

Certificate of Merit:

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Contest for Best Film Criticism 2023

**Kalpajyoti Bhuyan**

***Emuthi Puthi* (2022): An Eco-Critical Interpretation**



Bhaskar Hazarika is a writer and filmmaker from Assam with a distinctive voice and a warped perspective on reality. His films explore dark and taboo subjects, often through the lens of female desire. His debut film, *Kothanodi* (2015), which won him a National Award, is an unusual folk horror film set in the world of children's bedtime stories. His most recent film, *Aamis* (2019), is yet again a unique storytelling manoeuvre and a provocative exploration of vorarephilia.

With a proven track record of his gifted abilities, he takes his approach to experimental storytelling one step further

with his next film, delving into a new genre that stands in stark contrast to his earlier body of work. *Emuthi Puthi*, released in 2022, was written by Hazarika and co-writer Sunayana Dutta and directed by Kulanandini Mahanta.

This quietly odd film is beautifully crafted (and entirely shot with an iPhone), often humorous, and poignant work that further cements the efforts of the new generation of independent filmmakers in Assam to offer inventive stories for the new age audience. On the surface, *Emuthi Puthi* is about a rebellious teenager, Ritika (played by Srishti Sharma), trying to escape the confines

of her home due to her differences with her mother (played by Neetali Das). Meanwhile, her grandmother (played by the veteran Pratibha Chaudhary), who has an unconditional love for fish, seeks a mythical fish while also dreaming of an ideal end to her life.

The film is as whimsical as an optimistic ode to the peculiar. It is about finding solace in the simple act of adventure and also the misadventures of life that follow the daughter and the grandmother after their planned escape from home. It presents an authentic character-driven drama supported by a compelling narrative while giving special emphasis on the journey of self-discovery.

Ritika's escape from home draws a parallel to her journey of self-discovery. She is rebelling against the expectations of her mother and society's expectations to find her own path in life. Her grandmother's quest for the mythical fish can also be seen as a metaphor for her search for meaning and purpose that would justify her life. The complex relationship between mothers and daughters, the power of love and the importance of the feeling of family togetherness are some themes explored in the movie.

However, beyond its surface, *Emuthi Puthi* also emerges as a sincere eco-parable that resonates with our contemporary environmental concerns and conditions. An eco-critical interpretation of the film reveals an additional layer of significance that connects the realms of cinema, ecology, and the human psyche. *Emuthi Puthi* subtly conveys ecological wisdom and encapsulates the ideological foundations of the green philosophy. The film's narrative takes an

intriguing turn when the characters, en route to seek a mythical fish in a legendary land, become ensnared within a labyrinthine forest. As night descends, a mysterious woman (portrayed by Lima Das) appears. She offers them refuge, only to vanish by morning. She is Mother Nature personified, safeguarding the lost souls within her protective embrace.

The narrative consistently maintains its peculiarity, sometimes albeit more subtly. Another ecological aspect of the film is the maze of forests in which Ritika and her grandmother find themselves trapped. This mirrors our complex challenges in navigating this world, especially in light of the current environmental crisis.

Meanwhile, the grandmother's desire to spend her remaining days in the realm of a divine prince, played by Arghadeep Barua, who emerges in this mystical land to present that unique fish, establishes a strong connection between culture and divine manifestations. This represents the moment she had long anticipated, leading her to yield her life to the divine embodiment of nature willingly. Consequently, she returns to the natural world from whence she originated.

The film's strategy for conveying its underlying message engages the viewer's affective, cognitive, and emotive faculties through the unconventional and strange scenarios it presents. Veiled beneath the intellectually stimulating attributes of magic realism, the film abounds with clever visual elements that attribute human characteristics to various aspects of nature. These elements collectively nurture the audience's ecological awareness and instil positive impacts upon them.

However, the film does not focus on ecological concerns; it is its primary thematic focus. Instead, it harnesses the creative potential of the comic caper and the road movie genres, melded with the elements of magic realism, to effectively convey its intended message. The central idea is that the ecological perspective should emanate organically from nature rather than being imposed by any human agency. This is precisely where the utility of magic realism becomes apparent. The elements of fantasy help the film succeed in delivering its message from a source beyond the realm of the human.

