

Exploring Woman-Nature Intersection in Indian Cinema: An Ecofeminist Study of Amit V Masurkar's 'Sherni' (2021)

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Abstract

Cinema Studies has become a prominent part of mainstream literary theory and literature. It has also entered in various other domains of literary theory. Film theory in the academic plenitudes of Feminism illustrates the feminist aspects of critical enquiry which played a significant role in shaping the newly developed discipline of film studies in 1970s. It has also entered into newly developing fields of Feminist theory including Ecofeminism, Queer Theory, Tribal Feminism etc.

Ecofeminism in Cinema Studies explores the intersection of gender, ecology, and film, examining how movies depict and engage with ecological and feminist concerns. It examines how women and nature are often linked in film narratives, reflecting cultural attitudes and power dynamics. Ecofeminist film analysis highlights the ways in which movies reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles, human-nature relationships, and environmental issues. The present paper intends to investigate woman and nature association in Indian Cinema with special reference to the movie 'Sherni' (2021) featuring Vidya Balan, directed by Amit V Masurkar.

Keywords: Cinema Studies, Ecofeminism, Queer Theory, Tribal Feminism

The syntagmatic and paradigmatic study of Film theory of the academic domains of Feminism illustrates that the feminist aspects of critical enquiry played a significant role in shaping the newly developed discipline of film studies in the 1970s. The emergence of film cinema studies as a young and politically engaged field provided a fertile environment for feminism to establish itself in academic circles. Feminist film studies, born out of this intersection, has been characterized by specialized theoretical debates on representation, spectatorship, and sexual differences, while also exerting a broad cultural influence. It has maintained a dual focus on criticism and cultural production.

Feminism focuses on the significance of gender and its hierarchy in various fields of knowledge, including film and visual media. Feminist film criticism and theory have led to a reevaluation of films centered around women, challenging traditional canons in film studies. One important goal of feminist film studies is to recognize the often ignored contributions of women to film history, both academically and through initiatives like women's film festivals and journalism. The concern for representation, politically and aesthetically, has brought together activism and theory in women's film culture.

Over the past two decades, feminist film studies has broadened its scope by incorporating intersectional analysis that considers race, class, sexuality, and nation in addition to gender. It has also expanded its focus to include other media forms like television and video. Feminist film studies have played a role in reevaluating film historiography, particularly in relation to consumer culture. The interest in how popular culture relates to marginalized social groups has led to a shift from solely analyzing film texts to encompassing broader cultural studies that examine institutions and audiences. The emergence of a postmodern, globalized, and technologically advanced society has presented new challenges and questions for feminist theory and the field of film studies as a whole. One notable advancement in film theory is the portrayal of ecofeminist discourses through films, which highlights a previously neglected aspect of feminist theory in cinema.

Ecofeminism is the theory developed in the West during 1970's with the publication of Rachel Carson's *A Silent Spring* (1962). The term was coined by French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in her work *Le Feminisme Ou La Mort* (1974), which was never translated into English. She dedicated this work to women and called them out to save Earth. The whole investigation poses the questions of the association of nature and woman. Why nature and woman are interconnected? The interaction of nature and woman is based in three claims. Firstly, women being the direct victim of ecological degradation because of their firsthand dependency upon the environment. Secondly, the 'hierarchy of dualism' which blames the patriarchal domination as the root cause of exploitation of woman as well as nature. Thirdly, women being the saviour of nature and historically been the agrarian cultivators.

Many urban, middle-class women find it challenging to perceive the interconnections between their own emancipation, the liberation of nature, and the empowerment of "different" women worldwide. This challenge stems from the capitalist, male-dominated system of beliefs and understanding, which establishes a hierarchical division in society, where one group is consistently deemed superior to another, and one group's success comes at the expense of the other. Consequently, man holds dominance over nature, men hold dominance over women, production takes precedence over consumption, and the global takes precedence over the local, among other manifestations. Feminists have long criticized this division, particularly the structural segregation between man and nature, drawing parallels to the segregation between man and woman. In 1982, the writer Edith Ward in her write-up published in Henry Salt's book *Animal Rights: Considered in Relation to Social Progress* (1892) argues "the case of animal is the case of woman". She further extends the similarities between the violence against women and animals:

similitude of position between woman and lower animals, although vastly different in degree, should inspire from the former the most unflinching and powerful support to all movements for the amelioration of the conditions of animal existence. What, for example could be more calculated to produce brutal wife-beaters than long practice of savage cruelty towards other animals? And what, on the other hand, more likely to impress

mankind with the necessity of justice for women than the awakening of the idea that justice was right or even an ox or a sheep? (Salt 41)

Maria Mies, a sociologist and an eminent ecofeminist critic in her essay 'His Search for What He has Destroyed' attempts to reveal the male dominating trend of romanticizing and exoticizing nature as a gateway of wilderness like the "other". She also accuses them for destroying nature for their material profits. In this wake, she condemns the tourist publicity material of First World countries for selling the 'native' experiences of Third World and their close relationship with nature to have their own profit. An American anthropologist and ecofeminist critic Sherry Ortner tries to bring out the ecofeminist theory, through history in her seminal essay published in a Routledge reader *Feminisms* (1974) entitled 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture' says that women have never been seen with the same value as man has in the society. They are also culturally oppressed. When men are busy in sustaining society with the help of culture, they tend to oppress women and nature in the process. She further asserts "We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with product of human consciousness, by which humanity attempts to assert control over nature"(Ortner 253).

