Article

Pranjal Borah

Meat, Smells, and Water as Posthuman Aesthetics: Three Contemporary Films from North East India Rethink What It Means to Be Human

The three contemporary films from India's North East, *Aamis* (Bhaskar Hazarika), *Axone* (Nicholas Kharkongor), and *The Lady of the Lake* (Haobam Paban Kumar) appear to embody posthumanist paradigms to create new readings of desire, racialization and ecologically-inflected trauma. Their film languages appear intent on foregrounding not just our own but the agency of flesh, scent and water to destabilise anthropocentric boundaries.

Posthumanism has emerged, with thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett, as a critical reaction to the Enlightenment image of the self-sufficient rational human subject. Instead, it proposes a conception of being where the human is always already networked with nonhuman animals, matter, technologies and ecologies. Braidotti proposes what she calls a "critical posthumanism" that decentres Man and demands an ethics of contact and corporeal difference; whereas that mattering in Bennett's notion of "vibrant matter" is marked precisely by the agency of nonhuman things and forces. Posthumanism is not just something that happens in the West and in Western academics. It can also be found in the

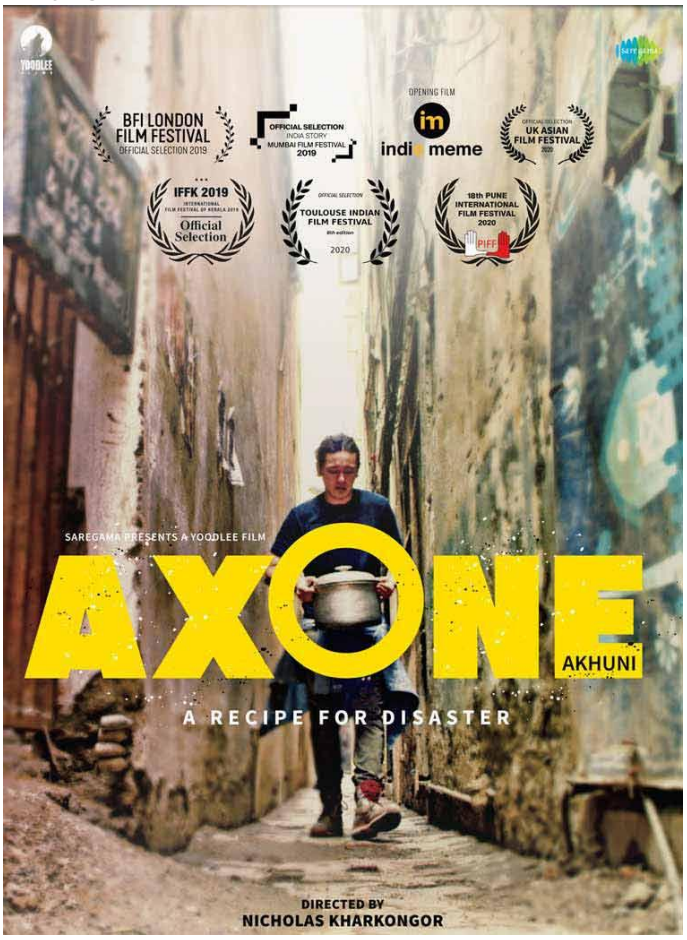
indigenous cosmologies in North East India, where animist traditions, folklore and intimate ecological awareness never suffered the strict nature-culture divide famed in Western modernity. The contemporary films from the region, which turn towards this world-view, are building a body of work, working through food, fermentation, myth and water as they work out what it means to be human in an age of ecological crisis, racial othering and fractured desire.

The three contemporary films discussed here-- Assam-born Bhaskar Hazarika's *Aamis*, Delhi-based but Nagaland-connected Kharkongor's *Axone*, and Manipuri filmmaker Haobam Paban Kumar's *The Lady of the Lake* — stage some kind of posthumanist intervention. They do that not through visual representation of theory, but through the components of film language that proprioceptively act in a sensuous, materialist cinema where the line of demarcation between human and nonhuman collapses.

