

The Green Men of Kumbalangi: Eco-equity in the Tinsel Text

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Abstract

Kumbalangi Nights is a 2019 celebrated movie released in the Malayalam family drama film industry. The film depicts the life of four brothers Saji, Bobby, Boney and Franky and the problems that they face in their life. But in course of telling their story, film also able to narrates many other nuances of ecocriticism and ecomasculinity. The very existence of characters subtly showcases nature's power to be hermaphroditic. Without challenging the essential claims of ecofeminism, this paper simply strives to points out the inherent semblance of men and nature. Hence to prove that only toxic male chauvinistic patriarchy only hampers the growth of nature but the ecomasculinity ever embraces nature.

Key Words

Kumbalangi Nights, Ecocriticism, Ecomasculinity, Nature, Toxic male

Ecocriticism defines itself as a practice of reading literature from an earth-centered (rather than human-centered) perspective. While ecofeminism has traditionally focused on studying issues such as how the exploitation of women and women's bodies are congruent with the exploitation of nature. On the other hand, ecomasculinity studies men's role in this process and looks for ways to enable men to take on roles that would challenge exploitative thought patterns and practices

Jesse Oak Taylor opines in his essay 'Environmentalism and Imperial Manhood' that "ecofeminism indirectly blames masculinity for exploiting and negatively influencing the natural world"(12). Scott Slovic fashions a term to counter the harm ecofeminism has done to masculine bonding with the natural environment; Ecomasculinism. "Where the former holds males solely responsible for the desecration of

ecology whereas the latter frames the counter-narrative to such static references. He showcases men fighting to safeguard the natural order, intensely engaging with the development and benefit of nature" (67–80).

The discourse of ecomasculinism compliments ecofeminism. Traditionally ecofeminism reads the exploitation of women and their bodies as coinciding with the exploitation of nature and its resources by men when metaphysically superimposed. Ecomasculinism of the other hand prepares for discourse concerning the resourcefulness, nurturing and caring nature of people of the masculine orientation as opposed to the image of the dominating and exploitative individual traditionally constructed. It is to be noted that ecofeminism is in no way robbed of its theoretical perspectives and justification with a view to general male performativity. Ecomasculinism serves to speak up for those male individuals who refuse to conform to the idea of dominating patriarchy and that of the destroyer of nature. Instead, they enact the role of a Green Man.

Kumbalangi Nights (Release date 7 February 2019), the directorial debut by Madhu C. Narayanan and written by Shyam Pushkaran, which unfolds in the suburbs of Kochi. The family of Saji lives there. As referred many times in the film it is on this small island like a 'wasteland' like space people dump their unwanted animals, including kittens, pups, etc. This place is home to many such unwanted others, which include four brothers. Saji (Soubin Shahir), Bobby (Shane Nigam), Boney (Sreenath Bhasi), and Franky (Mathew Thomas). They are not all from the same father and mother, which is also burning jibe that others threw against them.

Reading the film with an ecological perspective, this visually panoramic setting of the story does have the utmost importance and it is heavily influencing the characters and their behavior. Saji lives with his siblings — the aimless Bobby (Shane Nigam), Boney, the school-going Frankie (Mathew Thomas) – and they are practically orphans. Their father is dead, their mother has left them to serve God. (The small scene where she meets her sons is devastating in what it leaves unsaid.) Saji is the mother of the house, he changes a bit only when situations push him too hard. He cooks and takes care of the family. He is the sensitive mother figure of the home. When Bobby relentlessly complains about his mother, Saji defends her, by saying that she has not had an easy life. "She always had the smell of pain balm." Saji is 'feminine', this fact is further emphasized by the fact that he does not indulge in a female love interest. He does not seem to be interested

in any woman. His only 'partner' is Murugan (Ramesh Thilak), with whom he runs a street-side ironing business. This no waypoints that Saji is a gay or an emasculated person, just that he is not into the particularly macho things that escalate the aggressiveness of men in mainstream movies (like falling in love, or lust)

Shammi (Fahadh Faasil), antihero and the macho male, he is an exact opposite to Saji in every aspect. If Saji is the matriarch of his family, Shammi is the patriarch of his family. Saji's house is filled with men; Bobby, Franky, Bonny. Shammi's is filled with women: wife Simi (Grace Antony), her sister Baby (Anna Ben), and their mother (Ambika Rao). Saji's house is nestled in a place where waste and stray animals are dumped, in contrast Shammi's upper-class-ness is marked by the very fact that family runs a homestay business used by foreign tourists. And Shammi is anything but 'sensitive'. He is the personification of the toxic male and coldness towards nature. He takes great pride in his ordered immaculate mustache. Shammi is single-handedly the embodiment of the anti-ecological perspective of the film. In his introductory scene itself, he is portrayed in his closed bath room, pruning his ultra-masculine mustache and with the same blade, scraping off a black bindi on the mirror. He cannot tolerate even a trace of 'femaleness' to meddle with his concept of 'complete man' (He calls himself that.) And he is pathologically neat. In his mind he is the hero of the story, everything revolves around him. A classic example of an androcentric male. His obsessiveness over neatness pointing towards the ecological regimentation, something that hampers the natural growth of plants as well as people. He is willing and happy to restrict the women, nature and natural constructive growth of everything around him. He cannot bear to lose control. He cannot tolerate the kind of mess Saji's household is so used to, and this includes Baby falling for Bobby. This development disturbs his idea of 'neatness', of how things should be just so.

