



Journal of Media Research and Contemporary Studies

Contents available at: <https://www.swamivivekanandauniversity.ac.in/jmrcs/>

(Mis)Representation And Stereotypes: Racial Biases Of North- Eastern Women In Entertainment Media With Special Reference To The Movie Axone.

Dr. Moumita Chakraborty

Assam University, Silchar, Assam

Abstract

The way race is shown in the media plays a big part in how people see and feel about others. Media is a robust platform that shapes our perceptions and understanding of the world around us. It's not only about what's presented but also about how it's represented before the audience. Racial misrepresentation on a global scale is rooted in such systematic disparities that all races might be similarly tainted. This paper looks at how casting, roles, and stories in entertainment media lead to unfair ideas. It focuses on understanding media portrayal of stereotypes and racial discrimination against women of North- East, India. Film as a cultural artifact, has been used as a communication tool that indicates the reflection of stereotypes and prevalence of racial discrimination against one community (especially women of North-East) in our society. Women of the North-East in India have faced pervasive racial discrimination through mainstream media since time immemorial, often plainly stereotyped. In turn, these representations lead to a host of cultural interpretations, marginalization, and the "othering" of North-Eastern communities in the Indian socio-cultural milieu. These representations further the cultural misconstructions, hence strengthening the marginalization and "othering" of North-Eastern communities within the larger socio-cultural frame of India. Axone (2019) is a rare exploration of identities and struggles of North-Eastern Indian folk on screen and thus serves as a significant case for critical examination. These further analyze how the film works within and against a dominant narrative. The nuanced workings that either reinforce or contest the stereotype, such as that of being "exotic," "unwanted outsiders," and "persistent victims of systemic discrimination," are the objectives that this research seeks to achieve by analyzing character portrayals, dialogues, and narrative arcs. This study utilizes a content analysis approach, wherein it seeks to evaluate Axone as a cultural artifact that not only exposes but also critiques racial biases while checking how it developed the sense of empathy and understanding without enforcing some stereotypes. Within the larger ambit of media representation

in India, it emphasizes a researched and compelling case for the need for varied, inclusive, and genuine narratives to depict North-Eastern women as being multifaceted and not as caricatures. The main objective of the study is to understand the narrative structure of the film highlighting stereotypes, identity crises and racial discrimination against North- Eastern women in the film. The study is qualitative in nature; Observation method has been employed to analyze This is a case study of a movie "Axone" released in 2019 on Netflix.

This study's aim is to promote the more equitable and inclusive representation of such content in entertainment media. This paper also finds out how racial stereotypes are perpetuated and the consequences of such portrayals on common people. The study urges the necessity for ethical and inclusive representation in the entertainment media and to turn away from harmful and negative stereotypes towards diversity and equality.

Keywords: Racial bias, stereotypes, miss representation, media representation, North- East. ethnicity.

Introduction

Entertainment media has always been a powerful storytelling tool due to which its influence in social developments has been deep. This is because it mirrors a social condition in itself, thereby challenging cultural norms as it goes. While it has served as a canvas of societal achievement, it has also been an instrument of great social change. It was able to reflect some of the most serious social problems of modernity and almost every form of enlightened positivist racism present in the post-Enlightenment world. Dress this up as much as you want, but it won't work without its significant flaws. And we know that its flaws would be in the critiquing of rampant cynicism.

Very early in the history of motion pictures, deeply embedded roots of racial misrepresentation of the media began. A profound reference to the beginning of the 20th century, such films as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), not only glorified white supremacy but also depicted blacks as dangerous and as subhuman. Such depictions did not confine themselves to being isolated incidents, but were a part of broader stereotyping, where racial and ethnic communities were fitted into largely superficial and degrading archetypes. Black people could only occupy the character of an accommodating butler, not to mention hilarious comic buffoon, and even worse for playing the menacing other character. Asian people were likewise typecast as villainously mysterious or placid, model minorities; American Natives could only be seen in terms as one of the two dimensions: noble savages or fearsome threats.