Aamis (Ravening) tells the tale of *amour fou* involving Nirmali, a paediatrician in an emotionally sterile marriage, and the younger man, Sumon, whose obsession with exotic meat brings implications of something more unsettling. Their relationship is conducted almost entirely through the buying, preparation, and eating of meat — first pigeon then rabbit then bat then, finally, human. This arc allows the film to traverse a socio-psychological landscape in which repressed female desire, boxed by Assamese middle-class respectability, transubstantiates into a predatory libido that knows no species distinction between man and animal. In a patriarchal world that renders the married woman desexed and domestic, Nirmali's desire for meat—and, in the end, for Sumon's body—is a violent retort. The response to this and the cannibalistic act, as she embraces human flesh, is not solely horror, but a logical act of love that has no sanctioned outlet.

Posthumanism is the transformation of human desire into animal. The idea of becoming-animal, as presented by Deleuze and Guattari, does not take a metaphorical sense. It does, however, have to do with a real breaking open and breaking out of the organised, molar nature of a body into some relation or zone of indiscernibility with the animal. Foraging on cooked flesh to coalescing into the draconian mythic being of a snake-god (in the dream-logic in the middle)—Nirmali's arc does exactly this. Her body is, as Braidotti describes in her definition of a posthuman body, "a radically immanent vitalist entity, a body-in-

becoming" (The Posthuman) and devoid of the humanist armour of rational self-control. The psychological power of the film is that it does not present Nirmali as a straightforward monster. Instead, it invites the viewer to know her sensing subjectivity, to experience the feel of wetted flesh, to know that the distinctions between love, desire and assimilation are always tenuous. *Aamis* creates a posthuman cannibal that solves the tensions of female hunger—both literally and sexually—by rendering her into a figure of both plaintive sensibility and liberatory liberation, the self-dissolving into the adored through the subjugation of the flesh.



Nicholas Kharkongor's *Axone* relocates posthuman inquiry to the sensorium of smell, with the preparation of an odorous fermented soybean dish (axone) by a group of North-Eastern Indian migrants in Delhi serving as the narrative fulcrum. The socio-psychological axis of the film is the day-to-day racism which marks the smell-signatures of marginalised communities as unendurable. The landlady, neighbours and even by-passers respond with exaggerated revulsion, rendering the odour as a bodily violation of the "civilised" urban milieu. Sara Ahmed observes that affect will always stick to these bodies and cause "figures of hate" through accumulated associations (The Cultural Politics of Emotion). The 'axone' comes to cling to the Northeastern characters in 'Axone' and to stand as the synecdoche of their otherness.

But the film does not just bemoan this discrimination. It reframes smell as a posthumanist agent of assemblage: bodies memories and spaces. The soy, fermented, is a bright matter in Bennett's sense, a thing-power which "resists being totally abstracted from the human milieu" (Vibrant Matter). It is the odour wafting through walls and halls, rewriting the social fabric of the apartment building. Meanwhile, flashbacks to the hills where the soybeans are allowed to ferment reveal 'axone' as a temporal agent, a slowly pulsing fermentation that ties the diaspora to their ancestral soil. The crowning meal where the same "insulting" food will unite the migrant group and the previously unfriendly Punjabi hostess, suggests what Haraway would term a "tentacular" kinship, an oddkin making across both race and species (the microorganisms, the soy, the humans). In this way posthumanism renders racial tension into an atmospheric encounter where human is not the primary agent. Eating together forms a fleeting quasi-common where bodies turn to each other and the strange ferment that is nonhuman: the proper answer of course to

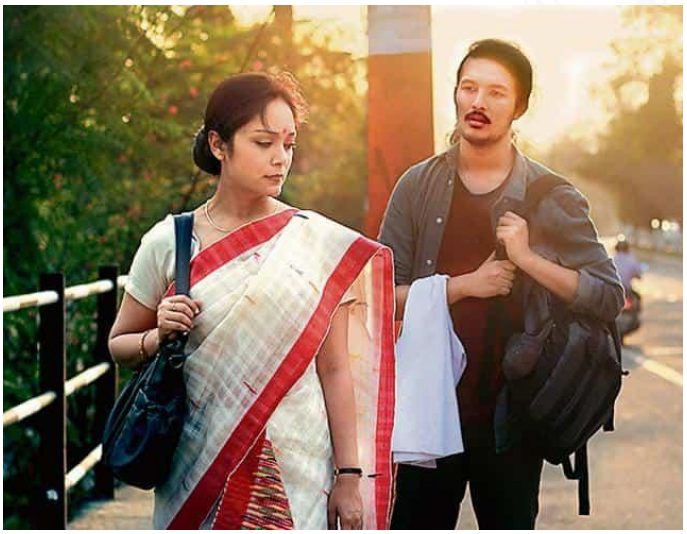
xenophobia is never to cleanse difference, but to embrace the brute materiality common to all flesh.

