

Article

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Manipuri Cinema and Magical Realism



Aribam Syam Sharma interviewed by Bobby Wahengbam

It (Magic Realism) is a Latin American literary phenomenon characterized by the matter-of-fact incorporation of fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction.... Prominent practitioners include Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Amado, Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Angel Asturias, Julio Cortazar, and Isabel Allende.¹ Writing in German in 1925 to champion a new direction in painting, Franz Roh originates the term Magic Realism to characterize this new painting's return to Realism after Expressionism's more abstract style.² Carpentier (Cuban writer) observed that 'the

extraordinary is not necessarily lovely or beautiful. It is neither beautiful nor ugly; rather it is amazing because it is strange. Everything that is strange, everything amazing, everything that eludes established norms is marvelous.³ The 'magic' in magical realism stories resides in the 'real' world of everyday objects, places and people. Therefore, a more general definition of magical realism is that it is a narrative device that creates (magical) meaning by seeing ordinary things in extraordinary ways.⁴ The miraculous is mundane, as it is described with

the same factual indifference that fits original everyday life.⁵

García Márquez, in his iconic magical realist novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), depicts old men with angel wings and raindrops that fall like flowers.

Some Notable Films Featuring Magical Realism

Edward Scissorhands (1990, Tim Burton); *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992, Mexican, Alfonso Arau); *Being John Malkovich* (1998, Spike Jonze); *Amalie* (2001, Jean-Pierre Jeune); *Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008, David Fincher); *Midnight in Paris* (2011, Woody Allen); *Malenclia* (2011, Lars von Trier); *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012, Benh Zeitlin); *Life of Pi* (2012, Ang Lee) and *Birdman* (2014, Alejandro Gonzalez) among others.

Magical Realism and Indian Cinema

Indian cinema encompasses both popular and parallel films. Several films can be classified under the term 'magical realism.' Recently, two films, among others, have been identified as magical realist works. These films create a distinct magical-realist world, in both form and content. *The River of Love* (Hindi, 2021, Akash Khurana) and *Kothanodi* (Assamese, 2015, Bhaskar Hazarika) embody key characteristics of magical realism.

The River of Love is a rare movie in the annals of Indian cinema. It is about the journey of a man along the mighty River Ganga. He lost his memory after a violent attack. He, then, gradually regains his past life during the journey, revealing numerous details to the viewers through various twists and turns. He is reunited with his lover and daughter during

a perilous and unpredictable journey. The climax is uniquely situated amidst the mystical atmosphere of the Kumbh Mela. The story unfolds in layers imbued with mystery.

Life around the River Ganga, is unique; a phenomenon rarely found elsewhere, even though civilisations have historically thrived on the banks of great rivers. The River Ganga is deeply associated with mythology and religious piety. The distinctive atmosphere of the river renders the film magical in various ways. Within the mystifying riverscape, the story unfolds. The Kumbh Mela and other festivals held along the riverbank may appear mundane to locals, yet they remain strikingly magical to outsiders unfamiliar with the environment. Various other distinctive and mysterious elements, including tantric practices, the mad rush into the 'sea of people' for a ritual immersion in the river, the folk singers, and the traditional attire, contribute to make the film both beautiful and distinct. These magical elements remain grounded in realism. Nevertheless, aspects of surprise and mystery emerge from the background of the main characters, who act in accordance with their upbringing, ambitions, and psychological dispositions. These situations render the film dreamlike at times, yet it never transgresses the boundaries of realism.

Kothanodi (The River of Fables, 2015), Bhaskar Hazarika's debut Assamese film incorporates elements of magical realism, fantasy, horror, and postmodernism.

