

Article

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***Boong's* Hidden Language:
Pacing, Sound, and Culture in Marginalized Narratives**



Abstract

This research examines the representation of marginal identity through different cinematic techniques with a critical analysis of the film's formal elements, sound studies, and aesthetic analysis of the movie, *Boong* (2024). With its diverse cultural contexts, this respective film paints a unique canvas of marginality where, within a simple plot of searching for a lost father, the film opens the lost resistance of indigenous voices and their altered existence in an authentic way. This study employs Gayatri Spivak's theory about the subaltern to explore the importance of proper representation that shapes scholarly discussions around the lost and found voice of the periphery that has no center or boundary.

Keywords: Marginality, Manipur, voice, narrative, indigenous etc.....

Introduction

The domain of global cinema is an intricate web of dominant narratives that do not want to associate themselves with the nuances of marginalized experiences, as it often becomes unheard, or if it is heard, it is filtered through

so many voices that it loses its original touch. However, film or cinema speaks metaphysically beyond the veil of words. Furthermore, the movie *Boong* articulates the hidden language of marginality through its unspoken dimension of visual minimalism,

sound design, and rhythm. Establishing a parallel with Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (2023), the film asks whether marginal voices are genuinely allowed to voice their narrative, or if it is mediated through dominant pop-cultural brain rot. However, what emerges as the answer to this question is the subtle embodied language of the film, where the absence of music, ambient noise, different pacing, and framing work as the tools of resistance and authentic representation. *Boong* paints a canvas that mediates how absences or the existence of sonic elements may hint at exclusion or inclusion. Likewise, the film's formal choices vibrate with indigenous cosmological frameworks that produce profound knowledge of marginal narratives. Additionally, with its deliberate refusal of the grand façade of cinematic grammar, the film gives it a political stance where the mise-en-scène of the film forms a cinematic language that smells of marginal voices, resistances, and reorientation of visibility.



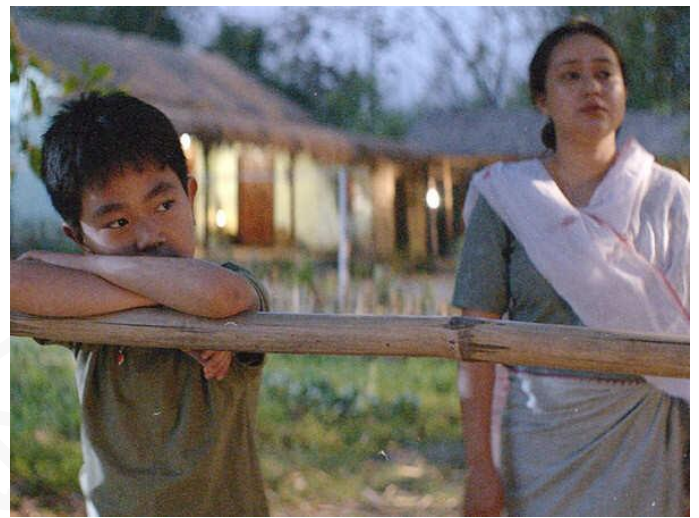
Soundscapes, bear the burden of audially painting a place and its identity on the moving screen where an acoustic

environment is perceived, experienced, and understood by a voice or a collective consciousness of a society, and how they create meaning within a specific backdrop as it is often dissected by the collective truth or understanding of respective societies, within their cultural background, personal memories, and the environment, to build a knowledge system of a particular narrative where sensory integrations and cognitive interpretations come together to create meaning of the sounds around them. Walia and Kuotsu talk about the use of a new low-tech, low-brow digital inclusivity with the backlash of peripheral behaviors that dance at the border of the prevailing film industry to inquire into the political and cultural dimensions of language and identity (Walia, 2024) (Kuotsu, 2012). For instance, Walia's research on Malegaon cinema outlines how politics of language works in the formation of class and cultural identity with the intertwined locations that are often fraught with internal tensions, opposing rhythms, and contradictions within the cinematic space (Walia, 2024). Kuotsu argues that local cinemas have become contesting elements that are inscribed and passed off as local (Kuotsu, 2012). Meanwhile, Harrod J. Suarez mentions the critical importance of listening a film as another way of producing knowledge for the understanding of postcolonial and feminist critiques, where sound stands as a vital tool to convey socio-political messages (Suarez, 2011). Leslie Marsh explores this idea of sound by inquiring into a hyper real domain of sound that emits complex social disconnectedness and an uncertain social domain to demonstrate the abilities of sound to communicate social pressure and anxiety

