

# Retelling Folk as Gothic in *Kothanodi* and *Aamis*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the retelling of the regional folk imaginary as Gothic narrative in two Assamese-language feature films by Bhaskar Hazarika, a filmmaker from Assam in Northeast India. In the first movie, *Kothanodi* (*The River of Fables*, 2015), Hazarika chooses four folktales popular in Assam compiled in *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (*Old Mother's Wise Tales*, 1911) in the early twentieth century by Lakshminath Bezbarua, a doyen of Modern Assamese literature. Hazarika, in his narrative, brings to the fore the macabre psycho-social dimensions of the tales and interrogates the conflicting gender dynamics present in them. His handling of the film narrative explicates dark overtones that give way to a distinct political ecology. Hazarika's second film, *Aamis* (*Ravening*, 2019), takes on the postcolonial fault lines of a differentia that marks the Northeastern folk culture as distinctive from that of the Indian subcontinent since the food culture of some of the Northeastern peoples is often stigmatised in the subcontinental metropolises as bizarre. Hazarika narrativises the nuances of this suppression in terms of a displacement of desire vis-à-vis the dismantling of normativity around food habits. The film narrative exemplifies a horrifyingly morbid turn whereby a unique instance of gastro-ethical transgression is theorised. The aim of the essay is to unravel the political underpinnings of the discourse instituted by these narratives by examining the cultural conditions specific to India's Northeast through a retelling of the folk as Gothic.

**KEYWORDS:** India's Northeast, film narratives, folk horror, transgression, gastronomic horror, postcolonial Gothic

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## **I. Introduction: The Postcolonial Poetics of the Gothic**

Gothic cultural productions can be looked at from a political perspective in a postcolonial setting. In its original expression, the Gothic as a Western configuration was the aesthetic other of the Enlightenment “reason,” with its signature thrust on the irrational and the fantastic. While this conception of the Gothic is predominated by the romantic and aesthetic values of the cultural opuses it germinates, a postcolonial understanding of the Gothic entails a political engagement of resistance notwithstanding such values. As it is observed by Gina Wisker, postcolonial Gothic writers aim at decoloniality,

us[ing] the power of the Gothic, its revelations of dark hidden secrets, legacies and haunting in the present to expose, then move beyond oppressive misrepresentations of people, places and cultures historically constructed as different, “othered” in colonial and imperial contexts. (105)

This postcolonial makeover of the Gothic and the outspread of the same in contemporary world literature and popular culture finds definition, *inter alia*, in what has come to be known as “globalgothic” (See Byron), accounting for the global circulation and diffusion of the Gothic in the era of transnational capital. However, as has been stated by Wisker, such global promulgation of culture cannot be isolated from its political underpinnings.

The globalisation of media and popular/consumer culture is still based upon an assumption of the unbeatable Western (American) domination, and the arguments are focused on how the Rest resist, imitate or appropriate the West. (Iwabuchi et al., qtd. in Balmain 119)

Speaking of the recent upsurge of the Gothic in popular cultural forms and practices in Asia, which is integral to and, conversely, resistant to the pervading epistemological implications of the globalised world order, Colette Balmain envisages the emergence of a pan-Asian Gothic:

In [pan-Asian gothic] the local and/or locale gives rise to ghostly returns, returns whose very existence can be interpreted in part as an act of resistance to the domination of Western cultures across Asia. (120)

Drawing partly from Susan Napier's study of modern Japanese literature, and partly from her own observations on the Japanese popular front, Balmain identifies the use of the "fantastic" therein as a mode providing a mechanism through which to subvert Western discourse and asserts the significance of returning to indigenous folk traditions and rural myths as a means of resistance (120).

Katarzyna Ancuta's scholarship on Asian Gothic vis-à-vis emergent Southeast Asian Gothic popular culture shares a similar note of resistance. She emphasises the importance of exercising caution even in applying the nomenclature "Gothic" to the Asian cultural imaginary, as the understanding of the Gothic demands adjustments to suit local Asian cultural contexts (429). Be that as it may, Ancuta's survey of Southeast Asian traditions registering supernaturalism and horror reveals instances of what she terms everyday horror which reveal the postcolonial trajectories of the genre under discussion. However, she makes a clear demarcation between postcolonial Gothic exponents who replicate the Western Gothic import to conjure up the Asian imaginary as *doing* Gothic and those who dismantle such established Western norms to fashion a political counterpoint as *being* Gothic:

The writers *being* Gothic are concerned of political or social horrors, discrimination, abuse of power, corruption, and the resultant violence of everyday life. (Ancuta 430)

This postcolonial takeover of the Gothic and the formation of its Asian specificities find pertinence in the context of the twenty-first-century popular culture of India's Northeast, which lies in the interstices of the South Asian and Southeast Asian geo-cultural milieu. In British colonial historiography, the Northeastern region of India was branded as a frontier and an exotic "other" because of its ethnic and geo-cultural distinctiveness. The region's affinities with East and Southeast Asia that stood contrary to the wonted structures of colonial governance also contributed to the fossilisation of its aloofness from

the rest of South Asia. The resultant perceptions persisted in the postcolonial subcontinental imaginary. As against this, India's Northeast has been a culturally vibrant melting pot of numerous communities with their respective folk traditions.