The film adapted four separate well-known and grim folktales of medieval Assam, revolving around infanticide, possession, dark belief, magic and witchcraft, best described as a horror anthology.⁶

We could see a strong use of folk traditions and magic realism in *Ishanou* (1990, Aribam Syam Sharma). *Kothanodi* (2015, Bhaskar Hazarika) is also important where folk stories have been arranged in a modern, realistic and magical ways.⁷ The film is the amalgamation of macabre, irrationality and magical realism. So, when it is seen for the first time, the eyes get stunned with fear.⁸ Because you know that it is exactly what Magic Realism means actually. You treat the magic as part of the reality of that story so that it is why we want like that and we also have the authority as if you look at the way it was filmed.⁹ So, this is very much part of their life. Those ghosts keep appearing in, say, in the novel *100 Years of Solitude*. They called it Ghost, we call it bhoot.¹⁰

The elements used in *Kothanodi* are rendered magical through its stories, locales, hybridity, mystery, fantastical elements and other stylistic features. The music, including the unique background score created with traditional chants, dhool, khool, and taal, helps bring out the magical and mystical atmosphere of the movie.

Important characteristics of Magical Realism include fantastical elements, plenitude, hybridity, and authorial reticence.

Magical Realism: Manipuri Cinema

In films such as *Ishanou* (1990, Aribam Syam Sharma), *Loktak Lairembee* (2016, Haobam Paban Kumar), *Sambal Wangma* (1993, K. Ibohal Sharma), and a few others, one encounters a sense of cultural distinctiveness that is rarely found in the broader landscape of world cinema.



Ishanou (*The Chosen One*, 1990, Aribam Syam Sharma)

The film depicts an aspect of the Maibee/Maibi phenomenon and its relationship with family and society through a young woman's personal encounter with it.

Ishanou addresses the subject of the Maibee, a rare form of intermediary between humans and God. The phenomenon itself is regarded as magical, and the accompanying songs and dances enhance its mythical and mysterious qualities. Such a miraculous practice, though real and familiar to the people of Manipur and is considered mundane. As messengers or intermediaries to God, the Maibeers lead distinctive lifestyles that significantly influence the social and family structure, prompting the protagonist to

conceal her identity when interacting with her only daughter.

Fantastical Elements

The Maibee tradition, which continues to exist within the life of the Meiteis of Manipur, is regarded as mysterious, pious, and devotional. It is remarkable that such a belief persists among the people despite the rapid growth of materialism and increasingly individualistic lifestyles. The ceremonial celebration of '*Lai Haraoba*' has continued to gain momentum with each passing year, despite its origins in time immemorial. Against this backdrop, the film is based on the Maibee phenomenon, the most integral aspect of the *Lai Haraoba* festival. The mysterious life of the Maibi, including her transformation from an ordinary human into a possessed state, contains many fantastical elements. These elements become increasingly prominent as the protagonist's story unfolds.

The narrative journey of *Ishanou* is unique. Such treatment regimens for the Maibeas are found only in Manipur. It is said that certain similarities in treatment are found in some Southeast Asian countries. However, the respect Maibeas enjoy in Manipur is unparalleled elsewhere.

Plentitude

Ishanou not only addresses the phenomenon of Maibee tradition but also reflects the lifestyle of the people of Manipur. It offers glimpses into village community life and the relationships within the neighbourhood, known as the *Leikai*. The sight of a man sweeping with a broom is common in a Manipuri village. The tradition of women-run local vendor stalls, often operating in a small

corner space, is also portrayed as an iconic aspect of local life. In times of trouble, villagers gather to assist the family. The film also reflects the tradition of the son-in-law living in the household of his in-laws, particularly when the wife is the only daughter of the family. However, the family social system – whether a matrilineal system, as in the Khasi society of Meghalaya, or a patrilineal structure, as generally practiced – is not clearly explained. Nevertheless, the son-in-law is depicted as somebody originating from a distant place, such as Cachar in the state of Assam. It suggests that such an arrangement arises from circumstantial necessity.

Subtle Narrative

The film is based on a mysterious lived phenomenon, yet its presentation remains simple. In keeping with subtlety, technical elements such as camerawork, editing patterns, colour, and movement are deliberately minimised. The protagonist is violent at times, particularly during moments of transformation and possession, yet the camerawork remains restrained. This subtle, minimalist treatment is essential for representing the phenomenon realistically. Even a slight departure from realism would risk classifying the film within the horror genre. Hence, the film locates the magical within the mundane.

