

Examining the Problematics of Material Ecofeminism in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

This paper tries to engage with the concept of Material Ecofeminism through the lens of 'Indian cinema', thereby, analysing films from regional cinema, like Hindi films (*Sherni*, *Bhediya*, *Kaun Kitney Paani Mein*); Malayalam film (*Aranyakam*); and Kannada film (*Taledanda*) to name a few.

Material Ecofeminism is the view that connects institutions of labour, power, and property as the sources of domination over both women and nature. It falls in the third wave of Ecocriticism as per Professor Scott Slovic. Multiple scholars like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Stuart Curran, Ariel Salleh, and Charlotte Sussman, to name a few, have critically engaged with the category. The renewed interest in the field is exemplified by some of the recent publications such as, *Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, *Routledge Handbook on Ecosocialism*, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies's *Ecofeminism*, and *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* by Professor Swarnalatha Rangarajan and edited by Professor Scott Slovic.

The paper is a novel attempt to read cinema through the lens of ecology and gender studies. There has been an attempt in 'Indian cinema' to project issues of gender oppression through parallel oppression of nature. The paper delineates the cinematic language being one of the key driving forces of change and effective medium for projection of material ecofeminism. The paper tries to bring forth the problematics of this engagement and how successful are these endeavours to create a more egalitarian and anthropoharmonic society, provided art has its own limitations.

Keywords: Material Ecofeminism, Ecocriticism, Indian Cinema, Ecofeminism, Film Studies.

Wherever women acted against ecological destruction or /and the threat of atomic annihilation, they immediately became aware of the connection between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature...

– Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* 14

According to the 2021 *Down to Earth* report, India lost 6,68,400 ha of forests in the last five years (Khergamker). Nearly 2% of the total forest area is encroached, the maximum in Madhya Pradesh (Nandi, *Hindustan Times* 2019). 50% of the Indian population suffers from water stress (*NITI Aayog* 2019). Only 22% of women in India participate in the labour force as opposed to 57% of men, according to *India Briefing 2022* report (Bhardwaj). India records “greater unpaid care work-related violence in marital homes,” resulting in skewed gender dynamics (*Oxfam India* 2020). These facts elucidate the need for research in Environmental Humanities and Ecofeminism.

The paper comprehends how art, especially ‘Indian Cinema,’ absorbs and reflects these catastrophic developments around us, which many theorists now claim as the ‘sixth mass extinction’ (Barnosky 51). It theorises the problematics of gender essentialism and agency for the two subjugated categories through ‘Indian Cinema’, concluding with an observation on the employment of mythopoeia, elucidating the need for the same. The use of the term ‘Indian Cinema’ comprises a plethora of linguacultural and regional positionings in the larger spectrum of the terminology. Thus, the paper engages with and, at the same time, confines itself to the cinema in Hindi, Malayalam, and Kannada. The five films that this paper will primarily focus on are *Bhediya* (set in Arunachal Pradesh), *Sherni* (set in Madhya Pradesh), *Kon Kitney Paani Mein?* (set in Odisha), *Aranyakam* (set in Kerala), and *Taledanda* (set in Karnataka) as they span the Indian territory and engage with nature. The paper manoeuvres through the complexities of and the problematics in their presentation of the discourse of Material Ecofeminism.

The term ‘Material Ecofeminism’ views the institutions such as labour, power, and property as the source of domination over women and nature. There are connections made between these subjects because of the values of production and reproduction. Capitalism seeks cheap labour for mass production. Women are the source of production and reproduction of that labour. Hence, capitalist forces ought to control women and their means of

reproduction for increased production. Most often than not, the raw material for production is extracted from natural resources. The interconnectedness between production and reproduction gets translated into the interconnectedness between women, nature, and their subjugation.

Bhediya is a horror comedy Hindi film by Amar Kaushik that was released in 2022. It is set in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and is the story of Bhaskar, a capitalist man provided with a project to lay a road in the middle of the forest, and Dr Anika, a veterinarian who is later revealed to be *Vishanu* or a mythical wolf who is the protector of the forest. However, her screen presence, dialogues, and agency are limited, probably to parallel the limited space that is left for nature sans encroachment. When a cobra crosses Bhaskar's path, he claims that these animals should not be allowed to roam around freely, only to be corrected by Panda, the contractor, that he is the one who has entered the cobra's home. The concept of 'home' and 'otherness' is explored through the constant remarks made by characters in the movie about the northeast not being considered a part of Indian territory. Kaushik traces the self/other divide in the film through humour. It helps unite the audience and makes them perceptive to his didactic tendencies.

