

Certificate of Merit:

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Contest for Best Film Criticism 2023

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The Roots and The Uprooting in *Our Home*



As a young boy perches on a small, floating hut on a lake, a man slowly paddles his canoe towards the boy. He asks the boy for salt, as he has run out while cooking. The boy runs inside the hut and gives the man a handful of salt from a bamboo container. In this seemingly trivial request, Romi Meitei's film *Our Home* (2022) hints at a profound truth: a small community-based society living in a shared economy. The eleven-year-old boy, Chaoren, belongs to the tranquil Loktak Lake indigenous fishing community in Manipur. Their unique way of life revolves around the modest floating huts built atop the sporadic, yet remarkable, floating vegetation mass punctuating the lake's surface. Loktak Lake, a symbol of civilisation to the valley people of

Manipur, transcends its role as a mere backdrop; it emerges as a character in its own right, a motif and symbol seen previously in the canvas of Manipuri cinema. In films such as Haobam Paban's hauntingly beautiful *Loktak Lairembee* (2016), Aribam Syam Sharma's contemplative *Shingnaba* (1998), and Ningthouja Lancha's *Mami Sami* (2008), the lake has been a recurring metaphor, often serving as a mirror to the human condition, culture, environment, and identity.

Romi Meitei's film *Our Home* is set against the backdrop of an isolated fishing community residing on Loktak Lake, and it navigates the complexities of progress and tradition through the world of the young boy Chaoren. The narrative delves into the harsh

realities of development-induced displacement while celebrating the boy's indomitable spirit through his mundane activity of going to school in his father's canoe. The use of the boy as the protagonist hints at post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, where children's images are used as a humanist ideal in the imaginings of the future. The film is a poignant commentary on displacement brought about by neoliberal economic policies, a universal issue affecting marginalised communities worldwide. Chaoren's idyllic world takes a stark turn when his father, in the throes of a serious illness, is compelled to sell their canoe to finance his medical treatment. Faced with the inconvenience of attending school without the means of transportation, Chaoren decides to swim across the expansive lake to reach his school. Through this plot, the director argues his point of indigenous cultures and traditions inherited from generations lost to the displacement of globalisation.

The film's initial sequences provide a vivid and immersive glimpse into the profound interconnectedness of the fishing community, revealing a tightly knit web of relationships and a sharing ecosystem that defines their existence. From simple exchanges like the request for salt or urgent calls for medicine in the dead of night, the community exemplifies a culture of collective support where every need is met through community bonds. Romi Meitei's directorial prowess shines as he skilfully captures this community's exquisite beauty, inherent tranquillity, and harmonious coexistence through such moments. He achieves this through the authentic portrayal of their interactions and the ambient sounds of the

lake and its surrounding environment, which serve as an auditory backdrop to their lives, natural and harmonious living. As the narrative unfolds, we witness the fisherfolks and young Chaoren gliding through the lake's placid waters throughout the film, encountering moments when groups of women gather on floating islands to sing indigenous songs. These soulful performances, a deliberate artistic choice, symbolise the community's oral history and the generational wisdom preserved through songs, dance, and storytelling. By inserting these moments, the film situates their cultural heritage, which is alive and vibrant, echoing across the waters that sustain them.

However, as the film progresses, a disconcerting dissonance begins to intrude upon the once-serene natural soundscape of the lake. Chaoren's father, in the stillness of the night, becomes increasingly aware of an ominous mechanical hum that pierces the tranquillity of their existence. This sound, a stark contrast to the harmonious rhythms of nature, serves as a harbinger of impending doom. The community soon discovers that the government plans to evict them from their floating huts in the name of development projects, accusing them of encroachment and environmental damage. This intrusion in the soundscape mirrors the disruption and discord that now threaten to shatter the community's way of life, setting the stage for the film's exploration of the consequences of progress and displacement.

As the community prepares to resist the government's decision to evict them, Chaoren's daring act of swimming across the lake to get to his school becomes a vessel for the thematic exploration of the struggle of

indigenous cultures to stay alive. Chaoren's determination becomes a powerful metaphor for the relentless spirit of indigenous cultures facing adversity. His daily journey symbolises the community's resilience and unwavering commitment to preserving their way of life. In a particularly moving sequence, one of Chaoren's classmates bears witness to his daily struggle and, recognising Chaoren's daily situations, extends a helping hand.

As Chaoren stands on the precipice of another daunting swim to school, his classmate arrives in his canoe, embodying the profound sense of community that underpins their existence. This decisive moment underscores the interconnectedness and mutual support that define the community's coexistence. Furthermore, the film astutely redefines the notion of a school system as more than just the idea of Western educational paradigms confined to a classroom. Rather than resorting to the conventional classroom scenes, the film ventures into alternative knowledge and experiential learning. It does so through the schoolteacher, who embarks on a unique pedagogical journey with the young children. The film deftly sidesteps the traditional educational setting to focus on teaching the children how to plant and nurture saplings. This activity, woven throughout the narrative, imparts ecological awareness and symbolises nurturing cultural heritage and sustainable practices, aligning seamlessly with the community's way of life.

However, the neo-liberal economy is slowly approaching the lake and casting an increasingly ominous shadow upon the community. The presence manifests subtly

yet significantly in the heart of a small neighbourhood market at the banks of the lake. This local marketplace predominantly sells vegetables, flowers, and local snacks, serving as a microcosm of the community-based economy. Chaoren would also diligently deliver the smoked fish prepared by his parents for sale. However, as the narrative unfolds, the market undergoes a subtle yet inevitable transformation. In a scene, the market is swarmed with police coming for eviction of the floating huts and in the wake of this impending displacement, the once-familiar wares of the market fade away. The local economy is replaced by an invasion of corporate products – ubiquitous soft drinks and packaged snacks. Once a vibrant emblem of local culture and self-sustenance, the market becomes a haunting symbol of the erosion of tradition in the face of neoliberal encroachment. The film powerfully underscores the erosion of indigenous livelihoods and the intrusion of global corporate forces into the fabric of the community's existence, mirroring the larger struggle faced by marginalised communities grappling with the adverse impacts of economic globalisation.

In the heart-wrenching denouement, as the community faces its inevitable eviction from the lake, Chaoren's world crumbles around him. Forced to leave his beloved home, he finds himself in the cacophony of an unforgiving city. Here, amidst the relentless urban soundscape, he is haunted by an insurmountable dissonance that mirrors the disarray of his own displaced existence. In a masterstroke of symbolism, the film captures Chaoren's loss of home and the uprooting of the entire community. As a bamboo salt

container drifts away from the frame, it is a poignant metaphor for the community's departure from their ancestral lands. This departure resonates far beyond the boundaries of the frame.

Moreover, the women's indigenous songs, inserted intermittently throughout the film, become muffled at the end as the camera submerges into the water. This powerful imagery encapsulates the drowning of an entire cultural heritage, forever silenced by the tide of progress. Romi Meitei masterfully crafts a profoundly humane narrative, tracing Chaoren's journey of losing their home while unearthing the broader argument of

communities and cultures being forcibly uprooted. In the film, we are confronted with the poignant question of the cost of progress when it brings destruction. As the film concludes, we are left pondering the lasting repercussions of Chaoren's journey and the urgent need to preserve the endangered indigenous communities in a world increasingly obsessed with the dominant paradigm of progress. In a world where globalisation continues its relentless advance, *Our Home* beckons us to reflect on the cost of progress, the weight of displacement, and the erasure of indigenous communities.

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