



Cobras in the Cold: An Anthropocene Reading of Deepa Mehta's Videsh – Heaven on Earth

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Abstract:

This paper offers an Anthropocene reading of Deepa Mehta's *Videsh – Heaven on Earth* (2008), a film usually approached through diaspora studies, adaptation theory, and feminist criticism. It argues that the film's cobra, transplanted impossibly from Punjab to a frozen Canadian garden, figures the Anthropocene condition in which human systems of labour, migration, and patriarchy displace non-human nature alongside human bodies. The paper traces three interlocking ecologies: the displaced ecology of the cobra and its climatic impossibility; the extractive domestic ecology of the overcrowded immigrant household; and the psychic ecology of the protagonist Chand's imagination. Drawing on Chakrabarty, Nixon, Haraway, and Brah, the paper situates *Videsh* as an early instance of diasporic ecological cinema.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, Diaspora, *Videsh – Heaven on Earth*, Magic Realism, Environmental Humanities.

1. Introduction: Why Read a Migration Film as an Anthropocene Text?

Deepa Mehta's *Videsh – Heaven on Earth* has, since its release in 2008, accumulated a body of scholarship that reads the film almost exclusively through the registers of diaspora studies, feminist film criticism, and adaptation theory, given its evident debt to Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*. These readings are not mistaken; the film is centrally concerned with the abused body of a Punjabi bride, Chand, transplanted into a Canadian household that offers her neither warmth nor welcome. Nevertheless, a recurring detail in the film's iconography has gone comparatively unexamined: the cobra that appears, impossibly, in a suburban Canadian garden in the dead of a prairie winter. Existing criticism treats this cobra chiefly as a vehicle of magic realism or as the residue of Chand's psychological fantasy. This paper proposes an additional, complementary reading: that the displaced cobra, surviving against ecological reason in a climate utterly foreign to it, dramatises the central insight of Anthropocene thought – namely, that human systems of labour, capital, and migration have so reorganised the planet that no creature, human or non-human, mythic or biological, remains untouched by displacement.

The term Anthropocene, popularised by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer to describe a geological epoch in which human activity has become the dominant influence on climate and ecosystems, has migrated rapidly from earth-systems science into literary and cultural criticism. Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential argument that the Anthropocene collapses the distinction between human history and natural history – that the geological present of the Anthropocene entangles human freedom with planetary biology in ways earlier postcolonial and historicist thought did not fully anticipate (207-12) – provides an apt frame for a film in which the fates of a Punjabi bride and a tropical snake become, however fantastically, intertwined within a single frozen Canadian garden. This paper accordingly reads *Videsh* not as departing from its established diasporic and

feminist concerns but as extending them outward to include the non-human, asking what the film's treatment of climate, animal life, and domestic ecology contributes to its larger meditation on displacement.

It is worth pausing, briefly, on why a film so saturated with markers of social realism – dowry, domestic violence, factory labour, immigration sponsorship – should also reward an ecological reading. The answer lies in the peculiar status of the cobra within the film's diegesis: it is never explained, rationalised, or naturalised by the screenplay, and it is precisely this refusal of explanation that signals its function as more than decorative myth. Where the human plot proceeds according to the recognisable logic of social realism, the cobra plot proceeds according to a logic that is frankly geological and biospheric in its implications, asking audiences to accept the coexistence, within a single frame, of two ecological zones – the subtropical and the subarctic – that ought never to meet. This paper takes that improbable meeting as its starting point.

Methodologically, this paper proceeds by close reading rather than by survey, isolating three specific ecological moments within the film – the garden scenes featuring the cobra, the household's economy of labour and overcrowding, and Chand's interior fantasy sequences – and reading each against a distinct strand of Anthropocene and environmental humanities scholarship. This is deliberately a modest and exploratory intervention rather than an exhaustive ecocritical survey of diasporic cinema; it aims to demonstrate that even a single, much-discussed film yields fresh interpretive possibilities once its non-human elements are taken as seriously as its human plot. In doing so, the paper joins a small but growing body of scholarship, anchored most influentially by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's account of postcolonial environments as sites where ecological and historical-materialist analysis intersect (Mukherjee), that asks how popular South

Asian and diasporic cinema has represented environmental disorder, often well in advance of the critical vocabulary later developed to describe it.

