Article

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Queer in Assamese Cinema: A Creative and Critical Study of *Fireflies–Jonaki Porua*

Cinema is not just the display of images on a screen; it is a reflection of our own lives and experiences. It is a medium of telling our own stories and sometimes even breaking away from the status quo. Assamese cinema, known for its realistic and socially conscious content, has begun to feature the voices and perspectives of people who had previously been ignored. *Fireflies-Jonaki Porua* is one such movie released in 2020 by Prakash Deka. It is the first feature-length movie made in Assamese that explores queer content and is a quintessential form of storytelling in Northeastern India. It displays the idea of queerness as a normal part of life, not something sensational or extra-ordinary. In this paper, *Fireflies-Jonaki Porua* has been analyzed from the perspective of queer theory and how the audience consumes the movie. It has also attempted to use the concepts of Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Karma Lochrie to understand how Deka's movie has incorporated queer theory into the Assamese culture. With its simple and effective aesthetic, its rural setting, and its thoughtful portrayal of the transgender character Jahnu, Jonaki Porua is a subversively revolutionary film that seeks to change the way Assamese cinema treats identity, visibility, and compassion. The impact of the film is immense, as it humanizes the queer characters and makes them more relatable and accessible. This is the first step towards creating a society that is accepting and inclusive of everyone, where everyone's stories are valued and respected.

Introduction: The Cinematic Pulse of the Unspoken

In the quiet rhythm of Assamese cinema, where realism breathes through pastoral landscapes and muted human emotions, queerness has rarely found a home. For decades, the screen remained a mirror to social morality- depicting the man as strong, the woman as virtuous and love as heterosexual destiny. But cinema, like time, changes. When *Fireflies–Jonaki Porua* premiered in 2020, it brought a language that Assamese cinema had not yet dared to speak. It whispered, rather than shouted. It did not demand tolerance; it invited empathy.

The story of Jonaki Porua is a powerful one, it's about a transgender person's journey to figure out who they are. The main character, Jahnu, who later becomes Jahnabi, shows us the turmoil that people go through when they don't fit into traditional identities. What's really striking about this film is its quietness, it's not loud or flashy, but that's what makes it so strong. In the stillness of each frame, we can feel the pain and dignity of the characters. As Judith Butler once said, "gender is not something that's fixed, it's something that we perform through our actions and how we present ourselves to the world".(Butler 191). In Jonaki Porua, we see this performance of survival through the simple acts of walking, looking, and enduring. It's a beautiful and poignant portrayal of what it means to be human. The film's ability to convey such deep emotions and themes through its quietness is a testament to its strength. By exploring the complexities of identity and gender, Jonaki Porua offers a universal story that resonates with us all, regardless of our backgrounds or identities.

Tracing the Queer: From Myth to Modernity

Queerness, as a concept, has always been a part of the culture of India, even though the word itself is not very old. If we read old texts, we can see that they have always hinted at the idea that gender and desire aren't very rigid. For example, there is a character named Brihannala in the Mahabharata, which is actually Arjuna in the form of a woman during his exile. And then there is the concept of Ardhanarishvara in the Puranas, which is the union of Shiva and Shakti in one form. This, in a way, is the ancient concept of "gender multiplicity." The old texts have always shown us that Indians have always been very accepting of the idea of different concepts of gender and desire. But then the British came, and they made same-sex desire a crime under the Indian Penal Code in 1861, which effectively stopped the fluidity that had always been a part of the culture of India.

Eve Sedgwick notes that modern Western culture depends upon "the epistemology of the closet", a structure of secrecy and revelation that defines queer existence (Sedgwick 71). In India, that closet was constructed not only by colonial law but by postcolonial morality. Assamese society, though culturally rich, internalized these hierarchies of gender and respectability. Until recently, cinema reflected the same, portraying queer or third-gender characters as comic caricatures or tragic anomalies.

