

Critique

Anju Devadas R D

Aavasavyuham as Ecocinema: Bridging Man, Nature and the World

Aavasavyuham: The Arbit Documentation of An Amphibian Hunt, 2022, Malayalam, 115 minutes, Director: Krishand

Cinema, in essence, is an all-encompassing, far-reaching, and influential art form that reflects society and is a reality check for organisations. Regardless of its elementary *raison d'être* being entertainment, this potent medium of creative expression aims to enlighten and elevate the audience's consciousness about the diverse human conflicts that recur in various societies. Nowadays, cinema's universal language serves as a platform for the critical function of not only individual and social transformation but also the political socialisation of the public. The agenda of cinema to penetrate public consciousness with its liberating worldviews unites people in a common sense of humanity and shared responsibility, amplifying the sphere of civic discourse on myriad social issues.

The cinematic image of India never shies away from exposing the faultiness of Indian society along the lines of social, political, cultural, economic,

and environmental contexts and its life-changing implications in social reality. It induces a revelatory wake-up call and helps evaluate our beliefs, attitudes, and opinions towards topical social issues, thus fostering positive change and progress. Writer-director Krishand's painstakingly crafted hybrid film *Aavasavyuham: The Arbit Documentation of An Amphibian Hunt* falls into the cinematic realm of 'ecocinema' that actively and critically addresses issues of ecological importance with allegorical representations, aiming at raising awareness and political action.

The representation of environmentalism and the precarious balance between humans and the environment in Indian mainstream cinema has been few and far between or eclipsed as ancillary thematic props. The random cinematic rendition of environmental issues is limited to a select few alternative films, which include *Bhopal Express*

(1999), *Oru Cheru Punchiri* (2001), *Bhoomiyude Avakashikal* (2012), *Jal* (2013), *Ottal* (2015), *Valiya Chirakulla Pakshikal* (2015), and *Kadvi Hawa* (2017). The paradigmatic shift in ‘eco-cinema’/green film materialised with the reasonable mainstreamization of Amit V. Masurkar’s *Sherni* (2021) discussing deep ecology, particularly human-wildlife conflict and Krishand’s *Aavasavyuham* (2022) with its thoughtful engagements concerning the ecology, society and man’s interactions with nature. In this discussion, I attempt a holistic analysis of the film with special attention to the ecocritical perspective, political and philosophical underpinnings, representation, aesthetic choices, and treatment.

Premiered at the 26th International Film Festival of Kerala, Krishand’s award-winning *Aavasavyuham* is an experimental, genre-busting, ethno-geographically rooted Malayalam film that ingeniously combines the mainstream sensibilities about the environment in general and the ecologically sensitive and rare mangroves in Kerala in particular. As the title suggests, the film chronicles the search for a rare amphibian running parallel to the bizarre hunt for an enigmatic man Joy, who turns out to be an amphibian man, a force of nature, an ecological superhero resembling the Swamp Thing, a *Green Mile*-like persona who has a mystifying relationship with all creatures and nature. Set in the biodiversity hotspots of Munnar, Azhikode and Puthuvype, with an abundance of mangrove biome, the film comprehensively documents the socio-political and geopolitical reality of threatened regions and mocks the human greed that compounds nature’s tragedy. This multi-layered satirical and surreal narrative contains subtexts that condemn the anthropocentric invasion of industrial capitalism on Mother Earth and her creatures.

Aavasavyuham plays out as a mockumentary or pseudo-documentary, in the tradition of *Punishment Park* (1971), *The Office* (2005) and *Borat* (2006), where characters speak in front of the camera or narrate their experiences to provide exposition. The viewers formulate a picture of Joy solely through the memories of the people who interacted with him in different ways. Framed as a

series of interviews, we outline the character of the unfathomable Joy from Lissy, a woman who was pining for Joy; Plank, a man who lost his brother Valsan at the hands of Joy; Susheelan Vava, a man whose life changed for the better after Joy entered his life; and Madhusmita, a woman who speculates about Joy when he ends up in her house. The fragmented and contradictory narrative style in *Aavasavyuham* is quite reminiscent of the idiosyncratic style employed by G. Aravindan in *Esthappan* (1980), in which the eponymous *Esthappan* unfolds through the contrasting narration of different characters. It is also a homage to Akira Kurosawa’s intriguing Rashomon-style narration in which several unreliable eyewitnesses describe a single event in a contradictory manner.

The film's title resembles a research manual and is structured in a prologue, three chapters, and an epilogue. The film opens with a meaningful quote, “What is normal for a spider is chaos for the fly”, by Morticia Addams of the iconic *The Addams Family* setting the premise of ecological imbalance. The prologue introduces a team of researchers along with the protagonist, an inconspicuous and quiet Joy (essayed by Rahul Rajagopal), who seems to be the local guide, on a nature trail in 2015, looking for an exotic frog *Mysticellus joy* (loosely based on *Mysticellus Franki* that was discovered in Wayanad in 2019) in the Western Ghats. The hunt for the amphibian is interspersed with a scientist talking about the rare and endemic species in the ranges and the mangroves. The researchers are astonished when they discover that Joy possesses an uncanny and magical entanglement with amphibian creatures, including frogs and fish, who swarm towards him when he makes a peculiar sound alien to other human counterparts.

