

Paper

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**Gender, Sexuality, and Identity in Modern Assamese Cinema:
A Study of *Aamis* (2019) and *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018)**



Aamis (2019)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines issues of gender, sexuality, and identity in contemporary Assamese regional cinema through an analysis of Bhaskar Hazarika's *Aamis* (2019) and Rima Das's *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018), employing feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975), queer theory (Butler, 1990), and postcolonial perspectives (Bhabha, 1994). In *Aamis*, the special bond between Nirmali and Sumon is shown through a metaphor of meat consumption that challenges bourgeois morality, while simultaneously exposing the complexity of female desire and agency (Bora, 2019), and also contrasting it with Nirmali's search for illicit love, which illustrates the subtleties of self-determination in Assamese urban culture. *Bulbul Can Sing* portrays a neorealist representation of rural adolescence to explore how bodies and desires are regulated within a small village community (Nair, 2019). The film draws together the stories of Bulbul, Bonny, and Suman in a way that highlights the violence of heteronormativity and the power of youthful resistance. Connecting these films demonstrates how the rural-urban divide impacts discussions on taboo, the aesthetics of desire, and identity politics, making them important additions to the New Wave of Assamese cinema and its expanding representational scope.

Keywords: Assamese cinema, gender, sexuality, queer theory, feminist film theory, postcolonial identity, *Aamis*, *Bulbul Can Sing*, regional cinema, Taboo desire

1. INTRODUCTION

This is a departure from traditional Assamese cinema, which focused on more folkloric stories or narratives with rural nostalgia, moral lessons, or literature-based adaptations that often emphasized collective identity rather than individual experiences, a trend that has continued in the last twenty years. In recent years, however a new generation of filmmakers has come up who have been very aware of these tensions between tradition and modernity, local roots and global perspectives, public morality and private desires, and who bring to the fore a deeply humanistic perspective on the lives of Assamese characters in a rapidly changing world as seen in Bhaskar Hazarika and Rima Das's films.

This paper argues that *Aamis* (2019) and *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018) represent a departure from mainstream cinema not only in their artistic merit but also in the complexity with which they address gender, sexuality, and identity in ways that challenge the moral binaries of Indian mainstream cinema (Mishra, 2002). While Hazarika's *Aamis* pushes against conventional boundaries through metaphor and taboo to explore mature female desire, Das's *Bulbul Can Sing* tackles adolescent self-discovery and queer identity within the confines of rural life. Placing these films together in their cultural contexts, each director invites viewers to consider how personal agency is influenced by social norms.

This paper also focuses on these two films in order to examine them through feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975), queer theory (Butler, 1990) and postcolonial perspectives on regional identity (Bhabha,

1994). Feminist film theory will help illuminate how female characters are presented, as well as agency navigated within works directed by both men and women. Queer theory will allow for an examination of heteronormative frameworks and alternative expressions of desire and identity. Further, postcolonial and regional identity studies will be used to highlight the specific cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts of Assam in order to examine how these contexts influence narratives, settings, and themes of both films in their attempt to advance Assamese cinema towards a more diverse and complex human understanding.



Bulbul Can Sing (2018)

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive method that uses textual and visual analysis of the films alongside concepts from feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975), queer theory (Butler, 1990) and postcolonial studies (Bhabha, 1994), viewing each film multiple times with an attention to cinematography, mise-en-scene, dialogue, and symbolic themes, with timestamped key moments grounded in the films themselves as primary sources; critical reviews and academic articles on Assamese cinema are secondary sources, along with essential texts in feminist and queer theory, and recent