Sherni is a 2021 Environmental thriller Hindi film by Amit Masurkar about an IFS officer, Vidya Vincent who is stationed in Madhya Pradesh and provided with an assignment to save a tigress. As an outsider, both in the context of her job and her gender, she faces difficulties in maintaining a human-non-human balance. Vidya Vincent is paralleled in the tigress who tries to manoeuvre the shrinking space around her and protect her children. The institutionalised capitalist forces, led by men in power, create problems that need to be overcome by the oppressed communities of women, tribals, and nature itself. "[The film] touches upon the lopsided nature of development, the rights of forest dwellers, the dangers of a depleting forest cover, and the lust of politicians for power and self even as the world around threatens to come unstuck" (Chatterjee).

Taledanda is a 2021 Kannada film by Praveen Krupakar on the Soliga tribe (children of bamboo) of Karnataka. The etymological meaning of *Taledanda* is 'death by beheading,' which resonates with the deforestation of the forests by the capitalist men, like MLA Dodranga. The protagonist,

Kunnegowda or Kunna is presented as a mentally unstable man who is later medically proven to have schizophrenic tendencies and mental retardation. The film proposes that the “forest is god’s gift” (*Taledanda*) and trees sense pain and stress. We are told that the trees listen to us, and might talk to us if we show them love. For Kunna, all life is essential, representing biophilia or love for all living beings and an inherent need to connect with nature. The women, be it his mother, or his childhood beloved Sakki, both lack agency. The didactic aspect is brought in through Venu Gupta who addresses the masses about facts and figures of the felling of one lakh trees, timber lobby, destruction of rivers, environmental damage in the name of development, climate change, and predicts future war on water. Nature is shown using wide pan shots while institutions like hospitals are shot as confined, colourless, white spaces. “The eventual message of conserving nature for a better tomorrow has been showcased powerfully through the dialogues and the greenery seen in the visuals” (Basavarajaiah).

Kon Kitney Paani Mein? is a Hindi film of 2015, directed by Nila Madhab Panda. The film is set in a village in Odisha where honour killing occurs. A wall is created, separating the upper castes, led by Raja Sahab and the lower castes, led by Kharu, the wrestler. However, the inability of the upper castes to indulge in manual labour leads to shortage of water and of all other parameters of life. Water is treated as a currency. The priest calls the older generation ‘sinners’ for not saving water, both land and underground, for future generations. The film throws light at the ideologically influencing forces of religion and culture used to justify actions by the people in power. Amrita Devi, an upper caste MLA, tricks the villagers for gaining votes. However, she only acts as told by Raj, son of Raja Sahab and an upper caste male. She uses the farce of goddess Bihai to ensure the union of Paro, daughter of Kharu, and Raj. Though Paro is educated and helps her father in agriculture, there are multiple attempts for her subjugation by the men around her. In opposition to Paro, Amrita Devi has more say due to her caste identity. Water brings the two communities together, eliminating caste differences, at least superficially.

Finally, *Aranyakam* is a 1988 Malayalam film by T. Hariharan that is shown from the perspective of a young girl, Ammini. It delves further into the

Adivasi community of Kerala and the exploitation both nature and women face at the hands of capitalist men. Hariharan presents multiple scenes where Ammini talks to the birds or plants, showing biophilia. The crows are considered ancestors. There are scenes where Ammini and her grandfather converse with the crows while feeding them. The film shows a young man, Devan who starts a fire at the feudal lord's home. He fights for justice and equal division of resources amongst all and is revealed to be a Naxalite. He litters in the forest, enraging Ammini. Women in the film are seen to be subjugated, controlled, and limited by the male presence. Even though Ammini has agency of mobility, she is constantly questioned about her whereabouts. The film delineates the Adivasi land amendment bill that provided for the displacement of the Adivasi communities from their ancestral lands without compensations. The women of the community were affected the most by this bill. The displacement of Adivasis due to the new land reform movements and the forest land preservation legislations get captured by Hariharan. The latest film in Malayalam, *Aavasavyuham* (comedy-drama, Krishand, 2022) incorporates the theme of climate change and pollution and can be researched further.

The interconnection of women and nature has often been labelled an essentialist discourse. Nature is often referred to as 'mother nature' to establish the characteristics of a 'nurturer' that seem to be the 'essence' of both women and nature. In *Taledanda*, Kunna identifies nature as a woman. He creates an illusion of Atilakawa, the forest goddess wearing green and pink to denote fertility and nature. She is inspired by the folk stories of the Adivasi community. The 'Nataka' presents Atilakawa being pursued by men from multinational organisations with an axe. Their greed and arrogance are an exemplar of the anthropocentric forms of living for many humans. The goddess treats Kunna like a child however seeks to be rescued by him. Kunna claims to protect Mother Earth personified but he dies in the process. The essentialist tendencies seem visible in the film alongside the lack of agency that Atilakawa is presented with. His mother, Kethamma and his love, Saaki, are also etched around him and lack agency. A man forms the centre of their lives. In *Bhediya*, Bhaskar ends up becoming the saviour of both the jungle and Anika.