Local Ethos

Village life, the rural landscape, the shrine of the local deity associated with the *Lai Haraoba* festival and its performative surroundings, traditional houses, bamboo gates, and other iconic symbols and

expressions of local ethos all contribute to the establishment of the film as a unique cinematic work.

The film shooting was carried out without disturbing the rituals, even in the middle of the night. The visiting camera crew from Calcutta reportedly found the experience frightening. Most of the characters in the film were real individuals engaged in their everyday occupations. Maibee Komal performed the ritualistic songs.¹¹

Native Influence

Western, as well as the majority of Indian, observers regarded the phenomenon of possession as insane. In some parts of India, the phenomenon was regarded as an instance of black magic. However, in Manipuri culture, those who experienced possession were respected and addressed as *Emma* ('mother'). In London, the phenomenon was regarded as a therapeutic practice, specifically therapy through dance and song. It was acknowledged as a disease, and our engagement with the possessed was perceived as a mode of treatment.¹²

Artiste

Most of the characters in the film were real individuals engaged in everyday occupations. Maibee Komal performed the ritualistic songs. The film features professional actors, non-actors, and real Maibeas. Kiranmala, the protagonist, was not herself a Maibee but underwent training to prepare for the role.

Loktak Lairembee (*Lady of the Lake*, 2016, Haobam Paban Kumar)

The film narrates the story of Tomba and his wife, foregrounding the predicament of fishermen deeply affected by the authorities' "drive-out" campaign, during which huts on the *phumdis* (the floating biomass) of the lake were burned. In this context, the promotional three-line synopsis provided by the film team states: "Tomba, a depressed fisherman, gets a gun accidentally. He marvels at the gun as a means of self-protection. He transforms himself into an assertive man who begins to believe that the gun will solve all his problems".



The filmmaker situates the narrative at Loktak Lake and immerses it in the natural way of life of the people inhabiting the lake, who sustain themselves through fishing. In the process, the film redefines the relationship between cinema and reality by advocating the recording of actuality as the essence of cinema.

The film is adapted from a noted story entitled "Nongmei" from the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning book "*Lei-e Khara Punshi Khara*" (*Some lines, Some Lives*) by Sudhir Naoroibam.

Elements of Magic Realism

A particular kind of realism is evident in the narrative scheme of *Loktak Lairembee*, which at times adopts a poetic tone, though it cannot

be fully categorised under French Poetical Realism. Further exploration of other realms of realism points toward Magical Realism, particularly the Latin American style, with which the film shares notable similarities in political, social, geographical, narrative, and cultural dimensions.



Loktak Lake is well known to every Manipuri, yet many remain unaware of the fishing communities that live on the *phumdis* (floating biomass) within it. Life on the lake, though seemingly routine for the people residing there, appears magical to outsiders. Here, the miraculous is embedded in the mundane. The everyday realities of the fishermen's lives are portrayed through an extraordinarily gaze that renders them both exotic and magical.

The narrative structure and visual representation, situated within the vast water-space of the lake, further underscores this magical realist approach. The waterscape serves not merely as a backdrop but as a thematic device that enhances the film's mysterious quality. A boat enters in-frame and then goes out of frame; it then reappears from the same direction in a meticulously composed shot. This sequence constitutes a convincingly dreamlike yet realistic visual narration, rarely seen on screen.

Fantastical Elements

Loktak Lairembee engages with fantastical elements, particularly toward its climax, through the mysterious appearance of an elderly woman in a boat. She is an enigmatic figure who may symbolically embody the lake itself. She is perceived as possessing an almost omnipresent presence, as though she were a guardian spirit observing and subtly governing life around the lake. Despite being shot, she returns unharmed to deliver the bullet back to Tomba, the protagonist, who has been paradoxically empowered by incidental acquisition of a gun. The gun functions as a potential symbol of power and resistance within the context of Manipur's troubled socio-political landscape.