research on postcolonial regional filmmaking. The connections between text, context, and theory helps to create a more nuanced interpretation of each film.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Feminist film theory offers an important perspective to analyze the visual and narrative aspects of how women are represented in Assamese cinema within patriarchal norms [Laura Mulvey's concept of "the male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975)], for instance analyzing whether female characters are presented as having agency or not, and how their desires may be portrayed as either conforming to or subverting social gender norms. This perspective allows us to analyze in more detail how Nirmali's identity is formed both from Sumon's point of view and her own sense of agency. Likewise, using this framework, we see in *Bulbul Can Sing* how Rima Das takes on a different kind of female gaze (Sharma, 2019), one that is more empathetic and non-objectifying, refraining from judgment and allowing the complexity of her characters to unfold. Queer theory (Butler, 1990) would be useful for analyzing these themes in the films, because it challenges heteronormativity as the standard framework for human relationships, and it allows us to read Suman in *Bulbul Can Sing* not as an other or a marginal figure but as a central character whose struggle against gender roles links back to broader concerns about identity formation (Ghosh, 2004). Similarly, *Aamis* can be read as a queer narrative because of its subversion of the heteronormative marital bond and sexual norms even while it has a main relationship between a man and a woman. In this case,

eating meat functions metaphorically as an expression.

Postcolonial and regional identity studies (Bhabha, 1994) emphasize how closely narratives are tied to their cultural and geographic settings. These stories settings are influenced by Assam's ethnolinguistic diversity, distinct social structure, and history of marginalization within the Indian nation-state. Guwahati's urban anonymity in *Aamis* permits transgressions that would be far riskier in a rural setting. *Bulbul Can Sing* on the other hand portrays the close-knit scrutiny of village life which poses a distinct set of difficulties because people are always conscious that their actions are never fully private. The characters struggles are not only personal as this analysis of these movies demonstrates but are also influenced by more general elements like postcolonial modernity, community ethics and regional identity.



4. Aamis: Desire, Transgression, and the Urban Cloak of Anonymity in *Aamis*

In *Aamis*, Bhaskar Hazarika tackles the idea of illicit desire in the contemporary yet traditional, cosmopolitan yet insular Guwahati and there is a kind of cultural conservatism that surprisingly survives

amidst anonymity of our times. The protagonist of story is Nirmali - a married pediatrician. Her existence is one of ritual professional politeness, and an indifferent acceptance to a loveless marriage. She lives a humdrum existence until Sumon, a young PhD student researching the meat-eating habits in North-East India, comes along. They are exoticizing each other as they exchange unusual foods in what is ostensibly a cultural exchange around their mutual culinary curiosity. Their move from societally palatable meats to the illicit eating of human flesh is a symbolic dive into transgressive intimacy (Bora, 2019) with every meal the representation of the sexual bond that they deprive themselves of having. Hazarika sidesteps the constraining glare of what tends to be the case when sexuality is set in the sights of the patriarchal panoptic through the correlation of erotic desire and eating, words or actions, even when it is full of animal intention, that are metropolitan yet remaining expressive of the sheer hotness of attraction as well (Sharan, 2019). The camera zooms in on Nirmali's face for one of the film's key scenes — a hushed dinner during which Sumon tries a dish she is unfamiliar with and speaks to her in a tone that verges on conspiratorial — and what emerges is a blend of excitement and nervousness. The audience has been given no option but to have a less explicit desire - to share her food lingering glances the strained silence that comes immediately after a bite. This is all the more intensified as the couple indulges in increasingly dangerous gastronomic escapades, proving that both are willing to break almost all moral laws in order to hold on to the emotional and sensory epiphany they have found in one another.

In addition, Jumi, Nirmali's close friend, counterpoints her behaviour in *Aamis* with the former being more subdued. Jumi can speak out what she wants, where as Nirmali's demands are influenced by cultural dictation, fixity in marriage and self-restraint. Unlike the more discreet confession of her infidelity by Nirmali in their conversation, Jumi was more forthcoming in her revelation. This time around, Jumi's pursuit of desire is unapologetically, even directly, physical; she does not appear to feel the need to be delicate. The difference between public and private female desire in a patriarchal culture, from coded and self-suppressed longing to bold and unashamed acts of rebellion is one of the film's central subjects, and this contrast gives it its vitality. Hazarika demonstrates how women navigate their desires in different ways through Nirmali and Jumi, influenced by their characters, status as women and risk-taking disposition.