But in the household of Saji, there is no kind of regimentation is found, the spirit of nature is embodied there, and different people can come together, despite their cultural, linguistic, gender differences. Just as the green creeper that is outgrown into the walls of the house (these green creepers also support the decrepit walls too) or as the free flow of butterflies or as accepting the abandoned kittens sauntering in the care of Franky.

From a dismissive 'outsider' to the family, Franky by the end of the film becomes an insider, helping his brothers — and in the process, transforming from boy to man. From a sulking drifter, Bobby becomes a responsible adult and even his attitude towards love changes. Earlier he wonders if you have to buy the whole tea shop just for a cup of tea. Later, he evolves enough to realize Baby may deserve someone better than him. Saji goes from sponging off others to providing for those in need, later he transforms into a fisherman. Only Shammi does not change. He is a flat character or representation of a concept. He is the distillation of the worst aspects of patriarchy/masculinity, and so he has to be vanquished, removed from the root rather than be allowed to change. And it is Shammi who results in the film's most problematic stretches. This stunted growth must be the poetic justice of nature for those who do not flow with it. At the end of the film, this regimentation and stunted growth/deliberate opposition towards nature are interpreted as aberration or insanity which is against the natural flow of nature. Which is well depicted through the hysteric climax scene.

For instance, the scene where maniacal Shammi snubs Simi's uncle, whose claim to fame is that he is a good cook. It is a scene that 'fits' – because cooking, after all, is a 'feminine' pursuit in the eyes of a man like Shammi, and he is likely to be dismissive about a man who pursues it. But it is better to treat Shammi as a concept rather than a character (i.e. 'toxic masculinity' rather than a man).

One among the powers of 'Green men' in the film is their ability to cry. Two brothers explaining their complicated family history. The older brother Saji to a counselor and younger Bobby to his girlfriend. The scene cuts between the individual narratives. Bobby's girlfriend jokes 'how many mummies and Daddies you have? I want the complete list before sunrise'. Meanwhile, Saji tells the psychologist it hurts when people call them fatherless. Both brothers cry. Bobby silently sheds a tear as he gazes at the sky. But Saji holds the psychiatrist and weeps, his body shakes with grief, his tears wet the psychiatrist. Right from the name of the film, one can listen to a weeping sound. Also, the names of characters end with a sound more similar to weeping, Saji. Boney, Franky, Shammi, etc. This might be a semantic construction from the part of scriptwriter to vindicate the intertwined relation and assimilation of female essentiality of men in the film.

Kumbalangi brothers are more into nature, they are more averse to a more urban technicality, and this is more evident in the heartwarming scene where boney catches a fish with his barefoot while he talks

to his lady love. Gradually accepting to be a fisherman, something that he does best. Both brothers Saji and Boney constructively grows to tranquility when they finally embrace their self, finding happiness as perfect natural fishermen, and it is to be noted that no machines are used in the film to depict the act of fishing. During the final fight, Shammi is 'silenced' by trapping him in a huge fishnet. It must be noted that Shammi who represents the mechanized evilness is coming up with more calculated plans and weapons, and brothers had bare hands to oppose it. And just as nature who is calm and a silent sufferer in initial phases of destruction end up being a grand power that retaliates strongly.

The emotions of characters are also expressed through the depiction of nature. The beauty of interracial blooming love between Nylah (Jasmine Metivier) and Boney is well expressed not through a flamboyant dance number but with a more natural phenomena 'kavaru', the colloquial term for sea sparkle.

The other overarching conceit in Kumbalangi Nights is the definition of family. From the outside, it is appealing to be associated with Shammi's very 'decent' family, but appearances are so deceptive. It's the household with the eggshell ashtray that expands our idea of family. The concept of family is so ecologically tempered in Kumbalangi Nights. It is evolving, organic, and all accepting. This open-door policy is visualized literally — Saji's house has no door. It does not need one. This is, in its way, nurturing, offers a shelter for the needful. For those who seek shelter, Green Men happily provide.

Hence, the yearning on Franky's face as he gazes at the small shrine at home, with a picture of Mary holding the baby Jesus. This seemingly casual shot finds an echo, a crescendo, when Saji brings home a mother with a baby while rowing swiftly through the water. The boy does have mother figures inside the family, Boney who is fiercely protective of Franky, caring Saji, etc. Franky also becomes a mother/Green Man when he comes back from the hostel and tries to find a balanced family by uniting the brothers and clean up space. Ironically the nurturing is done by the Green Men and the soothing nature around him and not by the female characters. Thereby finding a golden semblance of nurturing paternal face of nature. The song, "Cherathukal" has got refrain "Makane Njan Undu Koode" which translates in to 'son, I am here with you' stylized with repeated allusions to paternal images. (In visuals of the song Saji rows slowly through the water with mother and child).

Lastly, the setting of the story offers a new coast of ideas. Kumbalangi Nights showcase a space where land and water exist together. This can be seen as the symbolic reminder of the conjunction of traits of masculinity and femininity in nature. Thus proving the essential hermaphroditic nature of Mother Nature.

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