Tomba's encounter with the elderly woman is shrouded in mystery lacking rational explanation. This ambiguity pushes the narrative into the realm of magical realism. The scene blurs the boundaries between reality and the metaphysical, elevating the lake to a mythic, allegorical dimension. The elderly woman may be interpreted as a philosophical allegory of the lake itself. Without this mysterious and

fantastical character, the film might have remained within the bounds of conventional realism. Her presence transforms the narrative by introducing the tenets of magical realism.

Plentitude

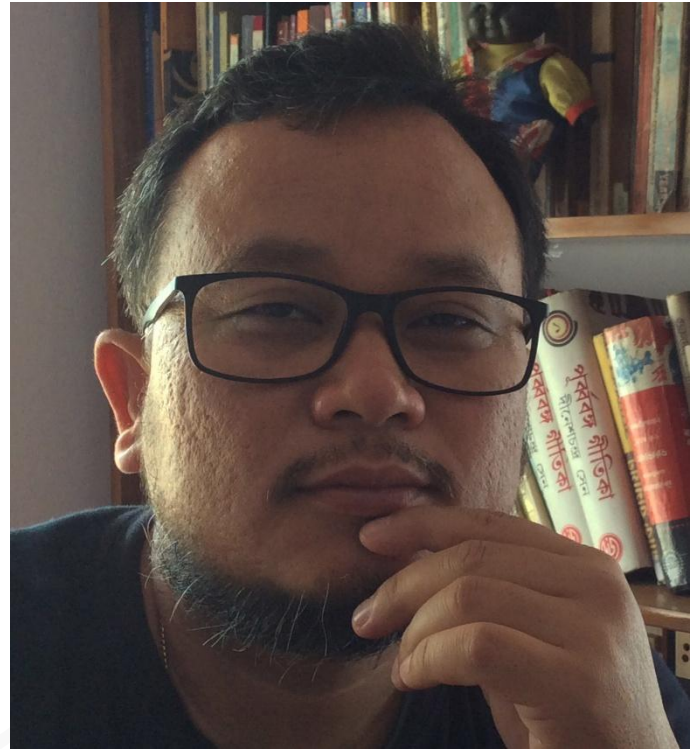
Loktak Lairembee does not adhere to a singular narrative or thematic approach. It presents a layered exploration of survival, human psychology, philosophy, and the hybridity of fantastical and realistic elements, and the tension between modern and indigenous worldviews. At its core, the film portrays the existential struggles of a marginalised community living on the fringes, physically, economically, and politically.

The film opens with a haunting image of a man in a boat looking at the charred remains of a floating house on a phumdi (biomass) in the middle of the lake. This functions as a metaphor for the anguish of a community whose very existence is under threat.

Struggling under the weight of displacement, the protagonist initially appears timid. However, his accidental discovery of a gun transforms him both psychologically and symbolically. His fear dissipates, replaced by an almost manic confidence. What begins as a desire for protection soon spirals into the temptation to misuse power.

This sudden shift leads to a deeper conflict, not just with external forces but also with the lake itself, metaphorically represented as “Mother Loktak”. The lake is not only a physical habitat but also a spiritual and cultural lifeline for the community. The man’s growing detachment from its rhythm signals a rupture between the self and the environment. Here, dream

(fantasy/philosophy) intermingles with reality, producing disorienting details.



Subtle Narration

Loktak Lairembee transports viewers into a cinematic plane that defies conventional melodramatic codes, thereby redefining the boundaries of minimalism and magical realism. At its core, the film follows the realist tradition championed by André Bazin, characterised by long shots, extended takes, and meticulously planned mise-en-scène, all of which together achieve profound, unspoken communication.