Whereas the supernatural and the fantastic have been ever-present in the Northeastern folkscapes which are replete with ballads, myths, legends, tales, etc., the rendering of the same in a modern frame of narrativity took place only with the emergence of print culture in the region in the nineteenth century. It was facilitated by British colonial rule over the region, especially in the Brahmaputra valley, which is roughly the present state of Assam in postcolonial India. The colonial forms of representation of the region are comprised of many attempts at ethnographies and historiographies by the legitimised standards of European print modernity. Even the postcolonial accounts of the northeast are heavily influenced by colonial forms of knowledge about this region which exemplify a continuity of practices central to colonial modernity. The postcolonial projection of the Northeast as a troubled space owing to its complex geopolitics continues to produce narratives of realistic overdeterminism. Against all this, the destabilising force of the fantastic rooted in the folk imagination of the people of the region constitutes a strong potential for resistance as well as promises a fervent counteraction.

It is noteworthy here that attempts at adapting the folk imaginary embedded in the vernacular story-telling traditions that would highlight the political potential of the horror within them—defined by Ancuta as *being Gothic*—emerged in the region's literary front only recently. This is surprising because in postcolonial times the style, as well as the genre embodying the semblance of the Gothic, emerged in the region side by side with the popularity of vernacular little magazines—something which Ancuta has indicated by the phrase *doing Gothic* (430). Citable here is Amit R. Baishya's take on Assamese writer Dhrubajyoti Borah's fiction as an intrinsic instance of horror induced by political terror. Baishya maintains that horror in Borah's fiction entails narratives around "hauntological spaces" produced by the tumultuous confrontation between the state and the independentist groups in Assam. These narratives based on local belief systems produce what he denominates as the "Gothic poetics of state terror" (18). This exemplifies a distinct strand of folk-based Gothic representation vis-à-vis the mainstream literary discourse of the region. However, given the spectacular rise of the popular media in the region

in the twenty-first century, varied intermedial ways of framing the translation of the folk into Gothic are now open for scholarly attention.

Signalling this departure with a strong sagacity of genre in the regional popular front, two Assamese-language feature films, *Kothanodi* (*The River of Fables*, 2015) and *Aamis* (*Ravening*, 2019), directed by Bhaskar Hazarika, an emergent filmmaker from the region, retell the folk imaginary of the region in the form of Gothic narratives. Although Assamese cinema has a considerably long history since its inception in the 1930s, horror as a genre has never been traditionalised as a mainstream preoccupation in it. Hazarika's ventures are thus a potential milestone in the genre's postcolonial history in the region. Ancuta and Valanciunas' recent foray into the South Asian Gothic, and their observation of it as something which emerged entirely as a popular cultural form in the subcontinent, is noteworthy here. For them, Gothic is a distinctive aesthetic in the postcolonial pop-cultural ecosystem which gets "consumed, appropriated, translated, transformed, and even resisted" like other global forms (Ancuta and Valanciunas 4).

Vindicating such a distinctive aesthetic, *Kothanodi* and *Aamis* represent narrative artistry in their negotiation of the folkloric in the realm of the Gothic. The ongoing objective of this essay is to account for these cinematic narratives as having their roots in such discourses which are ingrained in the folklife of this region and to examine them as politically predilected postcolonial Gothic retellings that imbricate counteractive forces and resistance.

## II. *Kothanodi* and the Dismal Political Ecology of Gender

In the early twentieth century, Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864-1938), a doyen of Assamese literature and culture, was instrumental in the textual dissemination of several folktales orally transmitted from generation to generation in the Brahmaputra valley through his collection of folktales titled *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (*Grandmother's Tales*, 1911).<sup>1</sup> This compilation, featuring tales extensively employing fantastic and supernatural elements, can be read as

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<sup>1</sup> Although "burhi aai" in Assamese means the grandmother and thus the standard translation of *Burhi Aair Sadhu* is *Grandmother's Tales*, the title of Bezbarua's collection is variously translated into English: in Pallavi Baruah's translation, the title reads as *Grandma's Tales* (2006) whereas in the translation of Nripen Dutta Baruah, it is *Old Mother's Wise Tales* (2017). The print version of the former and the ebook version of the latter, published in 2020, are used for the purpose of this essay.