At this juncture, Joy’s symbiotic relationship with nature is further outlined in the first chapter when Joy is shown living and working with Raghavan, a shrimp worker and his family in the coastal town of Azhikode in 2017. His unknown origins, refusal to eat fish, and the peculiar smell of dried fish emanating from his body make him even more of a mystery to the native people. Nonetheless, Raghavan’s daughter Lissy feels deeply enchanted by

Joy and starts having an affair with him, much to the dismay of Sajeevan, an infamous criminal whom Lissy rejected. An agitated Sajeevan and his brother Murali confront the couple during their rendezvous resulting in a clash with Joy, who overpowers and kills Sajeevan brutally with his superhuman strength. He disappears from Azhikode when he becomes an accused in the murder of Sajeevan.

In the second chapter, set in Puthuvype, a small island in Kochi in 2018, we are introduced to Susheelan Vava, a debt-ridden fisherman out of business. He narrates how he found the washed-up body of Joy and took him to the hospital where, shockingly, they pulled out worms from his leg. Vava takes advantage of Joy by exploiting his skill at attracting sea life and restarts his fishing business. When the past catches with Joy, he is arrested and beaten, survives a staged encounter by Murali and ends up in Madhusmita's house. In the third chapter, set in 2020, Joy is no longer an ordinary human being but has metamorphosed into a human-animal hybrid, an amphibian man with webbed hands and greater than-normal skin elasticity. Several theories and speculations come up about the origins and metamorphosis – while a scientist argues about the possibility of mutation due to disturbing ecological disruptions, a religious expert claims it to be an avatar, and a pastor declares it to be an angel. Some others theorise that he must be the devil himself. Amidst this pandemonium and commotion, Murali sneaks into Madhusmita's house and kills Joy to avenge his brother. The epilogue shows the skeletal remains of the “half-human half-frog” as an exhibit National Museum of Natural History in Paris, slowly turning into plant life.

From an ecocritical point of view, *Aavasavyuham* serves as a strikingly original commentary on the anthropogenic over-exploitation of nature and the need for maintaining bio-diversity, ecological balance, and the peaceful harmony between the human and the nonhuman world. The central character Joy strikes a balance between the human and non-human world by exhibiting characteristics of both realms. He has an innate connection with the non-human world and lives in communion with nature. But just like Mother Earth,

he is taken advantage of or enslaved by the human world for his gifted ability. Lissy's family, Vava and even Madhusmita, who had started charging money to see the “abnormal frog man” like a pay-to-view gallery and the police, made capital out of him. When Joy is reluctant to catch more than required, Vava insists that Joy produce sounds that attract shoals of fish and crustaceans. It establishes Joy as an element of nature that detests unnecessary loss of life and believes in conservation and sustainable use. While Vava embodies the capitalist economy and society that do not provide any incentives for preserving the environment, Joy personifies environmental conservatism, feeling a threat to his existence in the future.

From the beginning, *Aavasavyuham* exhibits the features of ‘eco cinema’ as it is replete with aesthetically shot scenes of nature and its small creatures. It is highlighted when we are introduced to a collage of amphibians, reptiles, and crustaceans preserved for inspection. Further, it moves to the forest, where the research team witness a wide variety of species with intertitles indicating the name of the species. The narrative indulges in making us aware of the rapid extinction of species every day, and the similarities between land and water, except that land, don't have blue whales. Sea doesn't have humans, the encroachment of the State/big corporates into mangroves in the name of development projects and the intricate human-beast-law relationship essential for the equilibrium of the ecosystem. The main narrative is interspersed with insightful gyan provided by the scientist wrought in humour and irony about diverse species such as Globe skimmer dragonflies, Olive ridley turtles, Giant African snails, Indian mottled eel, Myristica Swamp Treefrog, Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphin and the grave concerns the endemic species encounter with unwanted human intervention.

Further, Joy's existence as a hybrid creature symbolises the dynamic environment and the manifold possibilities where diversities thrive and co-exist. The perceived historical separation of humans and nature and the prevailing capitalist industrial economy has contributed to the ecological crisis and destruction of Earth's web of life. Joy is considered

an anomaly of nature, a peculiar deviation that fuses the three realms of the world: human, supernatural and natural. There are obvious hints of supernatural abilities and skills to attract sea life in addition to being human. He whistles to lure fish from their habitat, coaxes crabs from the swamp, and fish leaps from rivers when he lets out a strange sound. When the worms found in his leg were sent for testing, it was found that they had turned into plants, which is a phenomenon unheard of in the scientific world. His healing touch makes him a potential extraterrestrial/superhero/creature walking the earth rather than a mere human.

