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## About the Article

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# Cultural Differences, Racism and Trauma: A Critical Analysis of Nicholas Kharkongor's *Axone: A Recipe for Disaster*

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## Abstract

"How do people born and raised in one society manage to live in another society that is culturally different from the one they are used to?" (Sam & Berry, 2006, p. 3). This question is fundamental to the whole process of acculturation. When cultures come together there is always the possibility of conflict. But apart from conflict, processes like assimilation, integration, separation or marginalization are also there as the line separating different cultures is penetrable and not rigid. In this paper, an attempt shall be made to study these concepts and to some extent the problematic side of a globalized world and the related trauma the characters go through in a society culturally different from theirs in Nicholas Kharkongor's film *Axone: A Recipe for Disaster*. Though the film is particularly about the Northeast migrants and the racism they faced, it also portrays the universal presence of such bigotry and prejudices that have infected the Northeastern communities as well. This paper is an attempt to understand the sufferings and the hostilities faced by the migrant groups that compel them to return to their ethnic roots. Does retreating to one's enclosed shell a way out to avoid this conflict? Or is there a way out to establish a meaningful relationship and establish proper communication among people in an environment where different cultures reside together? A close reading of some particular incidents in the film will be done in an attempt to find an implicit solution to reconcile the differences.

**Keywords:** Culture, conflict, acculturation, racism, trauma, reconciliation

Culture encompasses every aspect of human life. With the onset of colonization, globalization and augmentation of such new concepts, thinkers have placed a critical eye on the concept of culture, as the homogeneity of societies has been doubted with penetrable boundaries and movement of people across the globe. The meeting of cultures resulted in hegemonic relationships and cultural imperialism which created an unbalanced equation among the culturally different groups (Weedon, 2004, p. 3). Moreover, the inception of "hegemony" has tended to serve one group better than the other. Such an imbalanced equation among groups caused the emergence of conflict. Samuel P. Huntington in his book *Clash of Civilization and Remaking of the World Order* (2011) has forwarded his idea about the source of conflict among the nations which will be cultural rather than ideological or economic in the coming future (p.26). The line that separates the dominant and subordinate cultural groups is penetrable. Thus, we have theories related to acculturation, assimilation, or cultural mixing to name a few.

India, a postcolonial society, is a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multiracial nation. Multiculturalism, however, has become more an expression of an individual's apprehension for dignity and respect than a reflection of culture. This remains evident in the treatment and

condition of certain minority social groups like the ethnic tribes from the India's Northeast region in a multicultural society like Delhi. People belonging to such groups are often singled out and are discriminated against by the dominant groups because of certain apparent differences in their appearances, accent, or food habits etc. The case of Northeast people and their condition in a culturally diverse place like Delhi has unveiled some larger issues that are often ignored in a culturally diverse country like India. Vinod Khobragade (2009), substantiating the idea of Harrison that there are many nations within India, has figured out the different nations that constitute India as "North Indian nation (the fair-skinned Aryan), South Indian nation (dark-skinned Dravidian), and more importantly the North-Eastern nation (theyellow-skinned Mongoloid)"(p.1162). India is considered as a synthesis of Aryan and Dravidian culture and the fact that Northeasterners belong to the mongoloid race made them 'the Other' (Bora, 2019, p.854). Sanjib Boruah (2005), citing William Van Schendel, has revealed how the western gaze that looked down upon the hill people as backward and generally stereotyped as uncivilized as compared to the people of the plains. Such extant practices have not only instigated racial divide but caused the fractured relationship between the Northeast and mainland India resulting in "a cultural gap, an economic gap, a psychological gap, and an emotional gap" (Baruah, 2005, p.166). Writers like Papor Bora (2019) have traced the problem of racial divide to the colonisation era when the imperial power tended to differentiate and discriminate the colonised native on the premise of the inferior race (p. 846). When people from the Northeast region started migrating to the mainland cities with such a history of differences, it made them vulnerable as they faced racial discrimination for their looks, the way they dress, or the food they cook. Ever and again, incidents of racial discrimination against Northeasterners come out. The sudden spike in such racial prejudices during the Covid- 19 pandemic has exposed the dehumanizing treatment a Northeasterner goes through in metropolitan cities. The incident of the Manipuri girl being spat on by an unidentified man and calling her "corona" revealed the racially charged comments and treatment people from the Northeast face (Bajaj, 2020). Again in Hyderabad, entry was denied to two young students from the Northeast region because the guard thought they were not Indian (Das, 2020). In many places, tribal students are asked to vacate the residency citing petty reasons, or sometimes no reason at all. Such racial discriminations remind us of Nido Tania, who raised everyone's concern when he was beaten to death by a shopkeeper who called him 'chinky' and against which Nido Tania retaliated (Pant, 2020). Later the High court cited intolerance for cultural differences as the root cause behind the attack. However, they acknowledged the presence of a 'racial element' for which they recommended an amendment in the IPC that would make "racial slurs punishable" (Bora, 2019, p.858). Commenting on the report submitted by the Bezbaruah committee in regard to Nido Tania case, Bora (2019) writes how the assigned committee failed to articulate racism as a problem behind his death substantiating the fact that racism exists in our society as "a problem without a name" (p.849).