"The term stereotype was first used in social sciences in the year 1992, when Lippman introduced them as 'pictures of the typical' conjured when one thinks about a particular social group" (C. Macrae, 1996). According to the Oxford Learner Dictionary, "Stereotype" is "a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality and may cause hurt and offence." "A stereotype can be described as one good way to coin the establishment of content-seeming perspectives or classes, brought forth by the mind when confronted with the onslaught of information it receives. From this perspective, a stereotype is a cognitive mechanism for making sense of reality through grouping people together in categories. As a picture of a social group, it can be either negative or positive, accurate or inaccurate, justified or unjustified. Still, it is the negative, inaccurate,

and unjustified ones that give people the toughest time" (Schneider, 2010). "Generally, for domesticity and sexuality, femininity has been represented in a different light relative to other stereotypes suggested in research on gender. Tuchman (1981) studied representations of American women in the media from the 1950s onward and found that a stereotype could portray women either in terms of respectability as sexual objects, as housewives, or in their roles which correspond to jobs further defined as secondary to their domestic/caring role." "The films as an audio-visual entertainment form play a significant role as tools for viewing society and culture. cinema opens vistas to world and space travel, invites people back to the past or future, and presents imaginative images and situations that suggest possible actions, behavior styles, and schemes"(Chauhan, 2015). John Berger, in his seminal work, "Ways of Seeing," points out that men and women have, traditionally, accordingly, two different social presences.

North-East India is an area spanning eight states, extremely rich in culture and diversity. This region is popularly known as the "Seven Sisters" and the brother state of Sikkim. It is famous for its multiple ethnicities, languages, and traditions. Unfortunately, over the years, the North-East has been somewhat an underdog in the political landscape of the country, as well as an outcast of Bollywood, where it is grossly misrepresented and stereotyped in popular Indian media.

The region has suffered unresolved political conflicts, economic backwardness, and social desolateness. The zest for life of the people is often neglected to discuss insurgency, border skirmishes, and underdogs' tales. Even though the regional contribution to the plethora of Indian culture is immense, the North-East has at times been called "exotic" or "other" and its diverse cultural fabric has suffered appalling caricature of triviality. Such marginalization continues in mainstream media with stereotypical representations that lean toward racial views and portray the people of the North-East as foreigners, naïve, or hypersexualized.

Bollywood, as the biggest film industry in India, has long failed to integrate real representations of communities from North-east India into films. NorthEastern characters and actors are rarely portrayed in substantive roles, and when such depictions do take place, they invariably follow the limited stereotype. Such portrayals reaffirm societal prejudices that categorize the residents of this region as "outsiders" in their own country.

By showcasing North-Eastern migration to urban India, Axone does attempt, in its rarefied way, to speak after a fashion of these people. The movie constitutes a lens of the possible intersection between identity and stereotyping, in terms of culture and its acceptance.

Women in Bollywood do not have an individual existence, but are seen on the screen in relation to some-other-male-character; either she is his wife or lover or daughter or sister or mother. (Nair, 2002). Women had mostly been shown as docile and weak in films of the previous era. However, post-liberalization (1991), Bollywood has been changing the narrative and has begun to give a distinctive position to women characters. The film depicts women as independent, confident, and career-oriented and shows changing roles and influence on patriarchal society. With its complex narrative structure, the film succeeds in better portraying the challenges and difficulties faced by women on the public stage-a world that is brutal to them in various ways away from the domestic sphere. This paper delves into the historical processes leading to the marginalization of North-East India, its Bollywood representation, and the social consequences thereof, with a keen eye on Axone. To

this end, understanding these intermingling dynamics must serve the conception of systemic attempts at dismantling stereotypes through an inclusive media narrative.

Research Methodology

The research is qualitative in nature and through content analysis it strives to find out the portrayal of stereotype and racial discrimination against north eastern women in a movie, *Axone*, released in 2019 on Netflix.

Objectives -

- To analyze the portrayal of North-Eastern women in the movie *Axone* and its association with stereotypes in entertainment media.
- To identify and evaluate the racial biases and cultural misrepresentations associated with North-Eastern women in Indian cinema.
- To examine the impact of such media portrayals on public perception and societal attitudes towards the North-Eastern particularly women.

Stereotyping North-East Indians in mainstream media:

A prevailing stereotype with the potential for danger is that of looking too similar among the Northeast Indian people; this is time-after-time sustained by the prejudiced reference to the Northeast Indian people throughout the media as "Chinky or Chinese-like." Such a generalization tends to ignore the enormous variation among different ethnicities in the region with reference to physical appearance or cultural practices.

