

Critique

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Sarcasm of Existence: *The Elysian Field*



In *The Elysian Field* (2025) a man confidently asserts, “You cannot say that you are really alive when you do not forget things.” His reaction comes when he is teased for not remembering a trivial matter. The averment gives a trait of human nature and existence that forms basic precepts of the fourth feature film by the Shillong-based director Pradip Kurbah. *The Elysian Field* (Khasi title *Ha Lyngkha Bneng*) revolves around six naive, pious village folk. They are the last natives of a remote place where ruined houses at once tell that they are abandoned, bearing a gentle evidence of cityward migration affecting the local population. The film traces human relationships with a sense of community amidst alarming changes and stagnancy, both.

From the very outset the film takes the viewers along a path of aesthetic appeal and philosophical outlines. A

passenger dismounts a coffin from a bus arriving in the village while a motley group of youngsters in the spot is heard singing a choir. Three men join him carrying the coffin on foot while a protracted sequence unveils a vast plateau, narrow pathways and half-made concrete footbridge bringing isolation and underdevelopment of the place to the fore. A bereaved man, Livingstone, has brought his late city-dweller wife, and when the coffin is taken for burial the grave-sign shows 2047 as the year of her demise, meaning the centenary of the country’s Independence.

The sign-functions convey age-old values and doubtless indictment of uneven progress, with the time-frame allowing a sneak peek into the nagging troubles the villagers face. A senior citizen, given name Complete, who feels his life and tasks are incomplete though, always takes the trouble

of lodging complaints over intermittent power cuts despite the mobile phone network seldom working. The old man's constant search for his lost goat coalesces into an allegory of desperate yearning for love and care. Although he has a rented house in the city he prefers to stay in the village denoting his milieu. Livingstone's caring for his mother, a retired school teacher, reflects the same ethos.



Significantly, the appearance of the choir group, singing not in Khasi or English but some other language, turns out to be a motif later on. It represents not simply the Christian spirit, but an unavoidable inclusivity which contradicts a revelation of an intense xenophobia represented by Complete in his village headman days. Forced isolation playing a part, the tribe's social hierarchy comes to such a pass that only six remaining people are attendants in the local church with Complete serving as pastor. The choir group connects the real and the metaphysical worlds, but is seen by somebody who is close to death: Friday for instance witnesses the Carol singers till he dies of alcoholism, and so does Livingstone's mother who catches a glimpse of the choir as an angel before breathing her last.

Their scepticism leads to digging graves for themselves. Lest anybody's death renders the task overburdened for the remaining few! Friday in a scene repairs the front-door of a dilapidated house. The absurdity in this act— for the house does not

have its roof, walls in decaying state— has other connotations. His ineffable feeling for his wife Maia is disabled by silence, for theirs is a dysfunctional relationship, they don't even talk to each other. What is called 'toxic masculinity' has no part in their customary matriarchal nuances. Yet, Friday's death causes a kind of resurrection in Maia; she transforms herself to a free-spirited soul occasionally mixing in community-feast and merrymaking, dancing, drinking and smoking no bar, eventually recharging an irresistible jealousy between her two neighbours, Livingstone and Promise. When one of them asks who she would prefer, Maia says, "Myself," asserting her self-awareness. A mid-shot shows them sitting on a large rock against a vast evening landscape: is that postulating a Biblical cord, one may wonder.



With mostly medium wide shots redefining the pneuma of the narrative, the film also captures Meghalaya's Sohra region through disparate seasons of the year with emotional transformation at the core of its grandiose beauty. Flowers too, that are put alongside a photo marking love and remembrance, evince the seasonal changes. Ace cameraman Pradip Daimary exploits the rich textures well and expropriates the rhythm of the exteriors and the interiors with equal elan. Some shots gracefully bring Abbas Kiarostami's and Wong Kar-Wai's style to mind with a sense of naturalism fuelling the actors' performance. The scenario sticks to

the locality where the roles are enacted; neither the script nor the camera cares for leaving the locale, chances ignored, scope for flash-back deliberately left out, although there are hints of an ongoing judicial matter involving Livingstone in the city, and their dependence on city markets for essentials keeps the passenger bus integral to the film-text. The whole concept is a testament to minimalism and the emotional arc presupposes sympathy to each and every character.



The characters refuse to part with whatever they possess and nurture, the ever-present beards of the males signalling their sense of attachment. The poet would say, no man is an island, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main, courtesy John Donne. So why is that specific look? A symbolic gesture to disparity (radio bulletins announce progress somewhere), or disdain for the city goers' mindset? They might resemble outcasts of the socio-economic sphere, forming a rare breed, especially in the times of free market economy and globalisation when sticking to one's root is ever so difficult.

The feeble phone connectivity apart, the power disruptions pose a metaphor of fragile presence and frailty of memory. It is Livingstone who doesn't care about a bit of amnesia. The metaphor ceases to be apolitical when electricity malfunction is hinted as doable for the local MLA. Having that: for a moment subtle humour overtakes Promise's

unabated probe on the power supply-line. His suspicion of Livingstone getting closer to Maia receives Complete's brash reaction causing the torchlight he is holding to fall off. As Complete unintentionally hurt his ego further, the power line produces a terrifying spark, a flippant jolt overall.

Sometimes a radio hum or a creaking windmill, sometimes low-key VFX bespeak the rhythm of life in an isolated village, as the editing pattern takes over to ensure a smooth flow of the narrative. Established notions and easy expectations are eventually broken in this unique film. As Complete insidiously doubts whether Maia is grieving for Friday's death, she reacts instantly: "I am not sad because I don't look for happiness where I lost it." The evocation didn't generate an argument. There are moments which are pure poetry, mostly felt rather than deciphered, as Pablo Neruda once said, don't ask the poet the meaning of the details! As par defiance of the clichés of cinematic tales, the narrative can be perceived as postmodernism in films. A postmodernist view involves the world with detached irony having no melodrama, no plot claim: yet *The Elysian Field* accomplishes its aims with existential undertones.



Premiered at the 47th Moscow International Film Festival, it went on to win three major awards there— Best Film, Best Director and the NETPAC award for Best Asian Film— a rarity for an Indian entry at such a major event. Known for his soft



storytelling, all based on silhouetted characters against contemporary reality,

Kurbah's debut feature *Ri: Homeland of Uncertainty* (2013) dealt with the idea of freedom and insurgency in Meghalaya while *Onataah: Of the Earth* (2016) depicted a young rape survivor facing reality and *Iewduh* (2019) focused on everyday life of people of a bustling Shillong market, all three national award winner as best regional film, and most notably, *Iewduh* earned the prestigious Kim Jiseok Award at Busan. In *The Elysian Field* however Kurbah unleashes a paradigm shift in cinematic experiment, a definite morale booster for the cinephiles in Northeast India.

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