The urban atmosphere of Guwahati is necessary for enabling various forms of desire. The city provides Nirmali with spaces for secrecy and transgression, where she can enjoy illicit moments beyond the public gaze in faceless lanes and nondescript restaurants. This urban camouflage allows Jumi to act still more freely within her own moral borders, and she does. Love's pursuit is both a thematic response to the state of loneliness as much as it is a response to passion, because of the anonymity of the city which makes hiding viable and loneliness possible. In a powerful moment towards the end of the film, Nirmali roams the streets, grappling with her growing desires. She looks at a street vendor's grilled chicken with a green reminiscent of a witch,

recognizing her overwhelming hunger and confronting the permanence of her decisions.

Ultimately, *Aamis* does not impose moral judgments on its characters, instead presenting a disquieting acknowledgment that once desire is ignited, it cannot be easily restrained (Bora, 2019). The film confronts the patriarchal belief that female sexuality should be confined within the institution of marriage, while also recognizing the repercussions of transcending those boundaries. By juxtaposing Nirmali's subtle, metaphor-rich longing with Jumi's open acceptance of her desires, Hazarika creates a depiction of women's desires as multifaceted, intricate, and deeply intertwined with the cultural and spatial contexts in which they exist.



5. *Bulbul Can Sing*: Adolescence, Rural Confinement, and the Fragility of Becoming

Rima Das's *Bulbul Can Sing* takes place in a rural Assamese village, where the vibrant scenery and wide-open skies stand in stark contrast to the suffocating nature of community living. The film opens by introducing its characters — Bulbul, Bonny, and Suman — who navigate the complexities of adolescence together. Their friendships are filled with the exhilarating unpredictability of

youth, yet they are also burdened by the weight of societal expectations (Nair, 2019). Bulbul, the main character, is a schoolgirl experiencing a budding sense of identity and desire, expressed through subtle and tentative actions — fleeting glances at a boy she likes and hesitations in her voice when discussing love. In contrast to the hidden urban desires of Nirmali in *Aamis*, Bulbul's aspirations are exposed; the village operates as a constant watchful presence, with its moral standards upheld through gossip, mockery, and communal scrutiny.

The friendship among Bulbul, Bonny, and Suman is a key element of the film's emotional depth. Their relationship serves as a refuge of kindness and support in a society that harshly enforces conformity to heterosexual norms (Ghosh, 2004). Bonny, who is more confident in expressing herself, contrasts with Bulbul's uncertainty, yet both remain within the limits of what their community accepts—until Bonny's own relationship draws attention to her. Suman, on the other hand, finds himself in a more vulnerable position. His gentle nature, passion for flowers, and unwillingness to conform to the strict masculinity expected of boys in the village make him a target for ridicule and violence. In one of the film's most heartbreaking moments, Suman is confronted and humiliated by a group of peers for his perceived femininity. The camera focuses on Suman's face, capturing an amalgamation of shame, fear, and quiet resilience, highlighting the harshness of enforcing heteronormative standards in environments where any deviation is viewed not only as unwelcome but also as a threat to community stability.

Das's camera operates unobtrusively, allowing life to unfold with a quiet, observant patience that reflects the village's own rhythm. However, this stillness also reveals the ongoing pressure of tradition. The rural setting is visually vast yet socially restrictive; the very openness of the landscape highlights the lack of privacy. For Bulbul, this means that even innocent displays of affection—like talking to a boy on her way home or walking next to him in the fields—are met with suspicion and moral scrutiny. The delicate nature of her adolescence is caught in this contradiction: the natural urge for self-discovery is frequently interrupted by the community's insistence on defining her before she can define herself (Sharma, 2019). The acts of rebellion in *Bulbul Can Sing* are subtle yet impactful. Bonny's openness about her feelings, Bulbul's wary exploration of romance, and Suman's commitment to being true to himself—these are small acts of rebellion that assert individual authenticity against the uniformity of rural norms (Nair, 2019). In this way, Das presents a version of the female gaze that sharply contrasts with the moralistic or punitive perspectives often found in mainstream Indian cinema. Her viewpoint is compassionate, refraining from condemning her characters for their desires and instead placing the burden of judgment where it truly belongs—on the oppressive systems that limit them.

