalence' the film captures the complexities of cultural assimilation through Antony's resistance to fully embrace either his Portuguese or Bengali identity. This tension is embodied in the scene where Antony is confronted by local resistance to his full integration, reminding him of his colonial origins. This ambivalence illustrates the postcolonial concept of the 'in-betweenness' of hybrid identities, as described by theorists like Homi Bhabha. As of 'Negotiation of Identity' the scene encapsulates how identity in a colonial and postcolonial context is never static but is instead negotiated through ongoing exchanges. Antony's refusal to be completely assimilated or to remain entirely foreign emphasizes the fluidity and complexity of postcolonial identity formation.



Source: *Source: <https://www.bengalfilmarchive.com>*

Scene 4: The Embrace of Bengali Identity

The film reaches a pivotal moment in its closing scenes when Antony, having been shaped by his experiences, fully embraces his adopted Bengali identity. This moment of acceptance signifies the potential for hybridization and the overcoming of colonial binaries. His final transformation is the culmination of his journey from an outsider to a participant in Bengali society. To showcase 'Cultural Synthesis' in this scene, Antony's transformation into a full-fledged Bengali is not just a personal evolution but a symbolic reflection of the postcolonial narrative. His acceptance into the Bengali fold indicates the possibilities of cultural synthesis and the potential for a hybrid national identity that transcends the colonial divide. To portray the 'Postcolonial Identity', Antony's embrace of Bengali identity reflects the postcolonial desire for a new, hybrid identity that is not defined by the binary opposition of colonizer and colonized. This scene suggests that postcolonial identity is not a rejection of the

colonizer's influence but a creative process that incorporates elements of both cultures to forge something new.



Source: <https://www.bengalfilmarchive.com>

These scenes in *Antony Feringi* vividly depict the complex interplay between colonialism, cultural assimilation, and identity formation. The film uses Antony's personal journey to explore broader postcolonial themes, such as the negotiation of identity and the impact of intercultural exchange. Through these critical scenes, the film challenges the rigid categories of colonizer and colonized and proposes a more fluid, hybrid understanding of identity in the postcolonial world.



Source: <https://www.bengalfilmarchive.com>

Conclusion

Antony Firingi, the film stands as a remarkable cinematic exploration of identity, hybridity, and the limits of cultural assimilation. Through its portrayal of Hensman Anthony's transformation from a Portuguese outsider into a Bengali folk artist, the film foregrounds the complexities of intercultural engagement in colonial and postcolonial India. It portrays the

processes of accommodation, acculturation and assimilation of a Portuguese-descended European who became an integral part of Bengali cultural and literary life. His story reflects intercultural fusion and religious pluralism in colonial Bengal. The film critiques the rigid boundaries of caste, religion, and race, while also celebrating the transformative power of cultural love and artistic expression. As a historical and symbolic narrative, the film compels its audience to reckon with the uncomfortable realities of belonging, the pain of exclusion, and the fragile hope of hybridity. In doing so, *Antony Firingee* contributes not only to Bengali cinematic history but also to the broader discourse on postcolonial identity, intercultural dialogue, and the politics of cultural memory.

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