2. Situating the Anthropocene within Diaspora and Postcolonial Thought

Anthropocene theory has not always sat comfortably alongside postcolonial and diaspora studies, in part because the universalising scale of “the human” implied by the term risks erasing the radically unequal histories of who has caused, and who disproportionately suffers, planetary environmental change. Rob Nixon's concept of “slow violence” – the gradual, often invisible attrition wrought upon the poor and the displaced by environmental degradation, an attrition that unfolds out of sight and on a timescale that resists the urgency of conventional media spectacle (2) – offers a necessary corrective, redirecting attention toward the uneven distribution of ecological harm. Read through Nixon's framework, the slow violence inflicted on Chand within the Brampton household – the years of unpaid factory labour, the gradual erosion of her name and her connection to home, the cold that never relents – takes on an ecological dimension: her body becomes a site upon which both patriarchal and environmental forms of slow violence are simultaneously inscribed. This is where Nixon's insistence on unevenness productively unsettles Chakrabarty's own species-level framing: if the Anthropocene names a shared geological condition in which the human figures as an undifferentiated species-actor, Nixon's slow violence insists that this condition is felt asymmetrically, by particular bodies, in particular households, on particular timescales. Chand's case dramatises exactly this asymmetry, since the cold, the labour, and the violence she absorbs on behalf of the household are never distributed evenly across the family that benefits from her presence, even as the film insists, in Chakrabarty's more universalising register, that no one in the household — coloniser or colonised, host or migrant — is finally exempt from the planetary condition the cobra makes visible.

Donna Haraway's insistence that no organism, human or otherwise, exists independently of entangled multispecies relations (3-4) further supports a reading of *Videsh* in which the boundary between the human Chand and the non-human cobra is never as stable as the film's surface realism might suggest. The serpent who assumes her husband's form is not merely a metaphor borrowed from folklore; it is the film's most visible acknowledgement that human domestic life is always already interwoven with non-human presence, however suppressed or denied that presence may be within the rationalist, climate-controlled space of the immigrant home.

These theoretical resources do not displace the diasporic and feminist readings already established in Mehta scholarship; rather, they extend the existing critical vocabulary of home, route, and root, developed most influentially by Avtar Brah in the context of diaspora studies, to include the non-human environments through which migrant bodies must travel and within which they must, however provisionally, attempt to dwell. Brah's argument that diaspora involves a critique of fixed origins alongside a continuing "homing desire" (16) gains an ecological inflexion once one notices that Chand's homing desire is repeatedly expressed through, and answered by, an animal figure rather than through any human relationship available to her within the household. The non-human, in other words, does the affective work that the film's human characters consistently fail to perform. This affective displacement onto the non-human also resonates with Vijay Mishra's account of the diasporic imaginary, the inherited repertoire of images, myths, and narratives through which diasporic subjects reconstruct a relation to a homeland they cannot straightforwardly inhabit (Mishra). Read alongside Mishra, the cobra is less an idiosyncratic invention of Chand's psyche than a further instance of the diasporic imaginary at work: an inherited mythic figure pressed into service precisely because the human relationships available to her within the household supply no comparable resource.

3. The Displaced Ecology of the Cobra: Climate, Habitat, and Impossible Survival

The most striking ecological detail in *Videsh* is also its most fantastical: a cobra, a creature whose biology is entirely unsuited to sub-zero Canadian winters, appears repeatedly in the family's garden and eventually in the climactic ordeal scene. From a strictly naturalistic standpoint, the scene is impossible: cobras are ectothermic, incapable of surviving prolonged exposure to freezing temperatures, and absent from the North American ecological record outside of captivity. It is precisely this impossibility, however, that makes the cobra such a productive Anthropocene figure. The film does not ask its audience to accept the cobra as a biologically plausible creature; it asks the audience to accept the cobra as a figure of forced relocation, a being whose presence in the frame is sustained by imagination and myth rather than by habitat or climate, just as Chand's own presence in Brampton is sustained by economic necessity and patriarchal arrangement rather than by any genuine ecological or social welcome.

The cobra's appearance can be read as staging India superimposed on Canada, a device not uncommon in diasporic literature but rendered unusually literal here through the cobra's very body. Extended ecologically, this superimposition is not only cultural but biospheric, layering a tropical and subtropical ecosystem onto a boreal one. In this sense, the cobra performs in miniature the disorientation that climate change itself increasingly imposes on species worldwide, in which organisms find themselves stranded in habitats whose seasonal and thermal logic no longer matches their evolutionary history.¹ The cobra's survival in the film is achieved only through the suspension of ecological law by imaginative or mythic means, which is to say the film implicitly acknowledges that such survival, outside the realm of fantasy, would be impossible.