subtly (Marsh, 2015). Will Higbee's focus on shifted audio and accented dialogues in Maghrebi-French filmmaking investigates how layering and displacement of sound, including local languages, can question Eurocentric norms and express distinct cultural identities (Higbee, 2009). While these concepts about embodying soundscapes in cinema to represent marginality have been discussed, very few studies can be found on how comprehensive soundscapes – diegetic noise, local languages, and sonic interpretations – embody marginality.

As marginal experiences can be found in the embodied soundscapes of cinema, its pacing also asserts the micro-politics of subaltern voices. Studies on cinema explored that film content, editing, and directing style implement significant control over the audience's brain activity and emotional responses. This principle can be implemented over the visual pacing of a cinema, which can evoke or manipulate the viewer's affect. The invisible line between pacing and narrative structure is additionally explored through examination of the pace of a film and its relation with narrative reposition (Moncrieff & Venkatesh, 2007). Moreover, Carlo Comanducci questions the oversimplified binary of fast and Slow cinema, arguing that these ideas evolve from complex interplays of temporalities and heterogeneous cinema components that support the notion of a minute micro-politics at play (Comanducci, 2021). James E. Cutting trails the evolving nature of pace in popular movies, and marks the way filmmakers have molded new cinematic tools and style to be parallel with the changes to the narrative structure (Cutting, 2016), directly grouping pacing to a

specific emotional and cognitive results. The concept of Cinematic endurance additionally argues that protracted techniques, including slow pacing, has the ability to function as a critical structure to shift the audience's physical, mental conditions while marking political and social issues (cottrel, 2017). But, despite its impact on cinema, the meticulous elements of "micro-politics" are still under-analyzed.



While talking about marginality in cinema, one cannot negate the intersection of indigenous cosmology and cinema. Kuotsu mentions regional and liminal cinemas and their ability to navigate familiar and the unfamiliar with the importance of local cultural elements. The idea that cinema has a national character, where reflection of national identity can be found which rejuvenates cultural construction of a nation with a prevailing framework to understand how different cultural world views construct different cinematic aesthetics (Yang & Zhang, 2023). Scholars have been arguing how indigenous narrative can offer a new critical model for social conjecture with a new attitude towards ethnographic film practices

to indicate how subaltern voices can fundamentally alter cinematic approaches (Ginsburg, 1995). Consequently, research exploring decolonial voices that restructures the Ecuadorian indigenista cinema embellishes the question of how indigenous philosophical narratives reconstruct cinematic expressions – especially implementations of subaltern ideologies through mise-en-scène to locate how specific cultural elements re-bubble formal cinematic choices (Carrera, 2020) (Hidayat, 2021). Moreover, the understanding of indigenous traditions and the natural world as having a sacred quality, with tribal narratives that indicate the importance of ‘place’, where their concept of space and spirituality could profoundly alter mise-en-scène and framing that is utterly distinct from the Western or non-tribal cinematic conventions. While these subaltern traditions and narratives are frequently discussed in the light of marginal cinema, a question still lingers about specific cosmological ideas – such as muteness, invisibility – that actively moderate formal film elements like editing, framing, and mise-en-scène.