This paper brings to light a culturally significant film set in the Humayunpur area in Delhi which is considered a ghetto for migrants from Northeast. The film is about a group of friends from the Northeast region living in Delhi and their struggle to cook 'axone' for their friend Minam's wedding. The film attempts to deal with some of the larger issues like racism and prejudices through the medium of food and how people from Northeast region are almost always on the receiving end of such discrimination. The discrimination is manifested through the vile act of

harassment, bullying, physical and verbal abuse, and other such experiences that affected the inner psyche of the migrants and traumatised them. The leading characters like Chanbi (Lin Laishram) and Upasana (Sayani Gupta) played challenging roles that attempt to break the stereotypical images associated with girls from Northeast. The group of friends from the Northeast knew that their owner would never allow them to cook 'axone' in the building, so they try finding out tricks to cook it. The struggle they faced to accomplish their goal of cooking their ethnic food highlights some major issues engulfing Indian society. For a Northeastern who has lived outside the Northeast, the obvious point of difference arises when you are cooking something specific to one's culture like fermented 'dry fish', 'axone', and ingredients that are more on the noisome side and smell pungent for the neighbours. This paper attempts to discuss such differences and challenges of prejudices and racism the ethnic minorities face in Delhi and the related trauma the characters go through in a society culturally different from theirs. The film also portrays the solidarity the migrant group shares and how they seek out each other to make friends, which helps to overcome the traumatic harassment and create their own space where they can recall and remember their home. The role of stereotypes, prejudices, and the conflict history of the region has fitted the region into the bowl of discrimination. Another issue that is highlighted in this paper is the universality of such bigotry and prejudiced practices which pervades every community and exists even within the Northeastern group. For instance, Upasana (the Nepali girl) is often considered as the 'other' among the group of Northeastern friends. In one instance Zorem (her boyfriend) made her realise how she is treated differently by Minam and Chanbi who are closer to each other. In another instance, Minam showed aversion to Zorem being in a relationship with the Nepali girl Upasana. Thus, occasionally Upasana too faces such discrimination within her own friend circle.

People carry their culture wherever they go, consciously or unconsciously. We often tend to carry with us objects that symbolise our culture. Food is an integral part of one's culture and a powerful lens of analysis. Food is also the space where intercultural exchanges possibly take place. The film *Axone* by Nicholas Kharkongor uses the food motif to deal with some complex issues like cultural acceptance, preservation, and also resistance in a multicultural world. In this film, food becomes the main point of difference that caused racist treatment towards the group of Northeast migrants who wanted to prepare their ethnic food for one of their friend's weddings. The owner of the building where the three Northeastern girls (Chanbi, Upasana, and Minam) live, calls their food "stinky" and even threatens to get them arrested if they don't stop cooking. She further abuses them and condemns their cooking by retorting that her building is stinking like a gutter. The struggle on the part of the migrants to taste and cherish their ethnic food in a foreign land brings forth some of the major issues like racism, casteism, and violation of human rights that have swamped the Indian society. In this era of cultural globalization where local food items are getting equal attention in the global market, the same is not the case with akhuni/axone. It has a distinct smell which makes the food sidelined in the global market. The matter gets worse when, along with the food, the particular community associated with it is pushed into the periphery and is discriminated against and judged with a biased and racist eye. Northeast migrants in Delhi often find it hard to get accommodation and when they get any, they are strictly prohibited from cooking their ethnic food. Despite having multiethnic restaurants in Delhi that reflect, on the surface, the cosmopolitan nature of such big cities, the question arises as to why the migrants