The film's final scenes do not provide a victorious conclusion. Instead, they leave us with the unresolved tension of growing up in an environment where every decision is weighed against tradition, and where one's identity is shaped in brief moments of freedom. Bulbul's journey focuses less on

achieving a stable identity and more on navigating the perilous path of becoming — a process that is constantly at risk of being disrupted in her world. By situating the narrative within the context of Assamese rural life, Das emphasizes that these challenges are not theoretical; they are experienced daily in the conflict between the individual and the community, the modern and the traditional, and the self and the perceptions of others.

6. Comparative Analysis: Desire, Gender, and Identity Across Urban and Rural Assamese Contexts

If we examine these two films together, both *Aamis* and *Bulbul Can Sing* present two unique yet complementary perspectives on how modern Assamese regional cinema addresses issues of gender, sexuality, and identity. The contrasting geographical and cultural backgrounds—one set in the somewhat anonymous urban environment of Guwahati and the other in the closely monitored social dynamics of a rural village—affect not only the characters' actions but also the conceptualization, execution, and consequences of transgression (Sharma, 2019). In *Aamis*, the city's expansive physical and social landscape creates a unique sense of anonymity; this urban setting enables Nirmali and Suman to nurture their forbidden relationship while blending into everyday public life, meeting in restaurants, navigating busy streets, and fitting into a lifestyle that doesn't scrutinize them closely (Bora, 2019). In contrast, *Bulbul Can Sing* places its characters in a setting where anonymity is unattainable. In this environment, a chance meeting or a fleeting rumor can spread rapidly through the

community, and the visibility of every action makes even the slightest deviation from societal norms a matter of public concern (Nair, 2019).

The way each film addresses taboo reflects a contrast in their settings. In *Aamis*, the central forbidden desire unfolds in private spaces and is conveyed through metaphor — the act of consuming meat symbolizes a deeper, socially unacceptable craving (Sharan, 2019). This allows the taboo to develop gradually, protected by the ambiguity of its metaphor until it eventually ventures into the realm of the unspeakable. In contrast, *Bulbul Can Sing* portrays taboos being violated in much less controlled environments. Affection is openly displayed — such as walking with a romantic partner or singing together in a field — and the community's response is immediate and straightforward (Nair, 2019). Here, the violation of social norms is not hidden in symbolic gestures but is evident in everyday actions that the collective moral order considers unacceptable.

The differences in narrative style reflect the unique directorial approaches of Bhaskar Hazarika and Rima Das. Hazarika's filmmaking is metaphorical and psychologically complex. It invites the audience to explore desire through a carefully crafted visual and tonal style (Bora, 2019). In his portrayal, Guwahati nurtures secrecy. Intimacy can grow behind closed doors while still connecting to a larger social context. In contrast, Das uses a neorealist, observational approach that immerses viewers in village life. Handheld cameras, natural lighting, and a lack of scripted elements give *Bulbul Can Sing* an authentic feel. This presents emotions

and conflicts without much narrative influence. The result is a film that feels personal yet relatable, grounded in the real experiences of rural adolescence.