The situated experience of decentering the human subject in Haobam Paban Kumar's '*The Lady of the Lake'* into mythic and ecological agency undercuts anthropocentric narratives of power, survival and resistance, making his film a posthuman statement. Attending to its posthuman ethos, the minimalist film language of long takes, ambient soundscapes, sparse dialogue, and a refusal of conventional narrative closure foreground the entanglement of human, non-human, and supernatural forces. In situating its human characters — fisherfolk making their homes on the floating biomass, or 'phumdis', of Loktak Lake — the film presents them as both vulnerable and, in another sense, as nodes within a larger, lake-based ecological and political matrix. Thus they not only emphasise their precariousness as those facing state eviction drives under the pretext of environmental conservation, but also how the state seeks to portray them in a negative light, not as heroic agents of resistance but rather as villains themselves. This irony—the act of "preservation" that erases human livelihoods—reveals the shortcomings of humanist frameworks that lay nature and culture in opposition to each other. The lake itself takes on life—as a force that nourishes, threatens, and finally owns the gun back again, pulling it down and down, off as if a cliff, into the depths. The single take hanging on the revolver in the underwater debris implies that human violence is temporary: the lake is eternal and blissfully the same through the ages. On a deeper socio-psychological level, the film works through centuries of complex trauma- the ecological devastation of the lake region due to the establishment of an industrial project and pollution, the aftereffects of past political violence and political "disappearances" in the region, and the loss of indigenous ways of life. Paban's film does not treat these as separate tragedies: the lake becomes a wounded body, a victim and a mourner whose suffering is part of a continuum with that of the human communities. To focus a nonhuman entity as the centre of grief in the context of a human subject that has been methodically brutalised by armed conflict is a radical political and psychic action. It enacts what Stacy Alaimo terms "trans-corporeality": the idea that "the human is always entangled with the more-than-human world" (Bodily Natures).

The mysterious figure, the "Lady"—a goddess of the lake, an illusion, or perhaps even a ghostly observer—bridges the ontological vagueness of the film. Her appearances defy belief and go beyond myth. The audience cannot help but want a rational explanation. When she throws cartridges back to Tomba , the film never chooses whether to assign that act to supernatural intervention or psychological projection. This indeterminacy fits with the posthuman thinkers who often

eschew stable binaries (human/non-human, real/imaginary). In its ethico-aesthetic commitment to ecological entanglement and narrative openness, *The Lady of the Lake* brings to the forefront a critique of human-centred posthumanism. Human agency is tentative, situated, parasitic on—or ultimately tributary to—a more-than-human world. Haobam Paban Kumar's film is not only about ecological disaster, but also about cinematic ontology where the subject is the lake, not the human.

It is both interesting and intriguing to discover that the film language in all of these films mediates the posthuman via the sensorium. Together the three films create a form of cinema that does more than represent the posthuman. They enact the posthuman by defocusing the figure of the human and using the materiality of the film medium—sound, texture, framing, temporality—to produce a corporeal, immersive experience.



Aamis is a metaphor of haptic visuality and sonic flesh. And Bhaskar Hazarika with cinematographer Riju Das create a haptic visuality that puts one on the flesh — one can feel the meat. The close-ups remain on to test and taste species of strange meat . This method, instantly redolent of Laura U. Marks's concept of haptic cinema, closes the distance between the spectator and screen, stimulating a raw, nearly gustatory engagement. The tone is especially vital in the final act, when Nirmali eats Sumon's cooked meat. This is visually indistinguishable from previous food sequences, clad in warm colours, sumptuous sheen. Instead of travelling the alternative, the film refuses to mark human flesh as visually abject, forcing the viewer into his own position as knowing agent in the ironic aestheticization of consumption. Equally important is the sound design---every sonic detail renders the film's body porous to the body of the viewer. Midway through, the dream sequence changes register into a liquid slow motion afterlife. With Nirmali and Sumon entwined almost as serpentine figures, the camera retreating from the human outline into an abstraction of pure becoming. This stylistic break is the formalising of the dissolution that the posthuman narrative has mapped.