The garden in which the cobra appears is itself a telling Anthropocene space: a small, cultivated, fenced plot of land, domesticated nature inserted into a suburban grid, in which the wild is permitted to exist only on terms set by human design. That this domesticated garden becomes the site of the film's one moment of non-patriarchal tenderness suggests that the Anthropocene's managed, fenced nature retains, however constrained, a residual capacity to host forms of life and feeling that the human household above it cannot. The contrast Mehta builds between interior and exterior space is worth dwelling on: indoors, the household is governed by surveillance, scarcity, and violence; outdoors, in the garden, an entirely different temporal and affective register opens up, one in which Chand is permitted, briefly, to inhabit a world unregulated by her in-laws. The cobra's habitat, however biologically impossible, becomes paradoxically more hospitable than the literal house in which Chand is supposed to belong.

4. The Domestic Ecology of the Immigrant House: Labour, Resources, and Extraction

If the garden constitutes the film's external ecological space, the cramped two-bedroom house in which seven family members live constitutes its internal one, and it too can be read through an Anthropocene lens of resource extraction. The household economy depicted in the film is fundamentally extractive: Chand's labour, performed at a menial factory job for which she is overqualified, generates a wage that is appropriated by her husband without her knowledge or consent; her body, meanwhile, is subjected to repeated physical violence that converts a spouse into an outlet for a husband himself depleted by the demands of supporting an extended family. This structure of extraction – labour drawn from the most vulnerable member of the household and redirected to sustain the household's collective survival – mirrors, on a domestic scale, the logic that environmental humanities scholars have identified at the planetary scale of the

Anthropocene, in which the resources of the most vulnerable populations and ecosystems are disproportionately extracted to sustain systems of production controlled by others.

The house's chronic overcrowding – seven people in two bedrooms – likewise registers as an ecological as much as a social fact. Aman's daily labour in the factory, Baldev's frustrated unemployment, the children's confinement to a small and contested domestic space, all describe a household operating, in effect, beyond its sustainable carrying capacity, a term borrowed deliberately from ecology to describe the maximum population an environment can support without degradation.² This borrowing is offered advisedly rather than literally: unlike an ecological carrying capacity set by finite resources, the household's overcrowding is not a natural limit but a structurally produced one, the result of an immigration and sponsorship regime that manufactures scarcity within an otherwise adequately resourced society, and the ecological vocabulary is retained here only insofar as it makes that structural production newly visible, not because the family's strain should be understood as ecologically rather than politically determined. The film never frames this overcrowding as a matter of individual failure; rather, it is structurally produced by an immigration and sponsorship system that requires each new arrival's labour and money to underwrite the passage of the next, a chain of extraction stretching back to Chand's father and forward, presumably, to relatives not yet arrived.

Read in this light, the household's domestic ecology is not separate from the wider Anthropocene logic of extraction and resource depletion. However, it is one of its most intimate and least visible instances. The dowry payment that accompanies Chand's marriage performs a comparable function: framed within the film as compensation to Rocky's family for absorbing a new dependent, the payment formalises the household's underlying logic, in which bodies, labour, and capital circulate together across the same routes that carry migrants from Punjab to Ontario. The

Anthropocene, understood broadly as the geological signature of an economic system organised around extraction, is here visible not in some distant mine or melting glacier but in the kitchen, the factory floor, and the cramped bedroom of an ordinary immigrant household.

It is worth noting, too, how thoroughly climate itself functions as an antagonist within the household's daily life, in ways that exceed simple atmospheric backdrop. The Canadian winter is repeatedly invoked by the family members themselves as an explanation, and at times an excuse, for their irritability and exhaustion: Aman's complaint that the cold of Canada has worn on her nerves, offered as a partial justification for her failure to intervene on Chand's behalf, suggests that climate is experienced by the family not as neutral setting but as an additional, compounding form of hardship layered onto economic and social precarity. The film thereby quietly registers what environmental humanities scholarship increasingly emphasises: that climate and weather are never simply a backdrop to human social life but active participants in shaping behaviour, mood, and the capacity for empathy. A household already strained by extractive economic relations finds that strain intensified, rather than relieved, by an unfamiliar and unforgiving climate that none of its members has the resources, financial or psychological, to adapt to comfortably.