then have to live under strict surveillance when it comes to eating and cooking the same ethnic food in the comfort of their home. In the film, we come across scenes where Upasana and Chanbi approach such restaurants serving ethnic cuisine to help them cook their food. The whole façade of multiculturalism has been rightly captured in Kikon's (2015) writing where she points out how ethnic foods from the Northeast region have been subjected to "inclusion without acceptance" (p.323). Naga food has been included in the national culinary map of India but the same food is banned from being cooked because of its strong smell. Instances of police circulating booklets about how cooking and eating smelly food by the northeast migrants have caused chaos in the migrants' pockets in Delhi proves the non-acceptance of the ethnic food (Dholabhai,2007). Another reason behind the non-acceptance of the tribal food in the mainland delicacies is the ways the dishes are cooked. Tribal food is cooked with less oil or masala segregates it from the mainland delicacies. The importance of ethnic food for a migrant lies in the fact that it invokes the memory of 'home' and 'identity' and helps to satiate the feelings of longingness for one's roots in distant or unfamiliar surroundings (Kikon, 2015, p.321). Gopal Guru (2019) in this context has pointed out how cooked food apart from satiating hunger and taste has a "decisive criterion for the construction of cultural identity" (p.156). In the power dynamics to maintain hegemony, food becomes a crucial aspect that carries political underpinnings and becomes a medium through which social hierarchies are indicated and perpetuated. The violent reaction against the food habits of particular social groups belonging to the Northeast region or the Dalits by calling it "dirty" and "smelly" stems from conditioned racism ingrained in the social structure (Kikon, 2021, p. 280). The attempt on the part of the upper caste to homogenise the culinary practices according to the dominant class pushed the minority social groups and their dietary practices into the domain of non-acceptance: "The upper castes have not only prescribed food for themselves, they have designated foods for other castes as well" (Guru, 2019, p.157). Such tendencies have not only victimized the minority social groups but denounced the notion of diversity altogether. Affirming the food practices of the minority groups will not only provide a counter-narrative but a proper presentation of diversified India.

Racist disparities shown towards the dietary practices of the northeast region become a metaphor for how northeast migrants are treated in mainland Indian cities like Delhi. Instances of racial abuse that take the form of violence are apparent in the film. The brutal comments that the landlady pass on one of the Northeast migrants, Bendang Longkumer, about his appearance that he can't keep his eyes open render it evident that the Northeasterners are mistreated and abused for their looks. The incident that Chanbi, another migrant from the Northeast, faced in the market pushed everything to an extreme. She was slapped by two guys who verbally abused her and when confronted, they did not hesitate to abuse her physically. The two boys unveiled the harassment women face that double up when colors of racism are added. Rachna Chandira (2018) while interviewing Ngurang Reena revealed the general perceptions about Northeastern girls that they are "easy women". Ngurang Reena, a social activist and a feminist fighting for such discrimination states:

When you are in a place like Delhi and you have to always adjust to something new, as a woman, as a person from the marginalised section, so every space you go into makes you sort of political. (Chandira, 2018)

This image of 'being available' is also manifested in their non-Northeastern friend Shiv's fetishism over the Northeastern girl who continuously makes comments like "get me a northeast girlfriend" (Kharkongor, 2019, 1:21:10). Women, in general, and women from marginalized social groups, in particular, are subjected to multiple jeopardies. They become victims of race, class, gender, caste, and whatnot. In a survey carried out by the Centre of Northeast Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, and the National Commission of Women in 2012, 81% of women from the northeast face discrimination daily. They are always viewed through a judgmental lens. This incident that Chanbi faced, traumatizes her to the point of making her numb, incapable to act. Moreover, nobody supported her except one woman who consoled her rather than taking any action. Even her partner Bendang acted passively. Each and every character in the film has a different story of such harassment altogether. For instance, Bendang once had blonde hair for which people nearby the area, where he worked, often made fun of him, and for once when he protested, he was beaten almost to death. The story of Bendang brings back the case of Nido Tania who was beaten to death when he retaliated to such bullying. Continuous discrimination has shaken the self-worth and self-confidence of Bendang. The behavior of Bendang can be related to social anxiety disorder, that is, the fear of negative evaluation, fear of embarrassment that partially comes because of his earlier non-acceptance. The effect of the incident is very much reflected in the behavior of Bendang when he remained numb even when his partner faced the same brutality. He no longer dares to stand for himself or others. Such psychological trauma compelled him to lock himself up in his room, away from everything. On the other hand, we have Chanbi who continuously suffered a panic attack after facing all those racist incidents.