The final chapter of the film showcasing Joy's transformation echoes literary influences from Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's tale "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" (1968). It also draws inspiration from *the Swamp Thing*, a humanoid/plant elemental creature with supernatural strength that can bend plant life to its will or accelerate its growth. In contrast, Joy is a human-animal hybrid that can control sea life to his will and shapeshift into a frog. When goons search for Joy in the night, we see a flash of light surging onto the frog, followed by a shot of Joy, indicative of his shapeshifting tendencies. There are also apparent associations with films like Jack Arnold's *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) and Vladimir Chebotaryov and Gennadi Kazansky's *Amphibian Man* (1961), as they feature an amphibious creature as the titular character. It was also influenced by *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (1990), who piloted an eco-superhero dealing with ecological disasters. The inspiration drawn from Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) is immense, as both films portray a captive amphibian man with a love element. And it reminds us that everyone is beautiful and those we cravenly consider strange and frightening will inherit the world by breathing life forms into the dying Earth.

In addition to the "green criticism", the film offers a political and philosophical standpoint on the complex human-nature relationship. It puts forward the idea of conservative coexistence and protecting the ecosystem without disrupting the web of life so that there will not be long-lasting consequences for

future generations. The film calls our attention to a subject of concern: the protests carried out by inhabitants of Puthuvype against installing an Indian Oil Corporation LPG terminal over ecological problems. It implores the dwellers of the Earth to listen to nature and refine our understanding of nature. With his deep ties with nature, Joy finds his associations with the human world to be artificial and riddled with concerns. The representation of Joy helps us further understand the vital aspect of nature, emphasised in the climax that the abused or washed out will always return in another form. His representation as an 'Other' becomes meaningful as the people treat him as an outsider/outcast due to the lack of a spatial-temporal locale that binds him. His abilities and affinities intrigue them enough to find him antagonistic and threatening, and tries to exclude and annihilate him. The film calls for an understanding of life as being confined to humanity and other living creatures. The film brings forth the Derridean notion of deconstruction to the anthropocentric viewpoint to decenter humans as the ultimate significant entities of the world and implores us to look into the larger picture inclusive of all diversities. The composition of Joy as the embodiment of nature subverts the usual gender conception of nature as feminine and thus urges to incorporate all forms of life into its fold.

Interestingly, the film excels in its provocative treatment as it renders much more than arguments for change. Jam-packed with puns, satirical humour, and dark comedy, the film straddles arthouse and mainstream cinema sensibilities. A wicked sense of humour in the most absurd moments is hilarious, especially in the third chapter, when the spectacle and massive circus-like event unfurl around the media sensation of the strange creature. Describing the amphibian man as a "marriage between Aquaman and a shitty b-grade Malayalam superhero remake" and the half-baked facts spouted by religious denominations calling it angel, satan, frogmander, or a Gandharva (a celestial being) crack you up, tickling your funny bone. The film heavily censures the media practices that go ballistic over prime-time television on the creature's origin, formulating theories that support their narrative and

fighting over their contrasting perspective. The undertone of dark comedy makes the otherwise severe and gritty circumstances comical. When Raghavan criticises Sajeewan and Murali for juvenile fishing, Murali talks to the viewers mocking him for catching snails to make a living, and in turn, slips into the footage of an ecologist explaining how Giant African snails are destroying agriculture. When a grieving Murali describes joy as a “slick, slimy snake”, the scientist makes an appearance to correct him and says – This is the Indian mottled eel.” The myth that amphibian is filth and the fairy tale “The Frog Prince” is retorted and shattered by the statement, “Kissing a frog to get a prince is the waste of a perfect frog.” The riotous and farcical finale of *Aavasavyuham* holds a mirror to our society and the current state of affairs.

In this regard, *Aavasavyuham* is an unconventional and inventive narrative on “eco-trauma” that uniquely juxtaposes the genres of

documentary, a fantasy drama, science fiction, dark comedy and superhero film. The transitioning between the genres and the effective blurring of the natural vs fictional and realism vs surrealism is unerring and smooth. Its aesthetic choices rely on the multiplicity of sensual realms, decentering it from human-centric imaginations of space and sound, embracing the sights and sounds of the non-human world. Undoubtedly, it is an eye-opener with a cornucopia of new insights that fulfil the propaganda for living in harmony with our ecosystem and aims at consciousness-raising to make people take notice and get the process of change going. In totality, *Aavasavyuham* is an ‘ecocinema’ that involves the human gaze looking at cinema through the lens of the environment and establishes that it is more than just sequences of images and explanations. Instead, it reflects the ecological eventualities that disrupt the hotspots and their precious life forms.

✿ Ms. Anju Devadas R D is a Research Scholar, PG & Research Dept. of English. Mar Ivanios College, Kerala.