She comments on the closeness of woman with nature. She puts forward that woman's body and its functions, involves in the same activities as nature. It seems to put her close to nature. On the hand, man's physiology sets him free to take up cultural responsibilities. She concludes, in her essay that culture relates itself to be better and dominant to nature. Culture also rests its sense of superiority in its capability to "socialize" and "culturalize" nature.

Writing about environmentalism's expansion into cinema studies, Paula Willoquet-Maricondi defines the emerging genre of "ecocinema" as "films that overtly engage with environmental concerns either by exploring specific environmental justice issues, more broadly, by making 'nature,' from landscapes to wildlife, a primary focus," along with films that "compel us to reflect upon what it means to inhabit this planet." Ecocinematic critics question the anthropocentric depiction and framing of nature in films "to probe into our values and culturally constructed beliefs about the nonhuman world." Because of cinema's creation of "the illusion of immediate, direct, and objective access to reality" and its "deceptiv[e] transparen[cy]" as a

medium, it is all the more imperative to analyze how cinematic devices frame nature; such framing and representation shape human perceptions, which, in turn, influence “nature by preserving ecosystems or by despoiling them.”

Cinema studies and ecofeminism intersect in their examination of gender, nature, and representation within the realm of film. Ecofeminist perspectives within cinema studies explore how women and the environment are portrayed in film, as well as the underlying power dynamics and ideologies that shape these representations. Ecofeminist film analysis considers the ways in which women are depicted as both victims and protectors of the natural world. It explores the intersections between gender, ecology, and social issues, highlighting how patriarchal systems of oppression contribute to the exploitation of both women and nature. By incorporating ecofeminist perspectives into cinema studies, scholars and filmmakers aim to raise awareness about ecological issues, challenge gender stereotypes, and promote environmental justice. This interdisciplinary approach offers a critical lens to examine how cinema can contribute to the broader discourse on environmental sustainability and gender equality.

The movie ‘Sherni’, directed by Amit V Maruskar, is an ecological fictional thriller, as mentioned in the exposition of the movie. However, it bears resemblance to the real incidents of the assassination of a tigress in the forests of Maharashtra, India. In the plot of the movie, the real names of the people and places have been modified. The character of the protagonist, Vidya Vincent, played by Vidya Balan, resembles the courageous Divisional Forest Officer KM Avarna. The tigress T-1 has been modified as T-12, and the forests of Maharashtra have been modified as the forests of Madhya Pradesh. But throughout the film, the gravity and seriousness of the man-animal conflict are nowhere compromised as a recreation of a real incident; rather, it is satirized to a larger extent.

‘Sherni’ is a Hindi-language drama film directed by Amit Masurkar and released in 2021. The film revolves around a female forest officer named Vidya Vincent, portrayed by Vidya Balan, who is assigned to a remote jungle region in central India. Vidya is determined to address the escalating issue of man-animal conflict in the area, particularly the increasing encounters between humans and a tigress.

As Vidya delves deeper into her investigation, she encounters various challenges, including bureaucratic hurdles, political interference, and a general lack of support from the local community. Despite these obstacles, Vidya remains resolute in her mission to protect both the wildlife and the villagers.

‘Sherni’ explores the complex dynamics between humans and nature, highlighting the intricate balance that needs to be maintained for the survival of both. The film delves into themes of conservation, environmental destruction, and the clash between development and preservation. It also touches upon gender dynamics, as Vidya navigates a predominantly male-dominated field, facing prejudice and skepticism along the way.

Through its narrative, ‘Sherni’ sheds light on the pressing issue of wildlife conservation in India and raises questions about our responsibility towards nature. The film offers a thought-provoking reflection on the intricate relationship between humans, animals, and the environment, ultimately challenging viewers to contemplate their own roles in the preservation of our natural world.

The voyage of ‘Sherni’ stands parallel to that of Vidya’s real life journey which is made difficult by men around her inside and outside the workplace. The uncommon force that Vidya exerts over the character of Vincent is unique and unusual in Hindi Cinema. There exists a peculiar bond between surrounding nature and Vincent which creates an intriguing interconnectedness between them. As per the discussions of Ecofeminism, “This is due to the female reproductive role and mothering nature, which brings them closer to the rhythm of nature” (Mukhopadhyay 106), the strong association between the character of Vincent and nature can be observed. Ecofeminism proposes a strong connection between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature, suggesting that sexism and environmental degradation are deeply intertwined. Vidya Vincent, serving as a Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), strives to uphold moral principles within a corrupt system plagued by cronyism and the complacency often associated with government jobs. Challenging gender stereotypes, Vidya tackles multiple issues simultaneously. Her battle encompasses not only addressing the challenges surrounding the

protection of the tigress T-12 but also challenging patriarchal power dynamics both within her workplace and society at large.