Another significant dimension of marginal cinema is its aesthetic of emotional labor, particularly performed by women and

children. Discussions regarding patriarchal hegemony modulating cinema in Manipur to implement proper representation of women directly restructure societal pressures that establish emotional labor (Kuotsu, 2012). Meanwhile, exploring women’s narrative in regional cinema searches for women’s impact, presence, and evolving roles within the cinematic bubble (Walia, 2024). At the same time, Anjali Ram’s research on women from the Indian migration background offers critical insight into the behaviors of these women that comply and resist the orthodoxy of a hegemonic patriarchal society (Ram, 2002). This research explores the idea of resistant reading, where it can be argued that even compliant performances can be dipped with emotional labor, likening it to the subaltern agency. However, these works do not centrally engage with “emotional labor” as a framework or have not analysed its depiction as an element of subaltern resistance. This fracture demands a systematic investigation into the aesthetics of emotional labor and how its intricate relationship informs subaltern resistance.

Additionally, regional cinema uses minimalism to revolt against the mainstream spectacle. Kuotsu’s research on Manipuri cinema explores certain political acts that uses transitional space and subversion of the ban on the ‘indian’ narrative (Kuotsu, 2012). Angelos Koutsourakis pinpoints agency of slow pace in a film reason that it restores the disruptive intrusion of the real into the diegetic domain (Koutsourakis, 2019). This argues for the refusal of cinematic spectacle in favor of a more raw or authentic engagement with reality. Moreover, Sarkar’s notion about southern, subaltern formalism

and his argument about lo-fi forms in his description of Malegaon videos negates elitist voices and ground minor attributes to reject dominant cinematic norms (Bhaskar, 2022). However, these studies merely explore broader context and alternative aesthetics rather than directly analyze the political gesture of cinematic minimalism as a core strategy of refusal.

While the existing literature about marginal cinema talks about embodied soundscapes, micro-politics of cinematic pacing, the intersection of indigenous cosmology with cinema, the aesthetic of emotional labor, and the political gesture of cinematic minimalism, specific gaps still exist in these domains. To address those gaps, this study takes a fresh look at the Manipuri movie *Boong* (2024) to examine the impact of non-linguistic sonic elements – such as ambient noise, the rhythmic quality of everyday sounds, or the conscious absence of sound – on the embodied experience of marginality as well as an analysis of the visceral impact on space and character. Moreover, this research investigates the interplay between different paces of the selected film that disrupt or enhance empathetic connection and build tension in the audience to understand the micro-level effect on viewer identification or alienation. While inspecting the difference of pace in the movie *Boong*, this research delves into the abstract indigenous cosmological concepts present in the respective film that restructure or push forward unconventional ideas in film editing rhythms and framing composition or *mise-en-scène* that reside in the subaltern narrative. Finally, this research examines the emotional labor of women and children in the

selected movie to understand its relationship with subaltern resistance. It is placed in parallel with Spivak's theory of subaltern to navigate the movies from a peripheral dimension that tries to be true to its roots.



Beyond Dialogue: Non-Linguistic Sound, Embodied Experience, and Marginality in *Boong*

Boong, a Manipuri movie directed by Lakshmipriya Devi, is a story about a little boy trying to find his lost brother. The whole movie circles around this plot just like a pop-cultural commercial movie. However, this cinema consciously abandons the pop-culture rituals – sound design, cinematography, editing, and direction aesthetics -- in every aspect possible. One of the major resistances of this film is its sound design. It gives the ordinary plot an extraordinary marginal taste, challenging dominant movie practices. However, one question may arise about this innovative sound design: What is the use of a new marginal sound design that alienates the audience? The answer is hidden in the plain sight of the film – the setting and its characters.

Nevertheless, to answer that question, one must ask another question – how a setting (space) can perform better with its indigenous sonic elements. The same question applies to

characters from any place or space. The answer lies in *Ngugi wa Thiongo's* argument about language. He argues that a collective consciousness of a society produces knowledge about language during the interaction of any production. This produced knowledge is inherently subjective to the collective consciousness of that specific society. Similarly, other kinds of knowledge production also happen in that identical manner. This is why every human society bears different knowledge systems that cannot be erased without negating its identity with them. The very process happens with characters or any individuals in society. That is why; to be true to tribal narratives, one must use subjective tribal knowledge systems in any creative work.