Bezbarua's answer to colonial knowledge formation in and about the region which was exclusively reliant on the tradition of Western realism.

Bezbarua, as one of the leading figures of Assamese print modernity, posited a powerful voice with his literary oeuvre. By compiling supernatural figures handpicked from local folklore, Bezbarua asserted the expression of the rich folk imagination of the people. In this way he also contested the formation of hegemonic knowledge about the region circulated by colonial discourses. However, bluntly establishing the political potential of the tales as a strong counter-cultural force was difficult at that time. With the astounding rise of pop media and digital-visual cultures in the region in the twenty-first century, rendering the stories in transformative ways has become possible. In *Kothanodi*, Bhaskar Hazarika chooses four tales from Bezbarua's book and gives them a distinctly political colour highlighting the element of horror dormant in them as an alternative and resistant aesthetic.

Hazarika chose and bound together four stories set in pre-colonial Assam from Bezbarua's book, namely "Tejimola," "Champawati," "Ow Kunwori," and "Tawoyekor Sadhu." He then based his versions of them on the conflicting power relations around the question of gender manifest in each. It is noteworthy that the tales in Bezbarua's collection are structured in such a way that they appear suitable for children and young adults to read. In *Kothanodi*, Hazarika makes use of this suitability but retells the four stories as a discreetly manoeuvred narrative of transcendence meant for an adult audience. Whereas the tales in Bezbarua's hands are fables explicating folk worldviews that incorporate human and non-human agential dynamics, Hazarika, through his retelling, highlights the uncanny and deviant female subjectivities within the pre-colonial patriarchal social setting and negotiates a political ecology of horror.

In Bezbarua's collection, "Tejimola" is an oft-cited tale that has kindled numerous retellings across different cultural domains in Assam. Set in pre-colonial Assam, it is the story of Tejimola, a teenage girl, who is brought up by her father, a merchant, and her stepmother after her mother's death during her birth. While the father loves and dotes on his daughter, Tejimola's stepmother—a barren woman—hates Tejimola but avoids showing it for fear of her husband. Subsequently taking advantage of the merchant's long absence from home due to a business trip on the river, the stepmother hatches a plan not only to torture Tejimola but also to get rid of her permanently before her

husband returns home. Accusing Tejimola of damaging an expensive pair of clothes she gave Tejimola to wear at her friend's wedding, the stepmother murders Tejimola by grinding her head with a *dheki* (pedal mortar) and secretly buries her in the backyard of the house. But Tejimola later springs from the soil in the form of a pumpkin plant, attracting the attention of passers-by. Fearing that she would be caught, the stepmother pulled up the plant and threw it a little away from the house beside an open field where the small boys play. There Tejimola sprang from the soil again in the form of a lemon tree. In this manner, in Bezbarua's story, Tejimola takes several non-human forms and eventually encounters her father in the form of a lotus flower after being thrown into the river by her stepmother. Recognised, rescued, and brought back first in the form of a *mynah* bird and then in human form again through an emotive as well as occult intervention by her father, the injustice done to her is compensated for.

On an apparent level, "Tejimola" can be read as a typical Cinderella tale, with the archetype of the cruel stepmother causing a crisis leading to a climax that serves poetic justice to the protagonist. However, unlike most Cinderella stories across the globe, the tale of Tejimola is filled with blood and gore. Stepping beyond the structurality of the coming-of-age impulse, Hazarika's Tejimola vindicates inhuman immortality through her resurrections in different forms, defeating the severe bodily violence inflicted on her. This makes the narrative a standalone parable of gender-based violence, redemption, and justice. As Hazarika's adaptation aims at sporting a nuanced expression of the macabre psycho-social dynamics of gender implicated in the tale, horror proves to be the most suitable vehicle to translate the dismal implications of gender and the subversive potential of its postcolonial representation.

In Hazarika's filmic retelling, Senehi (played by Zerifa Wahid)—Tejimola (Kasvi Sharma)'s stepmother—is a lonely woman, uncared for and left at home by her husband under the charge of Tejimola's caretaking. At night she visits a "male" water spirit at the riverside with whom she supposedly commits adultery and is instigated to design forms of torture to get rid of Tejimola. The evil embodied by the stepmother here is an outcome of the psycho-social circumstances she undergoes: sexual repression due to the long absence of her husband, which led her to the evil spirit, and anxiety caused by the societal stigma of being barren. The patriarchal forms of power manifested in the culture typical to the region deny a woman sans childbearing ability any legitimate position in the society. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's celebrated feminist

poetics rationalising the psychological with the somatic demonstrates that “female diseases” like hysteria are caused by patriarchal socialisation in several ways (53-54). The shadow of the sociocultural circumstances of the nineteenth century is also not uncommon in the postcolonial literary imagination.