However, though the realm of Material Ecofeminism might seem essentialist, it engages with the discourse of essentialism to transpose it. Some

of the women as presented in these select films are named “Anika”, meaning soldier, “Ammini”, meaning a free-spirited person in Malayalam, and “Vidya”, signifying knowledge, thereby utilising language to move beyond how women are essentially viewed or named. Their names provide them with characteristics that are beyond gendered qualities. Most of the women in these films have an identity of their own. They have a sense of self and purpose. Dr Anika in *Bhediya* is a veterinarian, Vidya in *Sherni* works in the Indian Forest Services, Ammini in *Aranyakam* wants to pursue her studies further, while Paro in *Kon Kitney Paani Mein?* is pursuing a course in agriculture. Therefore,

whilst essentialism posits that woman and nature share certain characteristics, many ecofeminists argue that these weren't inherent, rather a product of the same framework of oppression being applied to women and the environment. If women and other oppressed minorities shared values with nature, it was because our culture made it so. (Perrin)

So, Ammini, in *Aranyakam*, gains freedom of movement by walking in the jungle. Dr Anika can protect her community through her bond with nature, thereby garnering agency. In *Kon Kitney Paani Mein?*, Paro becomes the agent of change, fertility, and prosperity as her knowledge of nature helps increase her economic stature.

Though women gain some agency; be it because of their class position, their occupation, or through their own belief of being equal to men; there still exists a framework for their subjugation that ensures either their agency is limited or controlled by capitalist men, or there are men who take decisions that affect the lives of these women. Similarly, even nature seems to have limited control in these films. Vandana Shiva proposes the different forms of violence ensued on women and nature:

a) Violence against women: women, tribals, [and] peasants as the knowing subject are violated socially through the expert/non-expert divide which converts them into non-knowers even in those areas of living in which through daily participation, they are the real experts—and in which responsibility of practice and action rests with them, such as in forestry, food, and water systems. b) Violence against nature: nature as the object of knowledge is violated when

modern science destroys its integrity of nature, both in the process of perception as well as manipulation. c) Violence against the beneficiaries of knowledge.... (24-25)

In *Kon Kitney Paani Mein?* Raj asks Paro to clean his place, assuming a lower caste woman would know how to clean. She stands her ground and asks him to contribute too. She talks about the remineralisation of soil, drip irrigation from Israel, and dam building for water accumulation, however, the film ends in reiterating the conventional idea that a happy ending for women is to get married. In the party office, Paro gets frequently spoken over by other men and raises her voice multiple times to be heard.

Vidya in *Sherni* tries to save the tigress and her cubs from illegal poaching while at the same time ensuring the safety of the lives of the villagers. Gender inequality and discrimination at the hands of the superiors and subordinates are constantly hinted at. She cannot afford to smile as she would not be perceived competent enough in this male-dominated sphere. Vidya's sartorial identity is called into question by her family. She is perceived to be incapable of handling riots. The director creates a parallel between the tigress and Vidya. Where Vidya fights through patriarchy to ascertain her sense of self, the tigress too tries to own the space of the forest and roam around freely.

The Roti festival in the Soliga tribe community, as portrayed in *Taledanda*, provides women with some agency where they throw a stone at a man they like. If the man reciprocates, they both will be married. Saaki initially pelts a stone at Kunna. He does not reciprocate Saaki's action due to his ignorance of the cultural vocabulary. The stone gets accidentally thrown at Jadiya, so Saaki and Jadiya get married. Though the festival gives women agency to choose their partner, it is only in implicit or limiting ways. Thus, women face violence in varied forms that seems to be reinforced through capitalist patriarchal forces. Nature and the humans living in close association with it, the tribal communities too are the recipients of violence. According to Mary Mellor:

not only are economies gendered, but the relationship between humanity and nature is also gendered. Capitalism and industrialism, compounded by patriarchy, create economies that are dis-embedded from local communities, local environments, and the

whole of human daily life and the earth's life cycles. From this perspective, the so-called wealth-creating "economy" is parasitical on the regeneration and renewal capacity of the environment, unpaid work in homes and communities mainly done by women, socially provided infrastructure and laws, and the accumulated work and knowledge of previous generations. (52)

The tribal communities in India have been living in harmony with nature. Under the *Indian Forest Act of 1878*, the British divided forests into three categories of reserved, protected, and village. The privileges and freedom of tribals living in the forests were curtailed. Similarly, the *Wildlife Protection Act of 2006* also curtailed the non-timber produce collection rights of the tribal communities. *Forest Rights Act of 2006* designated certain rights to the tribal communities. However, the recent decision by the Government of India to 'develop' Great Nicobar, an ecologically vulnerable space, has caught the attention of many. "Shompens are the sole legally empowered authority to protect, preserve, regulate, and manage this tribal reserve. What we are seeing in Great Nicobar is a blatant violation of the rights of the tribals. This is also a violation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (Sekhsaria, *Frontline* 2023). India has seventy-five PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) that are highly connected with nature for survival. Tribal women are triply oppressed, on the pretext of class, caste, and gender.

