

INTERPRETING AAVASAVYUHAM: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF THE FILM'S NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyses the Malayalam film *Aavasavyuham*: The Arbit Documentation of an Amphibian Hunt through an ecocritical lens. The film, directed by Krishand RK, intricately weaves together themes of environmentalism, human-nature relationships, and societal reflections. Beyond its captivating narrative style, *Aavasavyuham* delves into ecocritical elements. The film's title *Aavasavyuham* itself translates to "ecosystem," highlighting the interconnectedness of all life forms and the consequences of ecological imbalance. The protagonist, Joy, embodies a harmonious relationship with nature, prompting viewers to re-evaluate their environmental perspectives. Furthermore, the film explores the contrasting "ecosystems" - the natural world vis-à-vis human power structures- highlighting the impact of human actions on the environment. By employing ecocentric and anthropocentric ethics of environmentalism, this paper aims to analyse how the movie *Aavasavyuham* makes us rethink our interaction with nature, discussing the potential harm being done to the environment with human interaction leading to ecological imbalance, and how the movie contributes to developing ecological consciousness by contrasting the ecocentric and anthropocentric characters and dialogues.

KEYWORDS: Consciousness; Environmentalism; Imbalance; Ecosystem; Ecocriticism; Coexistence; Mockumentary

INTRODUCTION

Silent Spring by Rachel Carson added urgency to the discussion about an environmentalist viewpoint to literary criticism. She challenged the anthropocentric idea that nature exists solely for human exploitation. "The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings" (Carson 10). Carson warns that human interference in ecological processes has far-reaching consequences. She further argues that "Only within the moment represented by the present century has one species - man - acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world" (10). These observations foreground the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world, a principle that later became central to ecocritical thought. The term

ecocriticism was coined by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (Glotfelty xviii). Hence, the concern for nature is not a recent phenomenon in literature. Early romantic writers like William Wordsworth and John Keats often expressed admiration for nature and a sense of awe for the natural world. Dating back to the epic of *Gilgamesh*, an ancient poem, we can see a story of a king who overexploits natural resources, leading to adverse consequences. While not explicitly environmentalist, this ancient epic touches on themes of resource management and ecological balance.

Ecocentrism is a philosophical and ethical perspective on the value of nature. It argues for the fundamental value of all living beings and the

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natural environment, independent of their materialist utility to humans. While anthropocentrism is a philosophical viewpoint that places humans at the centre of the universe and views all other living things and the environment as resources for human use and benefit, ecocentrism conveys a diametrically opposing view. Lawrence Buell, in his *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, explains them as two related though non-identical forms of polarisation which stand out as ecocentric or biocentric vs. anthropocentric ethics (each of varying stripes, with many intermediate positions along the continuum), i.e., health of physical environment as first focus of concern vs. social welfare or inter-human equity as first focus of concern. (2005)

Greg Garrard, in his book *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, says about the degradation of land and labour: “The fiction of their autonomy --that land and labour are merely things to be bought and sold--is what enables their degradation” quoting from Karl Paul Polanyi: “Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from social exposure . . . Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighbourhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted”. Nature as a resource that is to be exploited for human material needs is what Anthropocentrism advocates. (2002)

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “...the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, she outlines several questions that guide ecocritical inquiry, including: “How is nature represented in this sonnet?”, “What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel?”, and “Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom?” (xix). These questions encourage readers to examine the representation of nature, the significance of environmental settings, and the ecological values embedded within literary and cultural texts. Such concerns are particularly relevant to an ecocritical reading of *Aavasavyuham*, which foregrounds the complex relationship between human beings and the natural world.

By examining the environmental themes, character interactions, setting of the movie, and

socio-political realities depicted in the film, this paper aims to highlight the transformative power of cinema in fostering environmental consciousness and societal change. By juxtaposing ecocentric and anthropocentric ethics of environmentalism, this paper analyses how the movie *Aavasavyuham* compels us to rethink our interaction with nature, discussing the potential harm being caused to the environment by human interaction leading to ecological imbalance, and how the movie contributes to developing ecological consciousness by contrasting the ecocentric and anthropocentric characters and dialogues.

Director Krishanth uses the new genre of ‘mockumentary’. Mockumentaries tend to blur the lines between reality and fiction (Dictionary.com 2017). The term itself is a portmanteau word combining “mock” and “documentary”, signifying how stories mimic the realistic method of the documentary genre involving interviews with actors donning the role of experts, participants, and witnesses, shaky camerawork which creates a sense of immediacy, combined with a voiceover that guides the viewer through the storyline. However, unlike traditional documentaries, mockumentaries don’t focus on presenting facts. Their primary goal is to entertain. Many mockumentaries are comedies, using satire and humour to poke fun at real-world issues, historical events, or even the documentary format itself. Such lampooning allows them to connect to the viewers while also providing insightful critiques.

ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN THE MOVIE

In the film, we find the character Tharakan (Broker for boats and fish), Sajeevan and his brother Murali advocating an anthropocentric perspective. Sajeevan’s relationship with nature suggests rapacious greed and mindless exploitation, oblivious of any consideration for maintaining the ecological balance. When he violates the instruction on catching juvenile fish, Sajeevan is booked by authorities with an imposition of a hefty penalty of several lakhs of rupees. In the scene where this is being discussed, Sanjeevan and Murali speak callously as if the concern of the authorities regarding natural balance was not a matter to be heeded. Murali says, “We paid a small fine of 350,000 Rupees. Isn’t it the juvenile ones

that mature into big fish? While laying our nets, can we measure with a scale if they are less than 12 cm or not? If they book us again, we will pay the fine again”.

Their focus is profit-driven and the extractive culture behind human enterprises, which leads to the degradation of ecosystems and natural resources, upholding a utilitarian approach that makes them prefer economic advantages over environmental sustainability. Murali's role represents the destructive impact of human greed on the environment. Sajeewan and Murali display a detachment from the inherent value of nature and its significance beyond material advantages. Their exploitative practices and lack of reverence towards the environment highlight a tenuous relationship with nature based on material gains and profit-seeking. Their greedy, self-serving attitude causes potential damage to the ecosystem. As environmentalists would argue, the biosphere is one giant web, in which every living organism is in a symbiotic relationship with the other forms, and contributes to maintaining a vibrant, functioning ecosystem. Biodiversity, which Julia Whitty defines as “the sum of an area's genes (the building blocks of inheritance), species (organisms that can interbreed), and ecosystems (amalgamations of species in their geological and chemical landscapes)”, is a critical element in maintaining ecological viability, particularly in threatened small island ecologies. (Garrard 244)

The film discusses how human interference affects natural cycles essential for ecological stability. The construction of walls restricting fishermen's access to the sea, the Vallarpadam container terminal and LNG plant affecting the dolphin migration, the pernicious spread of Giant African Snails through the wood imported from Burma, the denudation of mangroves, and the encroachment of corporate interests into natural habitats all contribute to the disruption of the natural cycles and destabilisation of ecosystems. The COVID-19 pandemic is mentioned as a period of recuperation for nature, as evidenced by the increased migration and growing presence of dolphins, owing to the decrease in ship traffic. Prof. Swarnalatha Rangarajan, in her book *Eco Criticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*, mentions George Marsh's 1964 book, *Man and Nature*, which discusses the global environmental

impact of human actions of the time. As an ecocritical work, the book anticipates the late-twentieth-century thinking about the anthropocene. “Marsh points out that if left undisturbed, nature has the potential to restore and undo minor losses. However, human ravages are ferocious and irreparable since human beings do not retire from the field before nature has repaired the damages.” (69)

The character Susheelan Vava talks about the tragedy that happened to his father.

A tragedy had engulfed me; my father died of a snakebite. He was bitten by a Russell's viper. Our area doesn't have venomous snakes. Nowadays, rock powder and landfill from Eastern Kerala are used here to fill the mangroves. They sometimes have snake hatchlings and eggs; the trucks unload all the soil here. These eggs hatch, and we ended up having a lot of snakes here (Aavasavyuham 2022)

The unintended spread of snakes due to soil transportation stresses the theme of biodiversity loss and ecosystem disruption caused by human actions. The destruction of mangroves for construction and landfills shows the theme of ecological imbalance. The natural resources exploited for profit portray carelessness toward environmental conservation and sustainable habits.

When the character Kurian Babu says, “If you give 1000 Rupees, I will let you see the creature. 1000 Rupees is the decided ticket price”, we can understand the decision by the civil police officer Kurian Babu to monetise a mysterious creature by selling tickets to the surrounding population, indicating human greed in commodifying nature and exploiting its natural wonders for financial gains.

ECOCENTRISM IN THE MOVIE

The character Joy, one of the protagonists in the film, however, represents harmonious coexistence with nature, showing deep respect for the environment and its inhabitants. His mystical connection to frogs and fish, and his ability to communicate with them, denotes a deep understanding and respect for the natural world. Serving as a steward of nature, Joy maintains a

gentle balance within the ecosystem through his interactions and spiritual connection with the environment. The figure of Joy first serves as a bridge between man and nature, but later on, we witness Joy's helplessness as he is forced to catch every fish, including the juvenile, out of greed and desperation. In one scene, Joy helplessly says to Susheelan Vava, "There is no more fish's brother". He feels bad when Susheelan Vava says to him that his unique call attracts juvenile fish, and his call leads to the death of infants too. His presence signifies a symbiotic relationship, nurturing and protecting the natural elements around him.

Kochuraman, a mangrove activist, shares an experience with Joy. "Once when we were moving along the waters, he quickly jumped into the mud. He came back with a bunch of eggs. I was wondering if the eggs belonged to a tortoise, alligator, or snake. Joy finds some random eggs during their tour through the mangroves and brings them to Kochuraman, saying that something might eat them. Joy's relationship with nature transcends the physical realm, exploring spiritual and philosophical dimensions. His instinctive bond with Nature reflects a spiritual harmony that eschews a mere utilitarian or exploitative interaction.