5. Psychic Ecology: Imagination as Habitat in Chand's Inner World

The third ecology this paper identifies in *Videsh* is psychic rather than physical: the interior landscape that Chand constructs through imagination once the external environment of the household has become uninhabitable in any meaningful emotional sense. Existing scholarship on the film has already noted that Chand, finding no genuine bonding, love, or care among the human inhabitants of the house, gradually withdraws into a fantasy life centred on her serpent-lover. An Anthropocene reading adds a further dimension to this withdrawal: Chand's imagination becomes,

in effect, the one habitat within the film's diegesis where human and non-human, homeland and hostland, can coexist without contradiction. It is only within this psychic ecology that the warmth of Punjab and the cold of Canada, the affection she remembers and the indifference she experiences, can be reconciled into a single liveable space.

This reading resonates with Stuart Hall's well-known argument that the diasporic subject's relationship to the past is always already "after the break," constructed retrospectively through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth rather than through unmediated continuity (Hall, qtd. in Rutherford 226). What an Anthropocene framework adds to Hall's formulation is the recognition that the myth Chand reaches for, the cobra-lover of Naga-Mandala, is itself an ecological myth, one that encodes an older, pre-industrial relationship between human settlement and non-human nature in which the serpent is neither pest nor threat but guardian. Chand's psychic retreat into this myth can therefore be understood as a retreat not merely into nostalgia for homeland, but into an alternative ecological imagination in which nature is integrated into domestic life rather than excluded, fenced, or frozen out of it, as it is in the literal, climate-controlled space of the Brampton house.

The film's climactic ordeal, in which Chand must physically hold the cobra to prove her fidelity, can accordingly be read as the moment at which psychic and physical ecology converge: the imagined creature must be made to appear, briefly, within the literal space of the garden and the household, forcing the family, and the audience, to confront the non-human presence that has, throughout the film, structured Chand's only available form of emotional survival. That this ordeal echoes the agni-pariksha of Sita in the Ramayana situates Chand's psychic ecology within a still older mythic genealogy, one in which the trial of the female body by an element of nature – fire,

water, or here, the serpent – is simultaneously a trial of patriarchal suspicion and an opportunity, however constrained, for vindication.

6. Conclusion: Toward a Diasporic Ecocriticism

Reading *Videsh – Heaven on Earth* through an Anthropocene lens does not require abandoning the diasporic and feminist frameworks through which the film has previously been understood; rather, it asks those frameworks to extend their attention to the non-human bodies, climates, and ecologies that migration narratives so often background. The film's displaced cobra, its extractive domestic economy, and its protagonist's ecologically inflected psychic retreat together suggest that Mehta's film, made well over a decade before “Anthropocene” became a familiar term in literary criticism, was already intuitively grappling with the entanglement of human displacement and environmental disorder that Anthropocene theory would later name.

This reading is not without its own tensions, which are worth naming rather than smoothing over. The Anthropocene framework offered here does not always sit easily alongside the film's own priorities: Mehta's central concern remains the abused body of a Punjabi bride, and an ecological reading that lingers too long on the cobra risks displacing attention away from that abuse toward a non-human figure that, however suggestive, does not itself suffer domestic violence. Nor can the cobra's ecological signification be neatly separated from the feminist and diasporic readings already established in the scholarship; the serpent-lover remains first and centrally a figure of Chand's psychological and mythic survival, and the Anthropocene vocabulary developed in this paper is offered as a supplement to that established understanding rather than a correction of it. The argument advanced here is accordingly best understood as an additional interpretive layer,

one whose value lies in showing that the same detail can sustain more than one critical vocabulary at once, rather than as a claim that the ecological reading supersedes the readings that precede it.

As climate change accelerates the pace and scale of human migration worldwide, films like *Videsh*, which stage the migrant body and the displaced non-human creature within a single frame, offer fertile and still underexplored ground for an emerging diasporic ecocriticism, one attentive equally to the dislocation of people and the dislocation of the natural world that, in the Anthropocene, can no longer be considered separately. Future scholarship on diasporic cinema might productively extend this approach to other transnational films that similarly stage encounters between migrant bodies and non-human or environmental presences, building toward a more systematic account of how popular cinema has, often obliquely, registered the ecological dimensions of human displacement well before the critical vocabulary to name them became widely available.

Notes:

1. This disorientation is increasingly documented in conservation biology under the heading of climate-driven range shifts, in which species are recorded moving poleward or to higher elevations as their historical habitats warm or otherwise change; the cobra's impossible northward migration in *Videsh* can be read as a fantastical, compressed version of this broader and very real ecological phenomenon.

2. "Carrying capacity" is most commonly used in ecology to denote the maximum population size an environment can sustain given available resources such as food, water, and space; its application

here to a human household is metaphorical but is intended to underline the structural, rather than purely interpersonal, origins of the family's overcrowding and strain.

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