In the nineteenth century, . . . the complex of social prescriptions these diseases parody did not merely urge women to act in ways which would cause them to become ill; nineteenth-century culture seems to have actually admonished women to *be* ill. (Gilbert and Gubar 54)

While this condition of *being* ill governs the stepmother’s disposition, taking the form of a vehement co-text of the wrongs done to Tejimola, it also puts Tejimola in a contrary position in the equation of justice and rights. In terms of gender justice, Tejimola, in Hazarika’s narrative, comes to embody a resistant subjectivity and is meant to undergo reincarnations transcending her circumstances, unlike her stepmother’s irredeemably febrile existence under the toxic influence of spectral figurations of patriarchy. In Hazarika’s movie, the reincarnation saga is cut short, and Tejimola is shown to have taken the shape of a plant quickly growing from the ground where her body is buried while the stepmother looks on, stunned with horror. The intricate positionings of power put in place by patriarchy posit Tejimola between the binarism of life and death, but she proves herself to be a resistant life force reluctant to submit to the governing as well as obliterating forces. The assertion of agency by Tejimola has twofold implications: first, it formidably challenges the essentialist notions of human agency through convergence of non-human or inhuman subjectivities and that of the human and also debunks the humanistic overdeterminism engendered by Enlightenment humanism; second, by foregrounding gender-based violation, violence, and also vulnerability, it puts forward a postcolonial response to the Gothic by deeply politicising the very condition of *being* fantastical.

Notwithstanding the intervention of a century, patriarchal forms of power have persisted through the times of Bezbaruua till the times of Hazarika, and this is arguably the greatest incitement in the present century to retell Bezbaruua’s stories in varied ways. In Hazarika’s retelling, horror turns out to be the objective correlative in visualising the prevailing evils of patriarchal excesses



that engender a smothering atmosphere in the narrative. This atmosphere extends over to the retellings of all four tales typifying emblemized morbidity as Hazarika relates them all to the eerily unsettling question of gender and the story of “Tejimola.”

Hazarika’s Gothic retelling builds the interconnections among the tales in terms of thematic integrity around gender justice, unlike Bezbarua’s versions. In *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, “Champawati” is a long tale narrating various circumstances of Champawati, the teenage daughter of a rich man’s unfavourite wife, and her husband—a demi-god in the guise of a python. The first part of the story tells us how the demi-god in the form of a python gets attracted to Champawati and vows to marry her. Mistaking the python to be a common carnivore, the second and the favourite wife of the rich man, who also has a daughter of the same age as Champawati, out of jealousy towards the co-wife, convinces to get Champawati married to the python so that Champawati will be devoured by it. Contrary to her contrivance, on the wedding night, the demi-god in the guise of the python bedizens Champawati with golden ornaments from head to toe. Utterly shocked at such a development and getting more and more jealous of Champawati, the favourite wife hastily plans to get her daughter also married to a random python caught by her servants in a forest expecting a similar kind of miracle. But according to its instinct, the python swallows the girl on her wedding night and the villagers recover her corpse by slitting open the python the next day.

Although Bezbarua’s “Champawati” is comprised of several subsequent episodes where various adventures of Champawati and her husband, the python cum demi-god, are narrated, Hazarika chooses only a portion of this first part of the tale for his filmic retelling. In Hazarika’s version, Dhoneswari (Seema Biswas), the favourite wife of the rich man who happens to be a dominating woman, prepares for her daughter’s wedding ceremony. Unlike Bezbarua’s version, Hazarika portrays Dhoneswari’s daughter to be Tejimola’s close friend and describes her wedding to be the same wedding that Tejimola attends. But, Tejimola is shellshocked to realise that the expensive pair of clothes her stepmother gave her gets damaged without her knowledge and leaves the ceremony for home abruptly. Tejimola’s behaviour enrages her stepmother subsequently. In his narrative, Hazarika establishes this link between the stories as both Tejimola and Dhoneswari’s daughter suffer because of the depraved designs of their mothers.

The most gripping yet pathetic part of this retelling occurs when Dhoneswari makes her bed near the newlywed couple's bedroom to overhear her daughter's joyous voice after supposedly getting embellished with riches by the python. As her daughter exclaims her name with horror in a raspy voice when the python starts swallowing her body part by part from her feet, Dhoneswari merrily tries to soothe her in vain by saying that the meaning of her discomfort is that her husband, the python, is putting on her exquisite ornaments.