In one of his interviews, the noted ecocritic and writer Amitav Ghosh talks about the lack of interest of contemporary writers in addressing social issues, which are indirectly accelerating climate change. "It is as though, in the literary imagination, climate change was akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel" (*The Guardian* 2016). He stresses the importance of addressing social issues leading to climate change, particularly issues which are aggravating and disrupting the precarious equilibrium that exists in nature. The film highlights real-life issues and protests against the LNG plant in Puthuvype, stressing its impact on the loss of biodiversity. The presence of the LNG plant on Puthuvype Island and its functioning, by ignoring the protests of the communities around Puthuvype, raises significant environmental concerns due to the potential risks associated with its operations. Biju says:

On the pretext of development, around 204 plant species, 21 species of fish, and 238 species of birds are disrupted in the area; almost 200 acres of mangrove have been

removed in the area. On top of all this, new development projects are proposed for the area. The officials completely disregard the disruption of fishermen's livelihoods. These 'development projects' will eventually result in fishermen completely giving up fishing. There is a four-and-a-half-kilometre wall constructed at our coast. Fishermen are not allowed to go into the sea for fishing.

Environmental activist Biju, A character, talks about the destruction happening in the name of development. The concerns which Biju puts forward are real according to studies. The mangroves in Puthuvype are home to several endangered species. The LNG plants are known for safety hazards, including explosions, risk of leaks, and environmental pollution. The film critiques the environmental impact of industrial projects on local ecosystems and communities. Incorporating the real-life issues from Puthuvype, like the strikes against this LNG plant which led to the arrest of 206 people, the film strives to awaken consciousness on environmental concerns. The comparison of the LNG plant's economic benefits with its environmental consequences reflects a broader discourse on the compromise between economic development and environmental conservation. Additionally, the presence of the LNG plant in the movie symbolises community resistance against industrial projects that threaten people's livelihoods and the surrounding nature.

GENRE BENDING APPROACH

As mentioned, the mockumentary is an innovative narrative technique which blends elements of fiction with those of the documentary form to create a captivating world that feels both realistic and fictional. As the story is divided into chapters, the main characters of each chapter appear as if in an interview happening four years after the incidents surrounding the character, Joy. All the characters are sitting in the wide frame of their work or home atmosphere while they are being interviewed. The sounds emanating from the background evoke the atmosphere and give one a sense of the place, adding realism to the narrative. The scenes depicting the backdrop of the interview, the unpreparedness of the individuals mingled with the background conversations,

insignificant to the context, all blend to create the effect of a documentary.

Joy's enigmatic existence and the rumours surrounding him evoke a sense of mystery and intrigue, adding a fantastical element to the narrative. Throughout the story, Joy's ability to attract fish with his sound is portrayed as a remarkable and magical trait. Susheelan Vava talks about this unique skill in a local teashop. "He makes this weird sound from the boat, then things get crazy, and the boat gets filled with fish" (Avasavyuham, 2022).

When Joy makes this sound, fish are inexplicably drawn to him, leading to an abundant catch that astonishes those around him. Though a maverick, Joy is sometimes portrayed as working for human greed. We can see Susheelan Vava telling Joy, "Call them from both sides; Make those strange sounds you make. Get all the crabs; your call should reach all the cracks and fissures". As Greg Garrard says, "It seems likely that any given concerned individual will probably have both eco- and anthropocentric attitudes at different times, under different conditions. At the same time, it is important to distinguish both perspectives from the animal rights philosophy that argues for the extension of the moral consideration accorded by humans to certain higher mammals." (*The Ecocriticism Reader* 2004)

The sound that Joy makes represents his deeper connection with nature and the living things around him. The transformation of the worms (which were found in the wounds on his legs) into plants and the mysterious nature of the sample found inside Joy's body point to metaphysical or otherworldly elements at play. This aspect adds a sense of mystique and wonder to the story, blurring the lines between science and the unknown. Joy's transformation or mutation, possibly linked to a frog jumping into an e-waste pile, resounds with superhero origin stories where characters gain powers through unique circumstances.

CONCLUSION

By taking a genre- bending approach and employing ecocentric and anthropocentric perspectives throughout, the movie *Avasavyuham: The Arbit Documentation of An*

Amphibian Hunt seriously discusses the urgency of addressing environmental issues. By connecting the documentary elements with the fictional superhero elements, the movie keeps the audience engaged and informed. The film's representation of nature, particularly its spotlight on the pressing issue of the loss of biodiversity exemplified by the search for the rare frog species at the outset, is commendable. It further illuminates the film's critique of environmental degradation, as evidenced by the destruction of mangroves and the fast-declining fish stocks. These environmental concerns serve as a backdrop to explore the human-nature relationship in *Avasavyuham*. Here, Joy's character is presented as a symbol of ecological wisdom; his mysterious connection with animals stands as a contrast to the exploitative attitude of others. The contrasting characters of Joy and Sanjeevan embody the dichotomy between harmonious coexistence and greedy, unsustainable exploitation. This portrayal compels viewers to consider the ecocentric and anthropocentric ethical implications of human actions on the environment. *Avasavyuham* functions as a tool for promoting ecological awareness. Both the narrative and the film's visuals serve to raise awareness of environmental issues, effectively conveying its environmental message and inspiring viewers to re-evaluate their relationship with nature.

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