The relation that humans share with nature is often portrayed in various degrees through films. The wide shots of forests in *Taledanda*, *Aranyakam*, *Sherni*, and *Bhediya* portray the aesthetic purpose of nature. In *Aranyakam*, Olichirrikkan song signifies how Ammini finds solace and comfort in nature. She sings about nature as an abode made of creepers for her to hide where all the birds will readily listen to her stories. There is also a reference to the 'touch-me-not' plant in the song, mirrored in Ammini as she is sensitive and vulnerable. Nature provides a safe space for Ammini where she finds her voice and is heard by others or by nature itself.

Nature is also used for utilitarian purposes. "Kunna inherits his deep love for nature from his father who also gave him a wealth of traditional knowledge

about the many medicinal qualities of trees and plants in the area” (Khergamker). However, this illustrates how even knowledge of ecology, as a discourse or for utility, is passed down from generation to generation among men. Women are kept out of the domain to restrict them to domestic duties. Kethamma supports Kunna in his endeavours. She protects him from the wrath of the villagers. The night before Kunna takes his life, we see his mother bathing him. The song in the background harps on the mother-child relation that is one of sacrifice, reiterating what is expected from nature and women.

On the other hand, the animals like cobras, wolves, angry dogs, or bison portrayed in *Bhediya* contribute to the ‘sublime’ nature that can evoke fear and awe in humans. Anika and nature are paralleled and presented not just as nurturers but also capable of being violent destroyers. She says that when people disrupt the ecological balance and reduce the forest areas, it unleashes unknown threats like Ebola, Covid, SARS, and AIDS in the past. Deforestation would lead to more pressure/stress on nature to provide oxygen for the growing population. She lives in an anthropoharmonic state with nature. She has the agency and responsibility to protect the jungles from capitalist greed that embodies itself in men like Bhaskar and many others. Through the ages, there is a relationship that humans and nature share. Humans are a part of nature; culture thrives on it through societal conventions and ideological constructs. The film reiterates that “there can be no development at the cost of nature” (*Bhediya*). Lastly, nature can be a disruptive force for the societal hierarchies of caste and class created by humans as seen in *Kon Kitney Paani Mein?*, forcing them to view themselves in the larger spectrum of ‘planetarity’.

In the above discussed films, nature as a trope is portrayed for aesthetics, utility, sublimity, and anthropoharmonism. The women in the films form complex relations with their surroundings where social mobility through education (Anika, Ammini, Vidya), marriage (Paro), and caste division (Amrita Devi/Saaki and Kethamma) complicate their association with agency. Where the Hindi films present predator imagery with fierce women and fearful nature, owing to higher forest encroachment and urban living; the Malayalam film portrays them as nurturers who need to be protected; while the Kannada film provides a heightened didactic approach towards the current situation, owing to the claim that climate change will hit Karnataka the most (*Deccan Herald* 2014). Thus,

I would like to conclude this paper by asserting that it is not lucid enough to categorise women and nature in 'Indian Cinema' as victims of capitalism and patriarchy as we are made to encounter blurring of boundaries. However,

women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and . . . underlying values of . . . society. (Ruether 204)

There is a need for women to delve into Material Ecofeminism to create a more just society because as we move:

[on] the ecofeminist path, women cease being object and Other to male desire and regain themselves as [holistic] human beings. Correspondingly, men regain connection to the earth as the Other becomes others. Thus, the bifurcation is undone. Neither of these emancipatory motions within gender will happen except as isolated and disconnected instances. . . so long as capital and the capitalist state rule. (Kovel 37)

The said films evoke didacticism by venturing into newer genres of horror-comedy, environmental thriller, romantic comedy, and drama. Their utilisation of the age-old tradition of storytelling and mythopoeia helps connect to the masses as myths have been a part of 'Indian Cinema' and culture, providing legitimacy to the world the films create. The myths also give more space for the filmmakers to experiment with the form, making the absurd seem real and the real, absurd. However, these movies give voice to the concerns of Material Ecofeminism and try to create a more equitable, just, and anthropoharmonic society through cinema.

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