Consequently, the shared commitment to expanding the representational scope of Assamese cinema unites these films. Both movies steer clear of cliched moralism in favor of subtle portrayals of people juggling, complicated identities in settings that both empower and constrict them (Sharma, 2019). Nirmali's journey in *Aamis* is characterized by a growing acceptance of desire that defiantly defies social norms and results in deeds that conflate metaphor and reality. Instead of completely rejecting tradition Bulbul's journey in *Bulbul Can Sing* entails cautious exploration and modest acts of self-assertion that rebel against the oppressive moral codes of her environment. The main characters in both films traverse transitional areas as they are torn between tradition and modernity, duty and desire, and conformity and individuality, emphasizing the fine balance and fortitude needed to negotiate these difficulties. These films combined impact stems from both their thematic audacity and their contribution to the emerging new wave of Assamese cinema which is unapologetically anchored in regional culture while simultaneously participating in international discussions about gender and sexuality. They provide a representational space that challenges Assamese audiences to face the realities of their own social contexts by depicting taboo desires and queer relationships without passing judgment in an oversimplified manner. By doing this, Hazarika and Das enable Assamese cinema to transcend the

ethnographic perspective that formerly dominated its representation and enter a world where individual narratives are as complex contradictory and expansive as the identities they represent.

7. Conclusion:

Aamis and *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018) are two such films, and they belong to contemporary Assamese cinema, both celebrated for their analysis of the deep-seated cultural constructs of gender and sexuality as well as their non-conventional narratives that they follow (Sharma, 2019). Though they have different narrative philosophies and visual aesthetics, Bhaskar Hazarika and Rima Das share a commitment to challenging accepted moral assumptions. They do this by bringing us inside these private spaces, the sunlit but oppressive fields where Bulbul, Bonny and Suman have their adolescent awakenings, or the emotionally heightened, metaphor-laden secrecy of Nirmali and Sumon's urban relationship. These settings, despite the tonal and geographical variance are related by the vulnerability of characters whose desires run contrary to the social universe around them (Bora 2019 Nair 2019).

This escalation of the meat-sharing ritual in *Aamis*, increasingly tragic and anamorphic, becomes a metaphor and a hinge – from playful provocation of culinary norms to an ineluctable act of corporeal transgression. Nirmali's decision to acknowledge her desires and not to suppress them (Sharan, 2019) recasts female agency even as it leads to her permanent alienation from her society. Jumi, whose realism grounds her as a character much less likely to chase after the riskier aspects of what she

wants, illuminates Nirmali's choices. This highlights the variety of ways in which women react to social norms. Any facile account of a female revolt is further blurred by this complexity, which reveals that to reach an accommodation between one's own desires and the social order isn't straightforward or uniform.

Bulbul Can Sing, on the other hand, goes straight forward, dealing with issues of sexuality and identity, and when it is not hiding behind metaphor, the language is just too plain to turn a blind eye to — whispers round the corners, bullies in public space, and how the social untouchability of the normal operates in queer lives. One of the most forceful condemnations of heteronormative brutality in the film comes when Suman is physically attacked and ridiculed on account of his femininity. Bulbul's path is littered with moments of happiness and small rebellions that are nothing more than singing a song or holding on to someone as long as one can – it is not about open defiance as it is about realizing an acceptance of your own self in a society which allows precious little space and provision for privacy and none for empathy. Das's cinematography so effortlessly brings out the characters' vulnerabilities.

Collectively, these films reshape how identity politics and Assamese cinema face and reflect each other. Counting Assamese films among a broader global discourse of desire, tradition and the demure acts of resistance that shape ordinary life, they are a departure from the ethnographic and folkloric tendencies of previous regional cinema. They are also part of a significant change of the generation: that the directors focus on female points of view, queer associations and

forbidden yearnings suggests that the industry is becoming more receptive to voices that were previously marginal.

The influence of *Aamis* and *Bulbul Can Sing* can be measured by what they are inspiring to discuss in Assam and how they are being evaluated by critics a quarter of a century later. These movies address the stigma and silence that for centuries have marginalized and damned women and queer

people by showing their inner lives. These films suggest that the destiny of Assamese regional cinema is to invest a locally-distinctive world with a universal imagination, to make a cinema that is unapologetic in the streak of its gaze, confident of its cultural body and at ease with unsettling matters of resistance, desire and honouring the self-summoned life.

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