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## A Critical Outview of *Sherni* from an Eco-cinematic Point of View

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### **Abstract:**

The movie *Sherni* (Duration: 02 hrs and 10 minutes), directed by the experimental filmmaker, Amit Masurkar, released on 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2021 has raised various issues, such as human and non-human conflict, the extinction of non-human beings, exploitation of nature in the form of mining, ecological misbalance, wildlife and forestry in India, the Forest Divisional Officer's struggle for the preservation of the forest and her ultimatum to save the tigress T12 from being killed, etc. The story revolves around Vidya Balan's endeavour to help the Forest Department find and rescue a tigress, known as T12. The movie depicts real-life feelings and the interpretation of reality opens to lady officer as time flies. This paper has as its primary goal to investigate the link between nature and human nature as shown in the movie shot in Madhya Pradesh, India. This paper aims to analyse the movie *Sherni* by Amit Masurkar from the perspective of eco-cinema. This article explores how this film may play a significant role in raising awareness of the environment and issues linked to it.

**Keywords:** Eco-cinema, anthropocentrism, ecocriticism, ecological exploitation, ecological consciousness, animal rights.

### **Introduction:**

The emergence of environmental issues in cinema has cleared the path of eco-cinema studies. The coinage of 'eco-cinema' can be credited to Roger C. Anderson's "Reflections: Ecocinema: A Plan for Preserving Nature", which refers to films made with the goal of bringing environmental issues to the limelight, with the goal of raising awareness about environmental issues. One may describe eco-cinema as a means to draw attention to concerns pertaining to nature and the environment. These types of movies delve into the relationships between humans and nature, but they also serve as metaphors for environmental peril. Environmental problems are now at the forefront of experimental filmmakers, like Abhishek Kapoor, Nila Madhab Panda, Amit Masurkar and others. They have shifted from painting

idealized romantic vistas to depicting nature's raw wrath. Eco-cinema is concerned with human-caused ecological and environmental problems in addition to natural events. The loss of natural resources, deforestation and man-made calamities threaten our well-being in India. An early definition of eco-cinema is included in an essay by Scott Macdonald, who introduced the term in a journal, ISLE. In this context, Macdonald's interest is in re-training the audience's sense of the gaze so that the connection between people and nature is heightened. MacDonald says that the function of an eco-cinema is "to provide new kinds of film experience that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset" (20). The term 'ecocinema' refers to those movies that are connected to the close interdependency between the human and natural worlds, as well as to help people to reorient their vision as an alternative to traditional media consumption. Paula Willoquet Maricondi defines eco-cinema in the following manner:

I will define eco-cinema as encompassing documentary, fiction, and experimental films that seriously address issues of ecological import, foster environmental awareness, protection and conservation, and that in a broader sense encourage us to reflect on what it means to be a part of natural environment, to belong to the biotic community that includes humans. (127)

Nature and human views were shown to the audience by early filmmakers, such as Satyajit Roy, Goutam Ghose and others. The present movie encapsulates the relevance of forests in India in the contemporary time. It was western imperialism that worsened environmental conditions in India in the colonial period and it is still ongoing in the postcolonial period. In his article "Why Look at Animals?" author and environmentalist John Berger states that due to industrialisation, most animals are now concealed from the public eye (Garrard 139). People who become "ecological refugees" due to deforestation, urban development, and unlawful land seizure are known as the world's displaced people. While some Indian movies cover this issue, others just hide it. *Sherni* depicts the evolution of the district's circumstances. The scheme taken by the Government for the preservation and extension of the forest is in official records, not in the practical field. The advent of mining in the middle of the forest has changed the ecosystem of the forest. As a result, the villagers suffer from the agricultural economy.

The story of *Sherni* is carried forward by Balan, who plays the lead role of the Divisional Forest Officer. The story sets up the relationship among people, animals, and the

environment efficiently. The movie starts with the arrival of a new district-level official named Vidya Vincent who has been recently appointed for an investigation in a village, Bijashpur, Madhya Pradesh, where a tigress has been tormenting the residents. When she arrives in a rural community, she finds herself in a high-stakes political scenario. She gets the rising political pressure from the two opposing parties that try to exploit the emerging crisis. The main problem in the situation is T12, a ferocious tigress who is terrorizing the locals. The village is located in a region that consists of fields, forests, and pastures. In the village, the residents are entirely dependent on the forest and cultivate fields for their existence. Her crew enlightens the forest-dwellers about the best practices for staying safe and lets them know of any potentially hazardous periods in the woods, such as when a tiger is approaching. But village politics serves as a pawn in a petty game and it becomes a matter of gain and loss. Her new field posting in the woods of Bijaspur comes with its own set of unique problems. She appears to be alone in a section that is dominated by males. A sharpshooter, namely Pintu Bhaiya, is hired to track down the Tigress, and he believes in making records in the name of hunting. The movie ends on a sombre note with the murder of the tigress. Cruelty to animals and murder of animals are cognizable offence in India by Section 11(1)(l) of the Indian Penal Code, yet animal cruelty in India often goes unpunished, since some people just ignore these laws.