Both men and women from the Northeast are subjected to different kinds of racial discrimination which has its commencement in stereotypical conceptions that the common masses hold against the Northeastern people which further exacerbates the traumatic experiences of the characters. Stereotyping is when an assumption becomes knowledge that common people start sharing about an individual or thing. The stereotypes are generally negative and derogatory, often used to justify some kind of discrimination, oppression, and otherization. The concept of stereotype represents the consensus of the majority of the population about the other person or group. Stereotyping, and at the same time romanticizing the unknown or the half known has caused a lot of problems disrupting proper communication among people in a multicultural and globalized world. The building where Chanbi and Minam live also has some African girls. While they were having conversations about cooking 'axone', the African girl commented on how Upasana did not look like one who belongs to the Northeast. Even Shiv, the grandson of the landlady, made the same remark about her look. Her face does not fit the stereotype image people carry about the Northeasterners. This showcases yet another problem of how Northeast India is taken as a homogeneous entity by the outsiders. Women are more vulnerable owing to the gender-based violence they receive. The aspects associated with Northeast Indian Women, like the way they dress, the bond they share with their male friends, and the independence they forecast in metropolitan cities that stand at odds with most of the women from mainland India become a matter of speculation that finally culminates in presenting them as "loose in morals and sexually promiscuous" (Mcduie- Ra, 2012, p. 71).

In the film *Axone*, we see how the characters behave in intercultural encounters and respond to acculturation, assimilation, and other such processes. Sam and Berry (2006) defined

acculturation as, "The meeting of cultures and the resulting changes" (p.1). Some other terms associated closely with acculturation are assimilation, integration and marginalization, and separation. As forwarded by John W. Berry (2006),

when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures, the assimilation strategy is defined. In contrast, when individuals place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others, then the separation alternative is defined. When there is an interest in both maintaining one's original culture, and having daily interactions with other groups, integration is the option here. (p. 35)

Bendang trying to sing a Hindi song or Upasana trying to cook a traditional dish of Nagaland 'axone', and at the same time learning the language of her partner, are some examples of their attempt to integrate with the dominant culture. They did not adopt a separatist tendency or assimilative tendency but rather wanted to take a middle path where they could keep intact their own culture and at the same time integrate with the mainstream dominant culture. However, integration between dominant and non-dominant cultural groups requires acceptance and mutual accommodation of the larger social network. To live as culturally different people within the same society requires acceptance. The strategy requires efforts from both sides. The non-dominant groups are required to adopt some basic values of the larger society, at the same time the dominant group should accept the needs of the former. However, non-acceptance from the dominant group often pushes the individual to take up a separatist stand avoiding interaction with the mainstream group or minimal interaction. In the later part of the film, we see Chanbi telling Bendang about how he never tried to integrate with people other than his Northeastern friends. What we see in the case of Bendang and his other Northeastern friends is that the dominant group or culture did not accept them and pushed them into their enclosed shell. Bendang's inaction during the market incident or even locking himself up in his room can be interpreted as signs that imply his separatist tendencies compiled with fear and trauma. P.K. Nayar in his book *Postcolonial literature: An Introduction* (2008) states, "When the adopted culture fails to see beyond the ethnic identity of the diasporic/exilic individual then this individual has no choice but to retrieve her/his indigenous culture" (p. 205). Thus Bendang and Chanbi finally decided to leave Delhi and return to their native land. The decision taken by them somewhat hints at their intention to remain confined within the comfort zone of their roots and culture. But such a stand might have a different repercussion as such tendencies on the part of the Northeastern group might well further broaden the gap between the dominant and non-dominant groups leading to the continuation of differences besides being detrimental to dismantling the persistent social prejudices. As Lears points out that subordinate groups may participate in maintaining a symbolic universe, even if it serves to legitimise their domination. In other words, they can share a kind of half-conscious complicity in their own victimization (Lears, 1985, p.573).

In the final part of the film, we see how the friends ended up cooking 'axone' on the terrace amidst nature signifying the fact that nature never discriminates against culture. Love and friendship in particular and human relations, in general, are taken into account to show how this relationship can surpass all other man-made barriers that include our own culture. The friendship of the migrants is a crucial factor in determining their condition in the distant land. Making

