



## A Cinematic Reflection of Folklore, Superstitions, and Social Stigma in *Lembi Leima*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.379](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.379)



### Article info

Article Received: 15/08/2025

Article Accepted: 04/09/2025

Published online: 08/09/2025

### Abstract

Art is the most compelling medium through which humans find expression of complex emotions and situations. Like other artistic mediums, films influence how we engage with society and offer a framework for understanding the bigger picture. They have the potential to address topical social issues and shape people's beliefs, opinions, and attitudes which then percolate into society. Much like literature, films serve as a window into different cultures, and it allows individuals to gain a penetrating insight of themselves and their belief systems throughout the world. Therefore, perspectives are introduced into society through the kaleidoscopic nature of films, at times condoning and at other times challenging the existing preconceived notions, thereby expanding our cognizance of human experience. The characters seen in movies are perceived as real people who are confronting genuine issues and obstacles. Through them, the audience experiences their fears and aspirations and lives vicariously. 'Lembi Leima' is a Manipuri short film which leaves a lasting impact on its audience. This particular film has been screened at the recently concluded The Empty Space International Short Film Festival 2024 and was accorded the best actress award to Bala Hijam, the lead actress. This paper aims to undertake a closer analysis of the movie.

**Keywords:** Art, literature, social issues, culture, human experience.

### Introduction

Humans have a knack for evolving incredible creative ways to express themselves, which has paved the way for art to evolve

perpetually. To define it, would be to limit it; however, a definition can provide a foundation to comprehend various artistic mediums. Art must be tangible, self-contained and most

importantly a conscious creation. In the end, art is nothing more than an attempt to communicate when words alone cannot suffice. Films are a potent tool for cultural preservation, emancipation, and increased visibility especially for North-East India. It is not just for amusement. It gives indigenous people a forum to share their narratives, showcase their distinctive viewpoints, and dispel myths and stereotypes. Filmmakers in North East India blur the lines between ethnography, oral history, testimony, and narrative by employing a multidisciplinary approach. This creates dialogues where people in Northeastern India may explore different ways of defining their sense of belonging and home. Through their personal narratives rooted in the exploration of identity, conflict, and resistance, these filmmakers provide a more nuanced and comprehensive view of the struggles of indigenous communities in the local region and their experiences.

#### ***Lembi Leima*, a beacon of resilience:**

On the surface, *Lembi Leima*, a Manipuri short movie, which appears to be dealing with the stereotypical corrupt versus the incorruptible elements, has been placed in contrast to the backdrop of a pristine mythical cave in a far-off village. However, a more comprehensive look reveals a much deeper issue of exploitation and demonizing of the unfamiliar which later unravels in the theme of witch hunt. The rich symbolism embedded in the movie offers audiences the chance to grasp much of the unsaid and the pauses. The film explores with minimal, yet repetitive dialogues accompanied by eerie music at an even pace reminding us much about Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot'. The use of pauses and lighting to focus on pressing suspense is captivating. Although, the movie needs much elaboration regarding the folklore of 'Lairembi', it meets its success in drawing the attention towards the rich indigenous culture and beliefs of the Meitei community. There are only but a handful of movies from the Northeast which

manages to capture the essence of women in power. *Lembi Leima* becomes an interesting subject in such a category. The narratives which unfold showcase the already known themes of gender politics and archetypal motif of women as an entity of resilience, common to all cultures. The thought-provoking scenes in the film force its audience to question the norm and thus continue to be an effective instrument for social change.

*Lembi Leima* as a movie has received recognition and accolades for its simple yet profound manner in which it has been able to bring to the surface issues often superficially discussed but never resolved. Screened at the recently concluded 'The Empty Space International Short Film Festival 2024' the film was accorded with the best actress award to Bala Hijam, the lead actress. The film is produced under the banner CICADA Film Production in association with RJ Star Production, directed by Mayank Pratap Singh, with Bala Hijam Ningthoujam, Bijou Thangjam, Naveen Jagbir Sandhu, Khonykar Khuraijam and Niranjay Luwangcha being the lead actors. The movie opens with a speech by the dubious Probin Kumar, also known as 'Taibungo'. He talks about a government scheme which will benefit the villagers and provide employment to its youths. The man appears to be a phony as he uses English words to appear 'educated'; ironically, he cannot pronounce it correctly and Nando corrects him from behind. One might infer from this scene that Nando, who is not corrupt, must remain in the background, helpless despite his knowledge, while the corrupt stands boldly in the foreground due to his immense power. Nando is a simpleton who likes to follow Taibungo's order without question. He comes off as a character although naïve, quite eager to learn and rectify himself. The scene of two elderly folks conversing unfolds. One elderly ask the other suspicious of Taibungo's intention; however, he is reprimanded because the other believes that Taibungo is like God, revealing people's naive