Another stereotype is that all Northeast Indians are martial arts buff. While martial arts is practiced on a wide scale in Northeast India, some practices exist in other regions throughout the country. Such a stereotype gives a narrow and superficial vantage point towards Northeast India cultural traditions and ignores aspects of various other cultural practices that call for attention.

Yet another stereotype sees Northeast Indians as somewhat exotic and mysterious, creating "otherness". Mainstream media composites Northeast Indians, as Bollywood films and soap operas tend to portray them in traditional outfits and speaking broken Hindi, driving the perception that they are somehow less Indian than others.

The other stereotype is that all Northeast Indians are drug addicts or alcoholics. This stereotype is not only ill-founded but also a stereotype nourished by across-the-board misconstrued perceptions based on hearsay. This stereotype creates a kind of stigma attached to an already marginalized section of society because of such stereotypes put upon them based on their looks and culture.

Stereotypical representations of Northeast Indians in mainstream media can have serious real-world consequences, including discrimination, harassment, and violence against people from that region. This further perpetuates a distorted view of Northeast India and its people and hinders one from understanding and appreciating the cultural diversity the region holds.

If these issues have to be addressed, the mainstream media must seek a more nuanced and accurate representation of Northeast India and its people. This will mean hiring more Northeast Indian journalists, writers, and filmmakers who can explore the authentic experiences of the region. It may

also mean avoiding an avalanche of stereotypes and being more thoughtful to emphasize the diversity and cultural richness of the region.

The stereotypical representation of Northeast Indians in the mainstream media continues to be one of grave concerns with an impact in real life, few as it leans towards discrimination, harassment, and violence against the people from the region. And on top of these, it recreates an erroneous graphic about Northeast India and its people, which stops others from understanding and enjoying the region's cultural diversity lucidly.

Stereotyping North-Eastern Women: Stereotypes associated with women of North- East based on media portrayal are related to their physical features, distinct culture, custom and tradition.

1. Physical Features- Flat Nose and tiny eyes, and all look alike (addressed as CHINKS, Chinese-looking)
2. Dress- Tribal costumes/ Scanty dressing
3. Food Habits- Non vegetarian, beef eaters, stinky food eaters
4. Language- English, Broken Hindi speakers
5. Profession- Prostitution, Easily available for sexual gratification, massage parlour.
6. Addiction- Wine drinkers, Smokers, Drugs consumers
7. Hobby- Guitar players

Analysis of the movie *Axone*

The film *Axone*, directed by Nicholas Kharkongor, captures the essence of camaraderie, identity, and resilience amidst cultural challenges. The story is set in Delhi, where it revolves around a group of Northeastern migrants—Upasana, Chanbi, Zorem, and their friends—who came together to prepare for the wedding of their flatmate, Minam. The plot unfolds as the group decides to prepare "Axone," which is a fermented soybean dish of Northeast, to surprise the bride and to bring a feeling of home to the bride's special day. However, their effort to cook this fragrant meal in their rented apartment does not meet with the full approval of their landlord's mother-in-law and other tenants, which thus exhibit culture differences and prejudices faced by North-Eastern migrants in Mainland India.

The movie's main figures - Sayani Gupta's Upasana and Lin Laishram's Chanbi - bring the remarkable deeper emotional quality and cultural genuineness to the storyline. Upasana, a Nepali, is an intelligent and tenacious character, while Chanbi, a Manipuri, symbolizes elegance and staying strong in adverse circumstances. Uniting, they not only go through all the problems of cooking Axone and yet avoiding the ire of their neighbor. This journey becomes a metaphor for the obstacles that people face when they try to keep their culture in a world that is full of prejudices towards different groups. The story becomes more complex as the band faces hilarious, but at the same time saying segments, for example, they have to find an alternative place to cook the dish, were bothered by their neighbors, and had violent personal

conflicts. The landlord's son, Shiv, an ally, is created from the most unexpected quarters, but his involvement is what makes things complicated when his girlfriend misconstrues his intentions, thus causing interpersonal drama.

Nicholas Kharkongor directs the film so that comedy and social commentary are skillfully combined using Axone's preparation as a narrative element at which the universal longing for the familiar is at the center of a foreign environment. The film's very subtle depiction of Northeastern culture, side by side urban life in Delhi, makes the story richer. Instances like when the landlord's mother-in-law stresses the rules of no tasty cooking, and the locals' extreme uneasiness about the aroma of the dish show how migrants encounter microaggressions and cultural insensitivity. However, the movie is structured to avoid being too preachy and it instead goes for the heart of the matter-towards the humor and sympathy for the characters which also enables reflecting on the society barriers they face.