But queerness, as Karma Lochrie suggests, is "a category marking the sexual as

the site for a variety of cultural struggles" (Lochrie 5). It is within this struggle between identity and society, visibility and erasure- that *Fireflies–Jonaki Porua* emerges, both as cinema and as testimony.

The First Light: Queer Representations in Assamese Cinema

Assamese cinema, from Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's *Joymoti* (1935) to the contemporary independent wave, has largely focused on sociopolitical realism- land, class and moral conflict. Gender, when depicted, was almost always heteronormative. When queer-coded characters appeared, they were often used for comic relief, a form of "othering" through laughter.

In movies like Local Kung Fu 2 and Bidur Bhai 2, you see queer or transgender characters, but they're not the main focus - they're more like something to make the story interesting. Then, out of nowhere, came *Fireflies–Jonaki Porua*, a voice that spoke from the heart. The film is set in the countryside, with the peaceful Brahmaputra river as its backdrop, and it tells an Assamese story in a way that feels truly Assamese. There are no big statements or flashy moments - just the quiet pain of figuring out who you are.

Fireflies of Identity: The Narrative of Becoming

Jahnu, a transgender character, is the main character of the movie "Jonaki Porua" who faces a lot of difficulties in a world that doesn't accept him and instead teases and rejects him at every step of his life. Yet, despite facing all these difficulties and being teased and abused by people around him, Jahnu has a dream of becoming a woman and living his life as a woman, escaping the clutches of the society that does not want to let him live his life the way he feels it should be lived. The story of the movie is quite easy to follow; however, it is quite deep and doesn't require any dramatic events to happen in order for the story to move forward. It is more focused on the small events of daily life, such as going to school on foot, taking a bath in the river, or simply sitting quietly after dinner. The way the camera captures these moments is almost like meditation, it's so calm and gentle. It's as if the camera is observing the main character, Jahnu, with a lot of care and attention. This style of filmmaking reminds me of what André Bazin once said about the power of images in movies. He believed that when cinema is at its best, it shows us the truth rather than trying to manipulate us. Jahnu's sister Jumu, also queer, hides her identity under social conformity. She rides a scooter, wears shirts and cuts her hair short, traits that society tolerates because they mimic masculinity. Jahnu, however, embodies femininity; and in doing so, she violates the unwritten law of gender hierarchy. Jumu's silence becomes both a shield and a wound. As Butler argues, gender identity is always relational, constructed through power and resistance (Butler 194). The siblings are thus a reflection of two different survival strategies within the same social confinement. In a world where social demands are overwhelming, the relationship between Jahnu and Palash is a precarious thing. As a closeted homosexual, Palash is caught between his love for Jahnu and his need to maintain his social image. When Palash denies his relationship with

Jahnu, the latter is devastated—but not in a dramatic or over-the-top way. Rather, she is devastated in a quiet and existential way, a way that reflects the reality of what it means to be true to oneself in a world that often demands otherwise. In a poignant scene, Jahnu asks Palash, "If I become a woman, will you marry me?" The silence that ensues is deafening—a poignant reminder of the difficulties that queer relationships often face in conservative environments. Palash's inability to answer Jahnu's question says a great deal about the demands of society that often require people to live a lie, and the toll it can take on those who love them.

Cinematic Language: The Aesthetics of Silence

The movie Jonaki Porua has this visual style that really ties into its politics somehow. I mean, Prakash Deka uses light and rhythm along with sound to show what queerness feels like inside, like this world thats almost visible but not quite. The cinematography stays away from anything too showy, it goes for long takes in low light and just lets the nature look pretty on its own.

The river shows up all the time, and it kind of mirrors how Jahnu is always moving, fluid and not stuck in one place. That makes sense for the character I think.

The title Fireflies, it reminds me of how fireflies light up for just a second in the dark, and thats sort of like queer lives in the story. They glow briefly but mostly stay hidden in this big shadowy space where no one really sees them. Its a quiet way to say something about invisibility.