Nicholas Kharkongor's *Axone* is a posthuman film narrative in that it challenges stereotypical notions of the human subject with set formulations of belonging and identity. The film does not seek to portray identity as unitary or fixed but, rather, as something shaped by migration, food, language, urban spaces, and social

interactions, positioning humans always as relational. Drawing upon posthumanist scholars like Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, *Axone* challenges anthropocentric and ethnocentric preconceptions about what constitutes a "normal" Indian identity by foregrounding cultural diversity and interdependence.

The use of realism and everyday aesthetics in film language reinforces this posthuman perspective. Kharkongor achieves an immersive experience that captures the vulnerable lives of migrant communities through natural light, handheld camerawork and location shooting . The camera stays close to the characters rather than creating a dramatic spectacle to show ordinary interactions in common and shared experiences. Through long takes and medium shots, the conversations are allowed to have a realistic quality. They emphasize the shared experience between the characters rather than one playing the hero.

Sound design plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning in the film. The recurring discussion of the smell of 'axone' makes sound and dialogue central to the politics of sensory experience. Conversations in English, Hindi, Nagamese and various Northeastern languages create a multilingual soundscape which resists the imposition of a single national language. Being multilingual symbolizes a rejection of categorization and reifies identity as something inter- and intra-connected, never fixed.

The film's themes are further expanded in the mise-en-scène. The negotiations of belonging in the metropolis of Delhi are visually illustrated through narrow apartments, congested streets and shared living spaces. Costumes and everyday objects keep their cultural specificity and do not render the characters exotic, while the cooking of food becomes the visual metaphor of safeguarding memory, community and tradition in a hostile urban setting.

Importantly, *Axone* does not reduce discrimination to prejudice. Instead, urban infrastructures, housing practices, language hierarchies and cultural stereotypes coalesce to constitute the human. The film enhances the perspective of identity formation by introducing food, space, smell, and community as agents along with humans. As a result, *Axone* offers a posthuman narrative where cultural hybridity, coexistence, and relational identity replace static notions of nation, ethnicity, and self, while its realist film language effectively conveys creative audibility, visibility and spatiality.

In *The Lady of the Lake*, the film language is appropriated as posthuman aesthetic. The posthuman vision is supported by the formal choices of Kumar. The long takes, often kept uncut, induct viewers into the lake's rhythmic, non-linear temporality, defying the timed causality of human-centered drama. There is very little dialogue – mostly ambient sound; the lapping water, the sound of machinery in the distance, birdsong: all exist in a kind of sonic ecology, where the human voice is only an addition to an already complex eco system of noise. The lack of a musical score also removes most emotional manipulation, enabling the environment to "speak" through texture and atmosphere.

At the heart of Haobam's *'The Lady of the Lake'* are liquid as aesthetics and the lake as subject. Paban Kumar 's documentary-fiction hybrid adopts a liquid aesthetic that

decentres the human gaze. A lot of the time, the camera is low to the water level, so that the surface of the lake becomes the whole world, moving, reflecting, shimmering. Takes that linger over the 'phumdis', mist, and rain grant nature itself the time to impose its own temporality on the film in gentle resistance to the anthropocene drive for narrative momentum. And the underwater cinematography—roots drifting, fish darting, the almost ghostly green of submerged vegetation—visually renders the trans-corporeal crossing of human and lake. The Lady herself is filmed as just a figure moving across the 'phumdis' in traditional attire, more often from a distance so that she is in the landscape not separated from it. A portion of the track by the sound designer brings to the audience the lapping water, calls of birds, the creak of boats, floating huts . Interspersing the testimonies, recounted as voiceover by local fishermen, with fictionalised myth, brings the line between documentary and fabulation to the background and asserts that the truth of the lake is inextricable from its stories. This cinematic language does not simply represent entanglement; it immerses the viewer in it, turning looking into a kind of ecological attention.

Aamis, *Axone* and *The Lady of the Lake* seem to herald a crucial new direction in North East Indian cinema: a posthuman aesthetics grounded in indigenous cosmologies that challenges violent hierarchies of species, race and nature. Socio-psychologically, they reveal how desire can break down the barrier between humans and animals, and how racial othering is mediated by the material agency of smell and how the grief of ecological and political loss is to processed in a more-than-human register. Their film languages emerge as the vectors through which such posthuman apprehensions are 'felt' more than probably 'grasped', reclaiming cinema as a space where the horizons of the human are sensuously undone.

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Dr. Pranjal Borah is a member of FIPRESCI.