Premised on a gender subtext, the narrative presents a conflicting scenario where although portrayed as a dominant and nearly matriarchal figure in the tale, Dhoneswari falls victim to her misjudgement as greed for material possession takes the better of her. As a consequence, she pays the heavy price of losing her daughter to a non-human predator. A closer look at the narrative demystifies the darkness immanent in the story—it is the everyday predatorial power of patriarchy that controls the subjectivity of Dhoneswari and renders her agency redundant. In Hazarika's narrative, the python is the trope of the typical patriarchal predator that capitalises on the inequitable institution of marriage between a man and a woman to extend its apparatuses of control and subjugation.

In the third tale of *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, "Ow Konwari," a king is described to have two wives. The younger of the two gives birth to an elephant fruit (*Dillenia indica*), widely-consumed in the Brahmaputra Valley, instead of a human being. Out of shame and frustration, the queen throws it away but, unknown to all except for a prince from a different territory, the elephant fruit rolls on its own to the riverside. There a beautiful young woman secretly emerges from it, takes a bath and goes back inside again. Hazarika modifies this tale to a considerable extent and contextualises it in the circumstances of the rustic commoners. In Hazarika's narrative, the person who gives birth to the elephant fruit is an ordinary village woman, Keteki (Urmila Mahanta). After giving birth her family, including her husband, considers such an uncanny natal instance disgraceful and disowns her. As she starts living alone in a different village, she is discovered by Tejimola's father, the merchant who is in that village on a business trip and observes that she is being followed by a rolling elephant fruit wherever she moves. The merchant pledges to assist Keteki in unravelling the secret of the elephant fruit with his sorcery skills. Eventually,

with the occult intervention of the merchant, Keteki is able to rescue a girl child—apparently her daughter—who was living inside the elephant fruit.

The fourth tale compiled by Bezbarua in *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, titled “Tawoyekor Sadhu,” is arguably the most macabre one in the collection. In this tale, a young man and his wife bury three of their new-born infants alive one after the other in an earth-filled pond in the backyard of their house as per the advice of Tawoi (the close friend of the young man’s father),<sup>2</sup> a “discerning” old man upon whose wisdom the young man’s late father had placed immense trust. On his deathbed the young man’s father had urged his son to blindly abide by the instructions of his friend, and ever since the young man has obediently complied with all the advice and instructions of his Tawoi. Although it was extremely painful for the young man to murder three of his offspring, among whom two were males and one female, the young man’s wife gives birth to their fourth child, who is a male, and reluctantly brings him to Tawoi for his advice. But, to their utter surprise, Tawoi asks them to clean the child up and keep him with them with care. Tawoi now asks the young man to watch over the earth-filled pond where their previous three children were buried by sitting on a fishing basket. In this way he would come to know the reason why Tawoi had asked him to bury his previous progeny. The couple obeys this piece of advice and, towards midnight, hears the voices of their three children swearing they would have killed their father had they been spared and brought up.

Hazarika’s film adaptation of this tale goes through modifications and alterations similar to “Ow Kunwori.” Keeping most of the other details of the tale the same as that of Bezbarua, in Hazarika’s film narrative, the young man Poonai (Kapil Bora) is described as an expert fisherman who supplies catfish for the feast on the occasion of the wedding ceremony of Dhoneswari’s daughter from “Champawati.” Poonai reluctantly kills the first three male children whom his wife Malati (Asha Bordoloi) gives birth to, burying them alive in their backyard as per Tawoi’s advice. But, when their fourth child, a girl, is presented before Tawoi, he asks the couple to regard her as their first child and raise her with care.

Hazarika’s retelling of both “Ow Kunwori” and “Tawoyekor Sadhu” strongly accounts for a subtext that iterates conflicting outlooks on gender as in

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<sup>2</sup> The word *tawoi* is a common noun and the salutation for a coetaneous friend of one’s father in Assamese. The term is used like a proper noun in the story as the person referred to as Tawoi is not known by any other name.

the adaptation of the other two tales. In the former, Devinath (Adil Hussain), the expatriate merchant and father to Tejimola from the first tale, is seen getting involved in the personal life of the single mother Keteki and helps her to extract and thereby rescue her child from the elephant fruit. But ironically, he has no clue about the atrocities his second wife has carried out upon his beloved daughter back home. The theme of “saving the girl child” thus turns out to be complicated in the narrative. Devinath appears to be a patriarchal idler who is not seen with any urgent commercial obligations or preoccupation requiring him to leave his home and be away from his family for a long time. If the elephant fruit functions as a mechanism of defence or a trope of resistance against the domination of patriarchy that provides shelter to the girl child, Devinath’s favour to Keteki ensures the immanence of the instruments of patriarchal surveillance at work. The same instruments are pervasive in the retelling of “Tawoyekor Sadhu” also. Although Hazarika is seen to be caring for a redemptive potential through the “saving the girl child” motif like “Ow Kunwori,” the towering presence of Tawoi and his patriarchal control over the subjectivities of Poonai and Malati sabotage such an equation. In a suspenseful moment in the movie, representing an oscillation between hope and hopelessness, Malati secretly brings a kitchen knife to stab Tawoi as they bring their fourth child to him, provided he dictates an unsuspecting Poonai to bury their girl child also. But she regrets her deviance and kneels before Tawoi as soon as he spares the life of their last child with his soothing words of “wisdom” which are in no way based on the legitimised norms of rationality.