Due to the very function of knowledge production and to stay true to the Manipuri narrative, Lakshmipriya Devi has used unique core Manipuri sonic elements in crucial moments of the film. Brojendro, the lead character of the film, when he uses *Chekla* (ꯃꯪꯂꯩꯛ) to vandalize the main gate of the school, and the music that follows his actions carries a childlike emotion that supports the playfulness of the character Brojendro. Additionally, the music carries certain Manipuri musical elements that make it more rooted in the setting. Meanwhile, the very choice of music helps the director to open the film with a hearty gaze of a child without compromising with the marginal experience. Moreover, the music or sonic element used molded the scene as a mere façade of a child on the surface. However, it carries a heavy message within the surface of that façade about a child's resistance against the formative peaceful nature of society and

order, a common visual in Manipur, due to its ongoing ethnic clash.

In the context of Brojendro's mother, Mondakini, the aforementioned music carries an entirely different understanding. From the beginning of the movie, Mondakini knows about her husband's whereabouts, yet she still chooses silence before Brojendro, pushing him to the void of fake hope. The childlike, playful music here navigates Mandakini's silence over the truth like Brojendro's resistance. As the playful indigenous element of the music turns to a serious one at the end to support the inner turmoil of the characters and their helplessness, it indirectly also supports the façade of Brojendro and the blind eyes of Mandakinito to establish a setting where these two characters can only survive the harsh reality by indulging themselves in these processes. Moreover, the absence of any music and focus on ambient in the scene, where Mandakini sends a voice mail to her husband, depicts her as a person connected to the reality of the ongoing events of the film's narrative, with a barren future for the family and a broken heart for her son. The absence of music shows her in the scene, vulnerable for the first and the last time, as Mandakini tries to fill a void inside her. However, she refuses to reach any conclusion, as no happy music follows her action in the film. She is forced to have that fracture, and every day, sound, the conscious absence of sound, and the ambient sound force Mandakinko to be a mere voice in the narrative of Brojendro, her son.

Cinematic Rhythms: Engineering Identification and Alienation

Lakshmipriya Devi uses cinematic pacing in *Boong* to unravel the inner struggles

of the characters. The pace of the movie becomes fast when he is thinking about his father, but the moment he shifts his attention towards his missing father, the pace of the movie also changes. At the beginning, when Boong is causing havoc, the pace moves faster. However, as the plot moves forward with the increased attention of Boong towards his father, the pacing of the movie slows in his domain. For instance, the washroom scene where Boong is sending a voice mail to his father, and the riding scene with his mother, where he is hopeful about his father's homecoming.

However, as the narrative changes to Mandakini, the pacing of the movie becomes opposite compared to Boong. The pacing moves in a peaceful rhythm whenever Mandakini's attention is on her son or on her daily life. But the moment her attention moves back to her husband, the film rushes through her narrative as seen in the Holi scene, where her appearance is almost nowhere to be seen. However, only in one scenario of the movie does the pace slow down to follow the emotions of Mandakini, when she is in a state of nostalgia after visiting her husband's workstation. It is a deliberate effort by the filmmakers to represent Mandakini as a vulnerable character who can be affected by the overall surroundings and to address her emotions appropriately. Nevertheless, an abrupt cut follows this scene, implying her refusal to be vulnerable in front of the viewers and in front of an unknown future where a truth lingers slowly devouring her own shadow. The impact of this scene comes when, at the death ceremony of her husband, she wears a colorful *phanek* (ਏਟੌਞਾ), as she refuses to cut

her son's hair. Again, this whole scene of resistance walks on a balanced pace with a specific authority that helps her to negate the inevitable white *phanek* (ਏਟੌਞਾ) of her fate.