The film also extends its thematic commentary from the natural environment to the characters' social reality, emphasising their deep interconnection. When examined from an alternate perspective, the ecological imperatives associated with dwelling on an ailing planet resonate in parallel with the narrative of a dysfunctional family, which forms the film's emotional core.

The characters of the mother and Ritika are allegorical reflections of Mother Earth and human beings. Analogous to how humans often fail to comprehend the significance of the Earth and are increasingly becoming detached from it, Ritika, too, experiences a growing emotional distance from her mother. Ritika, referred to as Joon by her grandmother, epitomises the collective emotions of a confused and troubled new generation. She is surrounded by feelings of angst, much of frustration, and less of hope. She also finds herself caught in the crosscurrents of tradition and modernity, grappling with the consequences of acculturation.

The interwoven ecological themes within the narrative also entangle the dichotomy between traditional and contemporary values. A hyper-realistic portrayal follows the consequences of climate change as it disrupts the aquatic ecosystems in Assam, threatening the diverse array of underwater life forms. This transformation is presented in contrast to a previous era when such aquatic life was abundant. The film rapidly illustrates humanity's assertion and dominance over the planet under the guise of progress. This trajectory has placed the very existence of numerous life forms under threat. It also examines the growing disconnect between modern individuals and the physical and meta-physical world that surrounds them.

This detachment from the natural environment has led to adverse effects, manifesting as environmental degradation, the extinction of non-human species, the proliferation of toxic wastes and contaminants, unregulated practices within the food and manufacturing industries, the emergence of new diseases and epidemics, and the erosion of indigenous and native cultures.

The film also tries to situate the fish as an indispensable element within the heritage of Assamese culture. The grandmother, whose deep affection for fish is prominently featured, represents the Assamese populace itself. Whether during the celebration of Bihu or other traditional festivities, the culinary inclusion of fish is considered integral to our culture. In essence, the film tries to score the fish as a symbol of significance in Assamese culture, a facet that is gradually on the path to extinction.

Furthermore, the film's exploration of folkloric characters pays homage to the cultural wealth of Assam, which is filled with a treasure of folklore narratives. These narratives frequently feature characters symbolising nature, such as the powerful 'Bordoisila.' Toward the film's end, a remarkable spectacle unfolds as a rain of fish, signifying the rejuvenation of Assamese life and the revival of our cultural traditions. However, this renewal is contingent upon acknowledging our cultural heritage and its value.

In an attempt to escape her reality, Ritika had been planning to evade her circumstances and inner turmoil within the confines of her familial home. Yet, a Transformation occurs when the family reunites towards the end of the movie, and their grandmother embarks on her journey to a distant realm. This point in the film's narrative presents the significance of familial bonds and mutual understanding, revealing that love sometimes exists in unspoken sentiments, nevertheless preserving itself in the familial fabric in its own way. The film ultimately posits that a transformative change can be brought about by fostering an expression of love for our planet—an inspiring message of hope that audiences can

carry along with them after the movie's conclusion.

So, in terms of its thematic elements, stylistic approach, and central subject matter, *Emuthi Puthi* emerges as a noteworthy work within eco-cinema. The film offers many observations concerning the present state of our planet and how the risks can affect our indigenous and cultural beliefs and practices. This essay, in turn, seeks to make only a tiny contribution to an underexplored scholarship on eco-cinema in Northeast India.

Title: *Emuthi Puthi (A Very Fishy Trip)*

Year: 2022

Language: Assamese

Director: Kulanandini Mahanta

Written by: Bhaskar Hazarika and Sunayana Dutta

Cinematography: Ujwala Viswanath

Edited by: Shweta Rai Chamling

Producer: Shyam Bora, Bhaskar Hazarika

Actors: Kenny Basumatary, Pratibha Chaudhary, Rubul Boro, Neetali Das, Srishti Sharma

Running time: 1 hour 45 minutes

Release Date: 17 June, 2022

Country: India (Assam)

 **Kalpajyoti Bhuyan is based in Guwahati.**