Augmenting the agency of the narrative, Hazarika’s auteuristic style manifested in the cinematic rendering of the folktales plays a crucial part in the portrayal of the Gothic. In *Kothanodi*, Hazarika’s use of light and shadows to contrast the thematic aspects of morbidity and gloom is noteworthy in many instances. In Tejimola’s story, the extreme moment of violence finds a subtle depiction through an image produced by shadows. As the pedal mortar grinds the head of Tejimola, instantly killing her, the graphic details are avoided by the cinematographer by focussing on the image produced on the wall by the shadow of the pedal mortar being shoved into Tejimola’s skull, thereby ordaining the shot with Gothic artistry. Hazarika’s discreet use of sound produced by indigenous folk instruments in many crucial moments of the movie, and sounds extracted from nature such as those which emanate from the friction of dry bamboo trunks in the deep recesses of the forest, contribute

immensely to sustaining the Gothic atmosphere of the film and also act as a narrative propellant. Significantly, the score of the movie is based on the personal collection of folk tunes of Birendranath Dutta, a renowned folklorist cum musician from Assam, which he and Ramen Choudhury collated in the 1980s (Borah).

In his review, Ram Venkat Srikar underlines the feminist overtones of Hazarika's narrative and maintains that "*Kothanodi*'s world is a woman's world, like a film telling female stories rightfully be. Women make the decisions, they execute actions, and they experience the repercussions" (Srikar). What Srikar has not observed in his review, however, tends to be a good number of factors, as has been pointed out above, that justify the darkness suffusing the narrative of *Kothanodi*. The gloom in *Kothanodi* is a consequence achieved by means of fashioning a resistant postcolonial aesthetic engagement, based on the political potential of the folk, that calls for effective and resurgent means to counteract gender injustice.

### III. Transgression and Gastronomic Horror in *Aamis*

The second Assamese film by Bhaskar Hazarika, *Aamis*, is founded on a completely different premise of the Northeastern folk imaginary. It is embedded in the culinary aesthetics of the region that marks a distinction from the postcolonial Indian Subcontinent and embodies a geo-cultural affinity with East and Southeast Asia. Food and practices of consumption in Northeast India are largely grounded upon carnivorous traditions conserved by different ethnic groups living in the region. In the Brahmaputra Valley, the blend of Sino-Tibetan, Austroasiatic, and Tibeto-Burmese cultural-anthropological traits with those of Indo-Europeans contributes immensely to the making of its folk gastronomy. Although the food practices have been continuing since the pre-colonial *longue durée*, they are often at odds with the postcolonial culinary imaginary formed in the Indian subcontinent, resulting in the predicating of the Northeastern carnivorous traditions as unusual and at times as bizarre.

Set in the present century and cued by such dynamics of food vis-à-vis the region, Hazarika's *Aamis* tells the story of Nirmali (Lima Das). Nirmali, an early-middle-aged Guwahati-based paediatrician, forms an unusual bond with Suman (Arghadeep Baruah), a young doctoral research scholar of Anthropology at a university in the same city who is working on meat-eating

habits among different communities of the Northeast. Nirmali lives with her school-going son and is married to Dilip (Manash Das), also a doctor who lives away from the family in far-flung areas of Assam providing medical services to disadvantaged groups. In a chance meeting, Suman informs Nirmali that he is part of a meat club that explores and experiments with consuming different types of meat, including those which are often regarded as unorthodox yet at the same time typical to one or another ethnic group of the region.

The bond between Nirmali and Suman gets stronger over numerous sessions of eating meat dishes they partake in, and without reciprocating verbally they start having passionate feelings for each other. But given the multiple impediments against the societal acceptance of their relationship, and also to act within the limits of the ethical parameters of the class Nirmali represents, they start searching for novel means of corporeal connection in place of sexual union. Hazarika's narrative takes a macabre and horrifyingly morbid turn from here as Suman starts cooking and feeding his own flesh to Nirmali in order to have an alternative way of communicating his passion for her. Experiencing disgust at first, Nirmali develops a ravaging cannibalistic addiction and eventually pleads with Suman for a large chunk of human flesh to bring an end to her addictive hunger. Suman ends up murdering an innocent rickshaw puller, and he is seen butchering the victim's body when the police nab him red-handed. The climax of the movie depicts the covered faces of both Nirmali and Suman, now apprehended by the police. Before the credits roll, they hold each other's hands as if in solidarity.