faith when they are isolated from the world of development and depend solely on one individual. This train of thought gets elevated when Taibungo tells Nando that it was a good decision to stop his education and work in the village under him, thus revealing the insecurity of Taibungo who preys on people's gullibility and controls them through sugar coated words for his own self-vested interest. The subjugation of illiterate and naïve villagers in many third-world countries is comparable to the exploitation of nature to satisfy man's insatiable demands. Taibungo's persona is a perfect illustration of this claim.

#### Identity versus Identification:

The process of identifying as an audience to various roles in any movie becomes a crucial quality to enjoy the movie. Humans are known to be vain creatures, perpetually in search of 'the self', trying to wriggle out ounces of oneself from anything substantial. The director, thus, makes this process of identification seamless when the viewer is placed at the subject position. As audience identifies with roles, they become sutured, feeling the emotions of the character, their fear and aspirations. In the film, the audience is introduced to one such character which innately everyone aspires to become at one point in life, a force to reckon with, unyielding with truth as the armour. Bala who is heavily pregnant has an aura of authority as an investigating officer. Bala radiates competence and confidence in all facets of her personality. She has a penetrating gaze that conveys her tenacity and acute intelligence. As soon as she arrives, she sets out to interact with the villagers. She soon comes across Taibungo who keeps pressurising her to write a report which will allow for the commercial plantation of palm trees. This upsets Bala, thereby causing an altercation with Taibungo. Bala cares more to save the village from ecological catastrophe. Furthermore, if the scheme receives a green signal from the government, the recruitment will be done on educational qualifications not on muscle power, and that all the youths should

possess the right degree so as to reap the benefit of the scheme. This makes the youths who blindly follow Taibungo feel uneasy. Upon realizing Bala to be incorruptible and gullible, Taibungo goes into a fit of rage. This scenario, in which Taibungo, a respected patriarch, feels cornered by a woman who is also an outsider, demonstrates the unraveling of gender politics. An individual such as Bala is seen by Taibungo as a threat to both his power and the dominance he had built over the gullible villagers. Nothing hurts patriarchy more than a rival power that might undermine the already "known." Bala was like an irritating thorn in his shoe, pricking him every time he moved to satisfy his greedy need.

The stark contrast in character is revealed through the mindset and actions of the two characters. While Taibungo hopes to profit by hook or by crook, Bala wishes to stick to the rules and build a better world for her child, almost echoing the voice of every parent in this generation and generations before, the desire to build a better world for their children. Bhupen Hazarika, a well-known musician and cultural icon, illustrates the people's inherent bond with their country through his songs by using the mother motif. This same motif can be seen in *Lembi Leima*. Nando's identity is forming, much like a clay carefully taking shape, he appears a simpleton but his eyes are filled with ambition and a desire to upgrade for the better. The scene where Nando wakes up and glares at his family photo alongside a mirror seems to be depicting two different Nando. First a youthful and cheerful Nando, standing amidst his family and another Nando, stares back from the mirror, one who looks lost and forlorn as though questioning his own existence. Nando quickly snaps out of the thought and calls his sister whom he had managed to send to the Delhi for further studies. This brief phone call rejuvenates him as though he found meaning in his existence, his need to create his identity, one with a purpose.

### **The Grasp of Superstition: A Catastrophe in waiting:**

Superstition is the term used to describe actions or beliefs that derive from irrationality as opposed to reasoned analysis or empirical data. Superstitions are thought to be irrational, and resulting from either ignorance, or fear of the unknown. The auspicious, the inauspicious, the omen, the signs have been carefully placed at the heart of most indigenous communities. Whether they are mere coincidence occurring at random intervals over a period of time or shamanic truths, either way superstitions have a tight clutch on society. The plot of the movie, brings forth this narrative and builds its momentum when a small boy died after Bala and Nando visited the family. Rumours begin to circulate about Bala being a witch with 'bloodshot eyes'. The brother of the child symbolises 'rumour and gossips' personified, adding fuel to fire.