The time of the wedding nears and the friends are increasingly disheartened, especially after Minam leaves for the interview and is not aware of their plans. Zorem, out of pure devotion, persuades the landlord to let them cook Axone on the terrace. The turning point stresses the themes of union and compromise, as all the friends get together to prepare the dish just on time for the virtual wedding ceremony. The wedding itself is a very emotional moment of global interaction, where Minam interacts with her groom and her family members through the use of video conferencing, thus illustrating the capability of technology to overcome various distances.

The film adroitly interweaves subplots which deal with the individual's growth and reconciliation. Zorem's marriage proposal to Upasana and Chanbi's decision to go back to her own country with her boyfriend Bendang are each such a nice ending for their separate storylines. The theme of racism in Bendang's past is carefully dealt with as it also belongs to the character who is trying to overcome such discrimination which his social group has faced in India.

A striking part of Axone can be found among the many voices and traditions it showcases which are generally overshadowed by the bigger contributions from the Hindi, Tamil Telugu, and Bollywood genres in Indian cinema. The film develops the theme of presenting perceptions of northeasterners which are parallel to those of people from the rest of India and by so doing, resists the temptations around the absurd representations of the lives of these people. All actors were top-notch here. There was especially Ackibabus when it comes to Lin Laisharam and Sayani Gupta. Li Laisharam and Sayani Gupta were on fire, bringing so much life and depth to their presentations. The end, where the friends were able to cook Axone and Minam's wedding was celebrated via a video call, shows the strong bond of family and the strength to be able to persevere through anything that may come your way. Additionally, it is an exposition on how customs are modified in a world that is progressing rapidly and that is mostly impersonal.

Axone is at its core a story of perseverance, friendship and food as a symbol of identity and love. The movie explores the struggles of migrants in the Northeastern region and their determination to remain rooted while depicting the multi-faceted nature of the experience. Its fine storytelling, mixed with bits of humor and sadness, highlights the essence of acceptance and the marvel of differences. Through its richly layered narrative, *Axone* becomes more than just a film about a wedding party; it is a heartfelt exploration of the questions of identity, belonging and the multiplicity of foods in a multi-everything world.

Conclusion

Axone is not just a dish for North East migrants but it a symbol of their cultural heritage and identity. The juxtaposition of Axone with badboo (pungent smell) allude to metaphorically using diametrically opposite cultural values of the North -East versus North India. Taking New Delhi as a location for the movie has a symbolic purpose that flags the issue of racial discrimination at the heart of India, New Delhi, the seat of political dispensation, is more than worse for a largest and vibrant democracy like India. Echoes of adjectives referring to people of north east as 'in logon ko' instills in them a sense of alienation and exclusion. Outburst of such continued alienation found expression in Bendang's (victim of racial attack,) retaliatory dialogue to Shiv (representative of young India), as you bloody Indian's-is an alarm for a cohesive and unified India.

In search of employment and other preoccupations, women migrants of North- East have found themselves in peculiar situations time and again. They have been treated differently as they have to struggle a lot to forge their self identity and women dignity. This discriminatory attitude is best reflected in the narrative scheme of the film, wherein male authoritative voice shouts at and questions female lead character Chanbi "Kaun hai tu.Hai kaun tu. it was so heart-rending and terrifying for her that she got a panic attack which is a very pathetic representation of ill- treatment that these women folks become victims of. Along this line, a lady from the community hall represents her sexually promiscuous and as a free wheeler, expressing, "Teri jaisi ladki ko main khoob acche se janti hu . Words like chhoti chhoti aankhein, sabhi ek se lagte hai are also a recurrent haunt of our polluted mental state. Nevertheless, the film is not only an appalling representation but a brave confrontation of these migrants with the outside world. The strong statement of Belamon after much hard work and sweating, goes, 'even if it kills us, I think we should make this Axone today!" The movie tells us that Axone making is a matter of telling the others to let them be what they are. Finally, "Stories are representations not so much of life as it is, but of life as it is imagined, with that imagination shaped by previous stories. Storytelling is a dialogue of imaginations" (Frank, 2005).

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