Although capturing T12 alive is very important to Vidya, she navigates her way through the feelings of the locals, the pressure exerted by the politicians, and her boss, Brijendra Kalra's (Brijendra Kalra) desire to just erase the problem by secretly taking it away. She needs to assert to her ally, politician Ranjan Rajhans (Sharat Saxena), who also describes himself as a conservationist, but who views tigers as vermin. Hassan Noorani, the Zoology Professor at a neighbouring college, as well as several of the locals, like Jyoti, the village committee members, and Mr. Nangia, the forest department head, are the only people who support her. In the movie, it can be seen that some of the villagers have been misguided by the politicians and their anthropocentric mindset. So, their perspective has been distorted. In contrast, we notice that some villagers co-operate with the lady officer and her team. The solo song in the film (the music was provided by Bandish Project, and the vocals were composed by Hussain Haidry) gets it right. A friend from the forest says, "Sher hain to jungle hai, jungle hain to baarish hain, baarish hain to paani hain aur paani hai to hum hain." (If there's a tiger, there's a forest, and if there's a forest, there's rain. If there's rain, there's water, and if there's water, there's humankind). Hassan Noorani's forest friend, trained by him has

reassured Vidya that while the hunt for the tigress is urgent, the worst is not yet over and it is yet to come.

Noorani, a man of science and a learned Zoology Professor, educates the villagers through a stage show on the tigers, who have an undeniable claim to the land as much as people do. Hassan Noorani makes them understand the importance of understanding the symbiotic relationship between humans and wild creatures, and he works hard to make people realize this truth. Professor Hassan Noorani of the local college, an entomologist, meticulously educates the community on the co-existence between tigers and the village residents. Meanwhile, the ruling MLA on the one hand and the local oppositional leader on the other utilize the tiger hunt as a means to gain their political agendas and to increase support among their people. Vidya Vincent is a Forest Officer who believes that it is necessary to save the villagers and their livelihoods by capturing the tigress alive rather than killing it. She becomes desperate to save the tigress. She starts the search operation and her plan was to transfer T12 alive from this place to the nearby National Sanctuary. But unfortunately, it didn't happen in practicality.



(Scene of Campaigning in the Village Taken from the Movie, *Sherni* in Amazon Prime Video)

In the midst of the search, Vidya and her team learned that T12 has given birth and that the tigress is foraging in the village's nearby forest for sustenance and proper food. Meanwhile, Vidya's ability to safeguard the forest and its environment is hampered by those in power, the politicians, and even her own fellow forest officers. We can see that Vidya is genuinely committed to safeguarding the ecosystem. When asked about family planning, she

said to her mom that she would nurture the environment. Now, from the title of the movie, *Sherni*, the question may arise to our minds – who is *Sherni*? Is it the tigress or is it Vidya Valan, the lady Forest Divisional Officer, or both? But the lady officer has similarity with the tigress. They are exploited, manipulated, and subjugated by a patriarchal set of minds. When she initially arrives at the death site, PK questions Vidya's qualifications as a government officer. She realises very well that the death of T 12 is cold blooded murder and her upper officials are very much aware about this. Vidya admired Neeraj Kabi when she was still a trainee. But her faith was shattered when the senior forest officer, Neeraj Kabi, encouraged her to avoid this.

It is supposed that *Sherni* is an intellectual reflection on the incredibly harsh and extremely tragic murder of the tigress Avni in Maharashtra. The narrative of the movie has similarities with the incidents that took place in the woods of Pandharkwada-Ralegaon in Maharashtra's Yavatmal district. It was said that the tigress ate and killed 13 people between 2016 and 2018. After attempting to use a tranquilizer gun on her, the Hyderabad royals and their hunters, Nawab Shafat Ali Khan and his son, Asghar, reportedly shot her dead. Pintu Bhaiyya, who starred in the film as Pintu Bhaiyya, was likely inspired by Ali Khan. He wants to kill more tigers and leopards as well. However, according to the official story, Avni was initially injected with tranquilizers, but the tranquilizer failed to affect the tigress, who was instead prepared to pounce on the members of the search team. She was murdered in retaliation. Avni or T1 had two pups, one of which was a girl who had been rescued after her mother's death, but the male cub had not been discovered. Vidya Balan stars as Vidya Vincent, a rookie DFO, who finds herself in the middle of a crisis when she arrives in the territory. This is based on the real-life K.M. Abharna, who was also immersed in the same type of chaotic environment and anger because of allegations of forest officials' mishandling of human-animal conflict in the area. When Avni was killed, campaigners protested her death and termed it a murder. The case is currently before the Supreme Court. Screenwriter, Aastha Tiku has developed the circumstances depicted in this backdrop on which she constructed her screenplay. Sangeeta Dogre, a prominent animal rights activist, believes that Avni was not a man-eater because the post-mortem investigation found no evidence of human remains in her stomach. Forensic evidence collected at the scene shows that "...the tigress was not charging at the team, but instead going somewhere else... If she was charging at the team, she would have been shot in her face or chest, not her shoulder". A few have gone so far as to suspect

that the murder of Avni was an attempt to help business interests by increasing the amount of land in forests.