Vidya embodies the spirit of a tigress, fiercely asserting her presence and attempting to establish her own territory. As a newly empowered woman, her journey mirrors that of the tigress T-12, who faces unforeseen conflicts and obstacles in her path. Vidya's engagement in identity politics becomes a crucial means of resistance and a way to challenge the dominance of a male-centric society. Consequently, Vidya's personal investment in rescuing the female tiger intensifies, validating her determination and propelling her towards a decisive course of action.

The opening sequence of the film displays majestic view of the forest whose depth is unfathomable and mysteries remain unknown. This is quickly followed by a strange sight of a forest officer depicting a tiger in order to ascertain the accurate placement of cameras and sensors to collect information on the wildlife in that area. This shot sequence quickly establishes the theme of the film which centers around the intentional havoc caused by the tiger T12 owing to increasing encroachment of humans in the forests for animal fodder, agriculture and human settlements, mining industry, road infrastructure. The tiger T12 originating from the depth of the cavernous forest comes to the notice of the humans draws parallel with shots of the forest officers. where the sequence of Vidya Balan character Vidya Vincent for the first time gets acquainted with the stray cat Mini introduced by her caretaker. There is a scene in the beginning of the movie where a play based on the tiger is being shown to the villages generating awareness on the co-existence of man and animal. This Parallelism Montage signifies the budding relationship of Vidya Vincent with both cats of smaller and bigger variety. Her character evinces hesitancy as well as a welcoming curiosity towards both these animals and reflects shades of Ecofeminism as Vidya slowly becomes protective of the animals.

The male characters of the film are completely ignorant of nature. When Vincent asks the male officers of the movie about the consequences of the dried watering holes, they couldn't answer in spite of being in service for many years. They ignore their ecological/professional responsibilities and get inclined towards material profits. When Vincent questions Contractor

Manish about refilling the watering holes; he ignores the question and tells her that he was busy in his brother's elections. He even tries to bribe her for the same.

The Tiger play which is based on the coexistence of humans and animals also showcases the political narrative that underlining the story. Vincent addresses the villagers at the end of the Tiger play for generating awareness. During the address the political leader of the village PK with his entourage of forest department officials make an entrance. He promises the villagers as their savior, he will ensure their security by killing the tigers and thereby undermining the purpose of the entire endeavor. The sequence focuses the helplessness and powerlessness of tigers and Vidya Vincent, who in spite of being in the authoritative power of a forest official fails to address herself as the savior of nature. This film sequence establishes the propagation of humans at the expense of the non-humans thereby leading to encroachment of forest areas and endangering species of wild life.

There is a scene of the first sightings of the cubs of T12. The visuals of the cubs are placed between shots of Vidya, as the woman nurturer of nature, and the hunter Pintu who depicts men dominating nature. This transition suggests gendered connotation of Ecofeminism. Here, Vidya's is presented as a modern woman resisting against stereotypes by the nature of her work as a female forest officer which is largely shown as male dominated domain and her personal life wherein she put duties in her career above the duties of a marriage and motherhood. In spite of the same, her maternal instincts are aroused when she discovers the existence of the tiger cubs pitting her against the macho hunter Pinto which signifies the patriarchal nature of the forest society that beliefs in the oppression and domination of nature and puts no importance to the injustices against nature and environment.

To conclude, it can be said that 'Sherni' is a phenomenal initiative to address the unheard voices of nature and woman. The central character, Vidya Vincent, faces challenges and resistance from her male colleagues, who underestimate her abilities and question her authority as a woman. Her struggle to assert herself and make a difference in the male-dominated field of forest conservation can be seen as a reflection of the gender inequalities addressed by ecofeminism. The film highlights the exploitation of both nature and women. It showcases the

conflicts between the local communities, the forest department, and corporations that prioritize profit over ecological preservation. The detrimental impacts of such exploitative practices on both the environment and the lives of women in the community echo ecofeminist concerns and indirectly emphasizes the interconnectedness of women and nature. The film portrays Vidya's deep connection and empathy towards the natural world, as well as her determination to protect wildlife and their habitats. This portrayal aligns with ecofeminism's perspective that women often have a unique relationship with nature and can play a significant role in environmental conservation. The movie highlights the need to challenge existing power dynamics and social norms that perpetuate gender inequality and environmental degradation. Vidya's determination to bring about change and challenge the systemic barriers she faces aligns with ecofeminist ideals of disrupting oppressive structures and advocating for social and ecological justice.

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