### **Indigenous Storytelling as a Cultural Thread:**

Indigenous storytelling serves as a profound cultural thread, intricately weaving together the narratives, traditions, and wisdom of indigenous communities across generations. By means of these stories, native peoples safeguard their cultural legacy, strengthening their sense of identity and kinship with their homeland, forefathers, and society. It serves as a strong cultural thread promoting resilience, togetherness, and cultural pride in the face of past adversity and ongoing challenges. In the movie, a brief scene shows us a glimpse of the lore of a cave, where Nando narrates how a 'Lairembi'<sup>1</sup> resides in the cave and protects the village of their neighbouring community from misfortune. Nando tells Bala about another cave which is right behind the guest house, and how no one dares enter the cave as people believe it to be haunted. Bala drifts away in her own

thoughts watching the captivating cave, giving a forbearing of her connection to the cave.

### **Revealing Reality - a cinematic rendering:**

In the scene that ensues, Nando is pressurized by the villagers to persuade Bala to manipulate her report and this reflected the anguish of the youths and farmers whose hope is pinned against a project that might not come to fruition. This scene aggressively depicts the deplorable state of the economy and desperation of the people clutching onto a hope raised on a false promise. The real culprit, Taibungo dons the mask of the hero while Bala is branded an outsider, the unfamiliar villain. Upon hearing the accusations, Nando withdraws into silence, showing his conflicting conscience to either become an opportunist or to stand with the truth. We are soon revealed that Nando's dilemma and his gullibility costs him dearly. Capitalism pursues everyone, including an innocent villager like Nando who is easily enticed by a used smartphone, gifted by Taibungo in order to carry out his insidious plan. This smartphone which is a symbol of progress ends up in Nando's tragic end. Tragedy occurs when people succumb to superstition and blind faith, rationality and logic are disregarded as the crowd gathers for a witch-hunt. Bala loses her spouse from mob lynching; she flees towards a cave which she unconsciously heard Nando mention. The mob carrying torches chased her, making the scene resemble something from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Furthermore, she finds Nando's lifeless body dangling over the bridge, presumably killed by Taibungo and his gang.

### **Feminine Fortitude: Women as Pillars of Cultural Resilience:**

Bala enters the cave, but the bunch of frightened young guys lacked the bravery to do the same. Owing to dire stress, Bala then goes

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<sup>1</sup> *Lairembi*: Singh, Oinam Ranjit, and Kamei Budha Kabui. "The Ritual Festival of the Meiteis with Reference to Lai Haraoba.", (P.572)



into labour, as she screamed, her human screams transformed into growls of an injured animal producing an eerie effect which made the youths flee. Bala then delivers her baby all alone symbolizing resilience facing the most cruel charges of society. She kept walking till she found light at the end of another cave, the very cave which was worshipped by the other neighbouring community. She looked like a witch, her disheveled hair with her blood-stained clothes, bloodied hands clutching onto the baby and the umbilical cord. Despite the horrors, the motif of the womb, motherhood and strength which is the essence of every woman in all archetypes is beautifully rendered. The murmurs of "Who is she?" soon turned into "Lairembi is here"; 'the goddess of our forest has appeared' as they all started rejoicing. This movie ends leaving it open ended for the audience to ponder upon various alternative endings, almost gripping everyone with a sense of stillness. The stillness comes from the cathartic relief of knowing the protagonist survives as well as the lucid depiction of how a misguided and frenzied mob can lead to a literal transformation of a sane individual into demonic likeness. The transformation of a lady, allegedly hunted to be a witch whilst looking like a human to a woman who looked like a witch yet worshipped as a goddess despite the individual being the same is thought provoking.

### Conclusion:

Film making in India's northeast region is set against several obstacles, whether they are technological or financial. But despite this uninspired backdrop, filmmakers dare to experiment with the new medium due to the artistic ambiance and potential. In *Lembi Leima*, the audience is reminded of how education and knowledge play crucial roles in true empowerment. The role of such films continues to prove why awareness to educate oneself remains important. It empowers people to think critically, solve problems, and make informed decisions, empowering them to advocate for themselves and other. It involves breaking free

from societal limitations and stereotypes. Through cultivating resilience, accepting variety, and advocating for inclusivity, people and communities can realise their maximum potential and establish a fairer and more equitable society for future generations.

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