Noteworthy here, as in *Kothanodi*, are Hazarika's cinematic techniques through which he stylises the filmic form of *Aamis*, aptly complementing the narrative in giving the movie the mould of the Gothic. In their article titled "Forbidden Cravings: Exploring socio-cultural ramifications of food practices in *Aamis*" (2022), Alicia Jacob and Dishari Chattaraj suggest the visual route the movie paves in its quest to negotiate the representability of an alternative to the displaced sexual union of the two protagonists. Suman prepares several dishes for Nirmali in which he incorporates his own flesh extracted with the help of his friend—a veterinarian. The writer duo highlights the framing of a few short-animated pieces of footage where Suman is seen preparing dishes by replacing yolks of boiled eggs and stuffing rice cakes with his own flesh. Jacob and Chattaraj observe:

The egg is symbolic of fertility and carries sexual connotations. Replacing the yolk of the egg with his flesh can be connotative of their physical union where the egg is representative of the female sexual organ, and the action of filling is symbolic of the act of sex itself. Every dish prepared from Sumon's flesh has sexual underpinnings to them. (6)

Through screen experiments of this kind, Hazarika attempts to give transgression a direction in the narrative which this paper will address a little later. However, a potent instance of such cinematic techniques can be identified in the last part of the movie which forms the movie's proper Gothic segment. Here, nocturnal darkness acts as an important *mise-en-scène*. Darkness seems to occur as an objective correlative of the fate of the protagonists. Hazarika employs the trope of reflection and its visual distortion amidst the cinematic frames capturing nocturnality. In the scene previous to the one in which Nirmali meets Suman in the hospital morgue to express her ravening appetite for human flesh, she cursorily looks at herself in the window glass of a car and gets alert at the distorted reflection of herself. Even following the morgue scene, distorted reflections happen in several ways. While she continues pleading with Suman for procuring human flesh at any cost, the cinematographer diverts the camera focus from a close-up of the protagonists' faces to the blurred city lights against the darkness of the night. From this moment onwards, all the subsequent scenes till the murder of the rickshaw-puller are engulfed in darkness and compromised visibility—something which not only consolidates the Gothic setting but complements the narrative in its explication of horror.

Anthropologist Dolly Kikon has commented on the prescriptive limits set on the culinary practices integral to the marginal geographies such as those of Northeast India in the subcontinental metropolis. She refers to an instance in which the law enforcement agencies in New Delhi, India's national capital, came up with directives for the Northeastern inhabitants in New Delhi not to prepare a dish comprising fermented beans popular in some parts of the Northeast as it leads to situations of conflict due to its smelliness and unorthodox nature. Kikon explains,

Such official directives reiterate how the state plays a significant role in legitimising or prohibiting certain foods that particular

social groups in contemporary India consume, relegating these communities to a remote position in the national social and culinary order. (“Fermenting Modernity” 320)

In the face of such normativity around culinary practices of the region, Kikon in her essay “Tasty Transgressions: Food and Social Boundaries in the Foothills of Northeast India” (2013) defends the folk gastronomy of the region by demonstrating a precolonial anthropo-historical understanding of the region. She accounts for the culinary dynamics of the foothill geography, comprised of a permeable space of the eastern Himalayan and the Patkai hillscares with mostly the eastern plains of the Brahmaputra Valley. In this geography, transgression in respect of food habits is an everyday reality.

. . . [A] majority of the foothill residents often embraced and transgressed such taboos and adopted a "foothill" way of tasting and experiencing the place. Here the concept of food changed according to the season. The residents in foothills were often compelled or convinced to try out particular kinds of food in the sticky foothill landscape created by the melting of multiple boundaries. (Kikon, “Tasty Transgressions” 16)

This transgressive folk imaginary around food, rooted in the pre-colonial Northeastern geo-culture, meets with a suppressive ambience in the postcolonial milieu. Hazarika sews his narrative to translate transgression as a response to this suppression. Nirmali meets Suman in different places away from her habitual nooks to have sessions of eating where she experiences the taste of animal meats that are forbidden in many places in the region’s metropolis including her own house. In one such session, they travel to an undisclosed rural eatery where they have bat meat together. While relishing the dish, they discover that their passion for each other is growing parallel with their desire to experience forbidden food. Despite the growing possibility of intimacy between the two, Suman hesitates to touch or hold her hand. This repression of desire comes at odds with the transgressive practices of gastronomy they indulge in. As a consequence of the same, the resultant displacement of the very desire takes a dark and destructive turn.