Choosing a rural spot in Assam feels important too. Most queer stories happen in cities where theres more room to be free, but here Deka shows what its like out in the countryside. Everyone knows everyones business, so secrets dont last long. That part stands out, it gets a bit messy trying to hide who you are.

The music helps set the mood right from the start. Its simple stuff, beautiful in a way that echoes Assams folk tunes. I like how it mixes in sadness with a little hope, even if its not overdone. When the camera lingers on Jahnu's face like that, it pulls you in somehow. You start feeling this real link to him, almost like he's not just some image on screen but an actual person with thoughts and everything. That stands out a lot. It's kind of the opposite of what Laura Mulvey talked about with the gaze thing. Instead of turning the queer body into an object for people to stare at and then dismiss or whatever, the film treats it differently. With respect, I mean. Not making a big show out of it at all. The camera seems to be paying attention, even in those quiet moments where nothing much is said. It's like it's handing Jahnu a way to speak, you know, and that feels strong.

The editing catches my eye too. No quick jumps or going back in time with flashbacks. It just keeps moving forward, slow and steady. That pace makes you sit with the film, think about it more. Christian Metz calls something like that voyeuristic empathy, I guess. We're not only looking at Jahnu from outside. The movie wants us to step into her perspective, see how things look from there. It gets a bit messy trying to explain it fully, but yeah. Some might say it's too slow, others probably like how it builds that closeness.

Filmmaker and Context: Queer Activism through Cinema

The making of Jonaki Porua is a powerful statement in itself. By working together, director Prakash Deka and producer Milin Dutta, who are both deeply rooted in the queer community, wanted to create something genuine and real, rather than just something new and different. What's really interesting is that Dutta, a transgender man and a well-known activist from Assam, had actually organized the state's very first Queer Pride Parade back in 2014. When he teamed up with Deka, they were able to turn their activism into a work of art. This collaboration is a great example of how activism and art can come together to create something truly meaningful. The movie was made without the support of big film studios, instead, it was a project that the community came together to work on, with filming taking place in various locations such as Nalbari, Guwahati, and Tezpur. Deka remembers how the villagers, who initially made fun of the film's subject, eventually became supportive of the crew. This experience showed that cinema can be a powerful tool for education. In an interview, Deka shared his thoughts on the matter, saying: "I believe that the key to a great artwork is its ability to honestly and simply portray reality, and that the heart of any creative work lies in the emotions it evokes." The movie's big win at the 67th National Film Award and several Assam State Film Awards is not just about getting official recognition - it's a sign of a bigger change in our culture. Benjamin Daimary, the actor who played Jahnu, made history by becoming the first queer actor in India to win a National Award. His achievement changes the way we think about "representation" - it's not just about being seen, but also about being accepted and valued. This is a significant step forward, showing that our society is slowly becoming more open and accepting of diversity.

Reading the Spectator: Empathy and the Assamese Gaze

I guess the whole idea of who is watching queer films really gets to the center of it all. Like, what kind of gaze are they using, and what do they even expect to see. In Assamese culture, people have gotten used to treating queer characters as just funny sidekicks or some kind of warning story. But Jonaki Porua kind of changes that right away. It pulls the viewer right in, no space between you and whats happening on screen.

That reminds me of what Mulvey talks about in her essay on visual pleasure and narrative cinema. She says mainstream movies put the audience in this controlling patriarchal gaze. In Deka's film though, it feels different, softer somehow. You are not in charge looking down. Instead, the film wants you to feel some compassion. Jahnu's pain is not something you just watch from afar. It hits you, like you are sharing it too. The way they shot it all natural, with shaky hand-held camera and not much talking, plus those real unpolished faces, it blurs everything between the story and actual life.