People have been using the term 'Animal Rights' in attempt to stop the maltreatment of animals in the media since 1970. A large majority of the population supports this effort because they believe animals are equally valuable as humans. People have been still continuing this animal maltreatment in present times. To advocate the right of animals, Peter Wilson thinks that animals have a right to life (Roleff 18). Also, for some affluent individuals, animals are seen as a pastime or even a sport, such as; hunting, getting sadistic pleasure by killing animals, disturbing their natural lives and making unofficial record by killing animals. This activity should not be entertained as these sadist people and anthropocentric people only engage in it for the sake of their own enjoyment.



(Scene of Murdering T12 Taken from the Movie, *Sherni* in Amazon Prime Video)

Each scene has been well-planned. A typical government office in a provincial backwater location, Bansal as corrupt, stupid and the interference of local politicians, painting of a large tiger behind Bansal's chair are well directed. The camera (Rakesh Haridas) and sound design (Anish John) take viewers on a whirlwind tour into lush, green rainforests full of sunlight filtering through foliage, running water, the sound of insects, rustling leaves, unique noises of birds and animals. One cannot simply walk away from the trees without falling in love with them. Among these fascinating scenes, we would notice the mining in the middle of forest. It is as shocking to FDO as to viewers. Animals must traverse the fields in order to cross from one zone to another. The pastures indicate that the government plantings have made things worse for the livestock farmers.



(Scene of Mining in the Middle of the Forest Taken from the Movie, *Sherni* in Amazon Prime Video)

On the one hand, *Sherni* transports us deep into the jungle, with thrilling, stressful tiger tracks; but it also presents a humorous injection of satire. In the end, one considers leaving with a deep sense of environmental concern because of Masurkar's powerful documentary on animal conservation, portraying the flora and fauna of the forest, and preserving the ecological balance. *Sherni* is an exciting, enthralling film. This film is not like traditional Bollywood films. The environmental concerns raised by *Sherni* create situations that disrupt the delicate equilibrium we need to maintain in order to preserve and support our natural systems. In the movie, we don't get the tigress as the villain. Though some villagers have been killed by the tigress, the death or murder of T12 at the end raises some questions. We can't help shedding tears. We are curious to know whether the cubs will be shot dead after their mother's death. Who is responsible for the death of T12? Who has entered into whose territory? Tigress or local villagers or mining company? In the traditional Bollywood or Indian Cinema, we are habituated to watch that the father or family members or the villagers are killed by some lions or tigers or wild animals and he takes revenge by killing that beast. But such does not happen in this movie. The audience sympathizes with T12 and her family in this scene. The feeling of justice is not reeling out here. Here lies the success of this movie.

With each passing day, the world appears more devastated than ever before. Because of its broad appeal, entertainment, particularly films, has the potential to educate the public about the ecological imbalance that we face. This film presents independent perspectives of

environmental concerns that go against the grain of conventional filmmaking. The movie is very much realistic and it shows how the Government officials act as puppets at the direction of politicians. The officers have no choice but to carry out their orders, whether the directions are legal or illegal. Being dissatisfied with the job and disgusted with the patriarchal set of mind, the lady officer decides to resign from the job, but her husband requests her not to do that because his corporate job is not a satisfactory position. Yet, the lady officer did not recede from her firm determination to save the tigress. The director's goal was to shed light on the plight of the people in the village, and to bring into limelight the political interference in the matter of forest. Amit Masurkar, the director, attempts to highlight our relationship with nature through his appealing cinematography.

### **Conclusion:**

After the successful theorisation of ecocriticism in 1990's by Glotfelty, a new field of ecocinema studies in recent years has captured the attention of people all over the world. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in "The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology" define ecocriticism as "the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). In the same way, Stephen Rust and Salma Monani assert that "... ecocinema studies enable us to recognize ways of seeing the world other than through the narrow perspective of the anthropocentric gaze that situates individual human desires at the center of the moral universe" (11). In India, the forest and its inhabitants are rarely portrayed on the big screen. A closer observation at the movie will disclose the long-term consequences of mineral exploration done in the guise of development under the indirect help of corrupt political and bureaucratic agencies controlling information and the environment, using the media and the environment for their own advantage. The government's irresponsibility and laxity embolden innocent villagers to participate in stupid activities. This movie challenges the existing notion of perceiving the nature. It criticizes the Government's policies. The movie explores how human interference poses a threat to the lives of wild animals. This movie is supposed to be meant to inspire audiences to react against interference into the matter of forest by local politicians that require urgent consideration. *Sherni* might be viewed as an environmentally conscious cinema that's distinct from traditional forms of media viewership.

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