Tracing the history of representation of food horror in films, Lorna Piatti-Farnell observes that the current scholarship of the Gothic has been able to integrate food within the scope of politicised horror narratives through accounts of monstrous meat-eating, among others. She further expresses that representations of cannibalism have also received much critical attention in the discussion of films and other media vis-à-vis horror (10). *Aamis* finds appositeness in representing both monstrous meat-eating and cannibalism in terms of the postcolonial ethics of gastronomy, whereby the borderline between the edible and the inedible is maintained through the structures of power, as the logic of the self is established through the relegation of its alterity to the periphery.

Reactions, of edible acceptability or disgust, are reliant on the tacit narratives of cultural control that deem substances as belonging to either edible or inedible categories. . . . [T]hus the very notions of “edible” and “inedible” arguably lie at the very core of both conceptual and aesthetic boundaries of food horror.

(Piatti-Farnell 13-14)

Suppressed by such gastro-normativity of the postcolonial metropolis around edibility and inedibility, Nirmali and Suman participate in transgressive acts of consumption, leading to perilous conditions of gastronomic horror. It is significant to note that they are part of that folk imaginary which is historically a site of everyday culinary practices exhibiting permeability and transgression. The colonial intervention with its protraction in postcolonial times has caused the rupture here. The same rupture has allowed Hazarika to explore food horror as a politically predisposed representational tool in his narrative.

In his review, Siddhant Adlakha compares *Aamis* with Julia Ducournau’s *Raw*. He terms Hazarika’s movie as bizarrely enjoyable and also reserves the view that it ventures a bit too far towards dour aimlessness (Adlakha). Although Adlakha’s estimation of the movie does not look at the political underpinnings of being bizarre, it nevertheless identifies the many different tropes of repression at the roots of Gothic digression.

The film is rife with metaphors about repression and the all-consuming nature of romance, but it works best as a literal

document of two people with a strange shared passion, one which complicates their already complicated predicament.

(Adlakha)

A partial response to Adlakha's predicament can be found in Namrata Pathak's review as she relates *Aamis* with Nicholas Kharkongor's *Axone* (2019), another movie from Northeast India. *Axone* is based on the stereotypes formed of Northeasterners' food habits "elsewhere" in the subcontinental metropolis. Her claims resonate with those of Kikon as she mentions the transgressive and subversive potential of gastronomy to render the simple act of eating not only political but to erase various lines of division existing among people (Pathak). However, it is important to underline that *Aamis* negotiates transgressive horror by linking gastronomy with sexuality through the trope of cannibalism which is at the heart of the movie. Cannibalism as a transgressive upshot resulting from the sexual repression and abstinence of the protagonists is a point of departure in the movie which brings death and ingestion closer to each other. Death is because cannibalism signifies self-destruction and ingestion. After all, cannibalism is also about consumption by the self—of the "self as the other," i.e., food.

Georges Bataille's argument that our existence as separate individuals exemplifies a profound sense of discontinuity finds pertinence here. While this sense of discontinuity is equivalent to the act of living, human sexuality represents an opposite force which is of continuity, in other words, death, which is the dissolution of individual discontinuity and hence a byword of violence: "the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation" (Bataille 16). For him, "the whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives" (17). The gastronomic horror of cannibalism as a trope of displaced desire pushing the limits of the normatively permissible as it is portrayed in *Aamis* finds appositeness in Bataille's observation in so far as the narrative resists the exoticisation of the horror of consuming what appears to be the very part of the self, as a canonical Gothic aesthetic. Being far from it, the culmination of the horror the movie characterises is a form of everyday postcolonial politics involving folk gastronomy that the movie translates into a popular cultural construct. As is the case in *Kothanodi*, Hazarika's second movie also stands as a political artefact manoeuvring the fantastic.

#### IV. Conclusion

Bhaskar Hazarika's *Kothanodi* and *Aamis* institute a discourse of the postcolonial Gothic that looks beyond mere artistry. They rather explore political trajectories of expression that negotiate everyday folk practices as a bulwark of resistance. One of the key propositions of this work could be to examine South Asian Gothic narratives as resistant textual performativity through the discussion of two Assamese language movies produced in Northeast India by employing a comparative stance. It would require placing the selected narratives against Southeast Asian cultural productions exemplifying similar as well as divergent strands of folk horror. Although the same could not be fully accomplished in the present study, it could be a promising proposition to follow with separate and distinctive methodological considerations. It is noteworthy that the mode of retelling the folk as has been made possible by Hazarika in *Kothanodi* in no way finds absolute semblance in *Aamis* since the latter is based on the re-rendering of the folk in terms of culinary habits entangled in the cultural geography of the region. Various forms of media have attempted to represent this entanglement but fail to do so in a fresh way. Having stated that, both the narratives contest the familiar forms of representation banking on Eurocentric determinism and lay open the alternative possibilities of projecting the folk as a vigorous narrative force.

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