Shots and visual compositions elevate the film into the realm of high cinematic art. The magic of subtlety is exemplified early in the film, immediately after the prelude where a boat quietly enters from the right-hand side of the frame, captured in a top angle shot over the vast, bluish expanse of the Loktak lake. The scene in which the elderly woman is shot provides another moment that exemplifies Bazin's realism. Shot in a single, uncut long

take, it allows viewers to absorb the emotional and environmental gravity of the moment. The scene unfolds with austere calm, inviting the audience to reflect on the act rather than merely react to it. This choice elevates the moment into the mythical, demonstrating that even the most ordinary reality can possess magical resonance when presented through a thoughtful visual grammar. A single shot is thus made to carry multiple layers of meaning; aligning with the idea that cinema should inspire reflection on what is being seen rather than how it is shown.

Her silent omnipresence hints at a power greater than human will, a natural or spiritual force that transcends logic. The film here draws upon holistic Eastern philosophical traditions, in which the metaphysical and the physical are not separate realms but co-existing realities.

Local Ethos

The coincidental convergence of politics and fantasy in *Loktak Lairembee* is intricately supported by the region's ongoing conflict and deeply rooted belief system, manifested through a quite stoicism that permeates the narrative.

The film also invites rich and constructive debate within the cinematic discourse. At times, the interplay between

direct commentary, lived reality, and constructed reality becomes ambiguous, raising questions about the filmmaker's precise intent. This ambiguity appears deliberate, aiming to suggest the existence of a powerful omnipresent force watching over and guiding us. In Meitei philosophy, every locality, whether small or large, is believed to be inhabited or guided by a deity, some ancestral, others connected to the natural environment. These deities are revered as caretakers and provide for successive generations. The ritualistic celebration of Lai Haraoba festival is still practiced, lasting several days and involving the participation of every community member. In *Loktak Lairembee*, the spiritual dimension contributes to the film's alignment with magical realism, wherein the mystical and the ordinary coexist seamlessly.

The filmmaker exercises creative liberty to critique the proliferation of gun culture through a visually poetic underwater scene. Though this moment slightly deviates from the film's overall simplicity and subdued tone, it effectively heightens the symbolic resonance of violence, power, and redemption. It stretches the boundaries of realism to evoke a sense of the magical, something beyond the rational or the literal.

Notes

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. vol. 6, p. 136.
2. Roh, Franz, and Wendy B. Faris. "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism (1925)." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 15–32. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw5w1.5>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2025.

3. *The Baroque and the Marvellous Real*. 1975, p. 101 in Beltschewa Ana. *Uncovering Gondry's Reality: A Theory on Magical Realism in Cinema*. University of London, 2010, p. 18.
4. Edmund Yeo Yee Haeng. Application of Magical Realism in Cinema: Depicting Cultures and Traditions. *Dissertation, Graduate School of Global Information and Telecommunication Studies*, Waseda University, 2013, p. 9.
5. Ibid
6. Barpujari Manoj. Assamese Cinema: Will the Wave Last?" *Critics of Indian Cinema*, edited by Raghavendra M K & Joseph VK., Best Books, Kolkata, *FIPRESCI-India*, 2021, p. 290.
7. Interview with Utpal Borpujari, conducted by the writer, Guwahati, December 2023.
8. Phukan Himakhi. "Representation of Women in Bhaskar Hazarika's Feature Film Kothanodi: A Revisit to Assamese Folktales". *Spotaswini: A Peer-Reviewed Journal of the J.B. College of Women Cell*, p. 256.
9. "Bhaskar Hazarika on his Filmmaking Style." *The film voyage podcast: White Bird Trails*, 21st Feb. 2021. Interview by Aryan Singh.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Fa38xz0YtGw>
10. Interview with Pranjal Borah, conducted by the writer in Imphal, June 2024.
11. Interview with Aribam Syam Sharma, conducted by the writer at the residence of the former in Thangmeiband, Imphal, June 2019.
12. Ibid

Bobby Wahengbam is the recipient of the Swarna Kamal for his book, *Matamgi Manipur: The First Manipuri Feature Film* and Rajat Kamal for his film *Eigi Kona* (direction), respectively.