From what I read, this fits with Thomas Elsaesser's idea of a cinema of experience. (Elsaesser 44). The movie makes you participate emotionally, not just sit back and observe. Empathy turns into something political, I think, like choosing to look without judging right away.

For folks in Assam, this hits even harder. The film shakes up old movie habits and the way culture sees things. It sort of teaches you over again that queerness is not some outsider thing, not just from cities or weird. Its part of being Assamese, just human and everyday. That part stands out, but im not totally sure how far it changes everyone.

Queer Bodies, Social Violence and the Politics of Care

The body, in Jonaki Porua, becomes both the battlefront and the sanctuary. The taunts that Jahnu faces, "Ki he ladies?" (What's up, lady?), "Oi Madhuri!" (Hey Madhuri!) are an act of verbal violence, an exercise of control over the body. Her body becomes public property, subject to constant surveillance. Yet, in the end, the decision to undergo gender-affirming surgery becomes an assertion of ownership over her body.

Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, which is the control of bodies through social discipline, can be applied to this scene. Society exercises control over Jahnu's body through ridicule and rejection. Her resistance to this control is through transformation. Her becoming Jahnabi is both medical and metaphysical, an assertion of selfhood in the face of social erasure (Foucault 136).

The film's emotional climax is not a revelation scene but a moment of quiet peace. Jahnabi, now herself, stands by the river. The fireflies glow in the dusk. This stillness is revolutionary. The film refuses the tragic trope of queer death; instead, it ends in continuity , the persistence of life, love and visibility.

Reception and Legacy

While Jonaki Porua had a small release, its influence on Assamese viewers and queer rights activists was significant. "Generally, queer characters are portrayed as comic relief. Their struggles are never shown seriously. Jonaki Porua is different. It portrays a queer life in depth and realism. It is sad that such a film did not reach the general audience," said human rights activist Arpana Choudhury.

This quote by Arpana Choudhury shows that authenticity is often at odds with popularity. However, word of mouth is helping the film spread beyond Assam, creating a new chapter in Indian regional queer cinema.

For young Assamese filmmakers, Jonaki Porua is not just a film but a doorway to themes that were once taboo. It is not just a film but a foundation, something that other filmmakers can work with.

The Creative-Critical Lens: Between Empathy and Aesthetics

Good film criticism is not really criticism at all, but rather a form of conversation. The critic and film and seeing and feeling, converse with each other. Writing about Jonaki Porua is like being in its silence, listening to things that cannot be said. The film is not sensational. It does not politicize queerness; it humanizes it. The realism is akin to the Assamese film movement in its early days, an ethos of empathy and sincerity that we see in Bhabendra Nath Saikia's humanistic social dramas. Jonaki Porua is not concerned with visual grandeur or narrative surprise. Its beauty is in its emotional authenticity. Every shot seems to say, in hushed tones, that "to exist is to resist."

This viewer, both creative and critical, recognizes in this film a conversation between aesthetics and ethics, beauty not as beauty but as care. We see in its fireflies "flickers of light that refuse extinction."

Conclusion: Toward a Cinema of Compassion

Fireflies–Jonaki Porua, however, is not merely a tale of a transgender woman but a tale of a cinema learning to feel differently. It poses the question of what it means to see, to empathize, to understand. In this manner, it broadens the moral and aesthetic possibilities of Assamese cinema.

Fireflies–Jonaki Porua, in fact, helps bridge the chasm between Western intellectual discussions of queer theory and the lived realities of indigenous cultures. As Butler puts it, "the cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain identities cannot exist" (Butler, 24). However, *Fireflies–Jonaki Porua* subverts this matrix, declaring that queer identities not only exist but flourish in the lands of Assamese culture.

Fireflies, ephemeral and glowing, however, become a metaphor for resilience. And in the light of fireflies, a new kind of Assamese cinema emerges, a cinema that does not mock pain, a cinema that listens, a cinema that loves. And perhaps that is the greatest form of criticism, not to judge but to see the light in the dark.

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