Sacred Screens: Indigenous Cosmology, Unconventional Form, and Subaltern Narratives

In certain scenes, Laxmipriya Devi uses Manipuri cultural elements to create unconventional film editing rhythms that peculiarly revitalize subaltern voices. For instance, when Boong was running towards home, Laxmipriya intrudes a wedding procession. This sudden introduction of a certain Manipuri *mise-en-scène* that has no connection to the movie's plot serves the purpose. Even though it seems out of place, it is a deliberate and conscious effort by the filmmakers to present the film's narrative from the rootedness of their culture. Any authoritative voice is not filtering it, nor is it surrendering to the universality of pop-culture cinemas. The certain out of place *mise-en-scène* of the wedding procession exists there to create a unique identity and space that only responds differently to the Manipuri consciousness, which other power sources cannot influence. Moreover, allowing Mandakini and Sudhir to be together in a frame while Thabal chongba (ਯੇਠੌੜ ਯੇਞਾਠ) is going on, challenges the inherent binary

narrative of insider and outsider. Additionally, this frame structure questions the overall legitimacy and power structure of society that decides to speak for a character who is vulnerable at that specific moment, completely snatching away their voice.

However, placing Mandakini again in the center of the frame, removing any obstacles, forces her to reclaim her voice as she navigates her desires, while fulfilling a particular wish of her son, dances in thabal chongba with a smile on her face. This effort allows her to feel her emotions and consider the unaltered reality, which again pushes her to be vulnerable and call her husband to see her son content with his life. Following this action, a specific chain reaction happens; she no longer listens to the authoritarian voices but questions everything that shakes her understanding of herself and her reality, which can take a sharp turn at any moment.



Emotional Labor, Subaltern Resistance, and Spivak: A Peripheral Reading of *Boong*

Boong, with its depiction of the emotional labor of women and children, addresses peripheral issues of Manipuri society. Spivak has argued that women in a subaltern society become more peripheral due to the patriarchal hegemony, and children

who are yet to learn their identity become more vulnerable to this kind of situation. That is the reason why Devi has opened the movie with a childlike nature, which complements Boong and slowly transforms it to Mandakini, who returns to Boong and his friend Raju. These changes allow each character to voice their opinion without the manipulative web of authority. Moreover, by providing all the characters the same kind of freedom, the movie explores some internalized faults of the society as the children of a new English medium school behave completely differently towards Boong and Raju. Through the freedom of expression, the movie analyzes the internalized teaching of Western education that may ruin each indigenous narrative.

Additionally, this inventive process helped characters like Raju and his father to bring forward their plight as they were threatened as outsiders throughout the movie that indirectly questions the voices of local powerful sources that have become biased due to ethnic clashes that have become a common sight in Manipur, as well as the brainwashing done by the influential individuals within the society. These ultimately led to the development of characters throughout the film. Boong behaves maturely as compared to the beginning of the movie, after learning that he can never bring back his father. Mandinka also accepts her reality, and a change of attitude can ultimately lead to shedding tears while staying as sole subject within a frame.

Conclusion

Lakshmipriya Devi's movie *Boong* is a circle with many centers and no

circumference. Most aspects of Manipuri culture and its resistance are being portrayed in the movie, yet one cannot pinpoint its center to provide a boundary to this creative work. The embodied soundscapes and non-linguistic sound elements have been used to represent the experiences of the marginal voices and how they behave within a free space where their voices can be heard clearly without any resistance.

The movie's pacing again disrupts the empathetic connection between characters when they move from the path of understanding to orthodoxy. However, an increase in empathy can be seen between the characters when they reject societal orthodox ideas and behave more peculiarly while distancing themselves from the omnipresent audience.

Moreover, *Boong* uses indigenous (Manipuri) cosmological narratives to push

forward unconventional ideas or formation editing rhythm to give the movie a subaltern identity where all the characters negate the superficial web of power to find their voices. In contrast, the film is the opposite of any pop-cultural brain rot.

At the end, *Boong* respectfully deploys the emotional labor of women and children to bring reality to the terrain that women and children are the one who has to suffer endlessly in front of a white fate. Through their production of labor, the filmmakers try to make them visible to the familiar audiences while allowing them to grow freely with a free voice that cannot be unheard of. Through this structure, Lakshmipriya Devi weaves specific frames and sounds with ordinary and extraordinary mise-en-scène to create a circle that knows no boundaries while shifting between many centers of society.

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