homoethnic friends, like the ethnic food, compensate for the migrants feeling of missing home (Akhtar, 2011, p. 86). The shared experiences of the migrants in a foreign land bring them together to create a symbolic world where they can feel comfortable. The sense of camaraderie binds the northeast migrants together. Besides, such friendship is not without rivalry but when threatened by the outside force they unite and stand together to overcome the discrimination. Like the homoethnic friendship, heteroethnic friendships develop amongst the migrant groups. Heteroethnic friendship, as Salman Akhtar (2011) puts it, can be divided into two categories- the first one with people who are migrants themselves and the second one with those who are native to the land. In the film, we come across both types of heteroethnic friendships. The first one is evident in the relationship Upasana and Chanbi share with the Black girls. They not only share the same building but share experiences in the acculturation process and go through similar kind of treatment as one situated on the receiving end of racial prejudices that builds connection and form solidarities that embody the genesis of their friendship. The second category of heteroethnic friendship is seen in the relationship the Northeastern group shares with Shiv, who is a Delhiite, which reflects how such a bond can surpass the differences that exist between them. Akhtar's use of the word 'native' comprises not only the original inhabitants of that land but those migrants or immigrants who have assimilated and earned the status of the native. According to Akhtar, most of the heteroethnic friendships are filled with ambivalences because of the mixed feeling they have towards the natives. For instance, the Northeastern group did not like Shiv at first and made weird facial gestures whenever he arrived on the scene. Shiv, on the other hand, made unintentional racial remarks that instigated such hatred towards him. However, Shiv was always there whenever they needed him. He arranged cylinder and cooking space for Upasana and Chanbi, also managed his grandmother who was against cooking any stinky food, and even took Chanbi to the doctor when she got a panic attack. Moreover, Chanbi's comment that although some are rude, most of them are nice to them, and because of such people they can still live in cities like Delhi, reflects how such mutual love and friendship helped them to tolerate the differences and diversity that exist in multicultural societies. Thus, Akhtar (2011) rightly puts it when he writes about heteroethnic friendships as something that can act as a "bridge to acculturation" (p.91). Apart from these inherent qualities, another way forward is cultural intelligence and tolerance and even learning to respect every culture. Minimum awareness about the diverse culture is the need of the hour that might fill the knowledge gap thereby increasing cultural intelligence. Though cultural intelligence is a concept limited to business, academics, education, and government research, there is a need to adopt the same in a social environment too. How to deal with or behave in a culturally diverse situation effectively is what cultural intelligence means. The concept is more than mere cultural awareness and sensitivity. Cultural learning approaches might help in reducing conflict during intercultural communication:

There is no doubt that one of the most important factors in determining effective communication with members of the host community, and arguably the most central one, is one's facility to speak their language. (Masgoret and Ward, 2006, p. 62)

An important element of cultural learning theory is language learning; learning the language of the host culture. It helps to establish successful intercultural and interpersonal communication. Bendang's struggle to learn the Hindi song and failing to do the same is a factor that might have contributed to pushing him into the periphery. Whereas we have other characters who can speak



the Hindi language and go along well with others and can even confront the abusers at times when needed to make their stand. For instance, we have Chanbi who confronted the two guys who abused her verbally but Bendang could not even utter a word. Though he has his own traumatic experiences, the language barrier has further broadened the gap. The same kind of cultural intelligence is also seen in Martha, a friend of theirs who married into a Punjabi family. In a conversation with Chanbi and Upasana, while they were complaining about their right to cook their food freely, Martha pointed out how others have the right to not tolerate the smell of the food they don't feel like.

Nicholas Kharkongor's *Axone*, released on Netflix, is indeed a short film that showcases the event in mere ninety minutes but the premise and the ideas it sends through are big. *Axone* is a balanced film where Kharkongor, in a non-patronising and non-moralising way has presented the lived reality of people from the Northeast whose stories have not got much scope to get the audience outside the region. Kharkongor did not restrict himself to Northeastern actors but extended his scope to include the brilliancy of Sayani Gupta, Vinay Pathak, Rohan Joshi, Dolly Ahluwalia, and others. The characters, apart from stripping the hard-biting reality of racism also provide comic relief through their humorous interactions. We live amidst multiculturalism and a globalized world where everyone has experienced such a crisis at some point in time. At a time when the *Black Lives Matter* slogan has shaken the whole United States of America, *Axone* portrays that India too suffers from this syndrome causing a systemic defect that needs to be addressed with urgency. Though the study mainly focuses on the migrants from the Northeast, it represents every such migrant group inhabiting culturally different regions and facing these issues. In this short film, we have seen how the Northeasterners are looked down upon and are discriminated against, and often projected as the other but prejudices and 'othering' also exist amidst their own communities. Awareness about the other cultural groups and removing the deleterious cultural practices like bigotry and biases that we hold towards others will help us to communicate better with others. Cultural intelligence, mutual learning, understanding, and other such approaches along with the humane qualities of love, respect, and tolerance will help establish a healthy relationship that would contribute to making this world a better place to live in.

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