



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**CONSERVATION, ECO-CRISIS AND ANTHROPOCENE: SCRUTINIZING
HUMAN-ANIMAL CONFLICT IN AMIT MASURKAR'S *SHERNI***

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Known for his most acclaimed movie *Newton* (2017), Amit V. Masurkar, this time, comes with a ground breaking, out of the box, eco-thriller *Sherni* (2021) dealing with grossly overlooked environmental issue of Human-Animal conflict over territory. Inspired by the real life experiences of K. M. Avarna as an I.F.S officer in the jungles of Maharastra, Vidya Balan starred film *Sherni* recreates the story of reckless killing of a 'man-eater' tigress called Avni or T-1. This paper attempts to address how through a faulty concept like 'man-eater' assigned to the tigress, the human greed for wealth is justified while the human agency stands responsible for the disruption of the ecological balance and resultant global ecological crisis. Further this paper seeks to examine how the seemingly untenable clash between 'development' and environment is addressed through the first ever Bollywood thriller on eco-conservation. Simultaneously, taking philosophical supports from the works of several eco-critics, this paper will focus on the concepts like Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ecofeminism, ecocinema, conservation and 'eco-cinecriticism', and relate them to the concerned narrative.

Keywords: *Capitalocene, Anthropocene, Ecocinema, Conservation, Ecofeminism.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Though Amit V. Masurkar's eco-thriller, as mentioned in the beginning of the film, is a work of fiction, the incidents portrayed in it clearly resembles a real notorious assassination of a tigress called Avni or T-1 in the jungles of Maharashtra, India. When recreated, the names and places of the real incident has been changed and modified. Vidya Vincent [played by Vidya Balan], an Divisional Forest Officer [D.F.O.] plays the role of the courageous I.F.S. officer K.M. Avarna; the tigress T-1 is modified as T-12; the jungles of Maharashtra is replaced with the jungles of Madhya Pradesh and so on. But the severity and impact of the real incident is nowhere trivialized for the sake of recreation, rather satirized to some extent the notion of conservation and man-animal conflict. The reason of this conflict is made clear at the outset when after getting the news of a hunted cattle, Vidya Vincent asks her driver to head to the hunt spot. The driver suggests,

-It must be a tiger, madam.

-Why? What makes you think that?

-It's just the lay of the land, madam. Jungle and [cultivating] fields are interconnected. To go from one part of the jungle to the other, they [any animal] must cross the fields. So, the lives of both animal and people are endangered. (My translation)

The conflict becomes more obvious when reaching to the spot, Vidya asked the local village cattle grazer:

-When you first encounter a tiger?

-A week ago. It comes in the evening usually. When the cattle are grazing, it looks and goes away.

-If you knew its movement, why don't you inform us?

-This is the season they come. (My translation)

When a forest officer addresses the villagers, addresses to the villagers, that the camera traps are set and nobody should be around in the jungle. The villagers replied,

-What are you saying, sir? So where can we go? Where shall we graze our cattle? (My translation)

The statements above reflect the interconnectedness, interdependence and a kind of symbiotic relationship between man and forest, man and nature. Through this incident the journey of Vidya Vincent as a D.F.O. started in the forests of Madhya Pradesh. Her journey ends in a tragic mode when T-12, the mother of two cubs finally is killed by a hunter Pintu Bhaiya [Sarat Saxena] who loves hunting and hunts to increase his records. The mother tiger dies leaving her cubs behind and Vidya becomes able to save them providing a sigh of relief to the viewers.

In Hollywood, ecocritical cinemas or eco-cinemas are made with considerable impacts, to name a few, *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988), *The Bear* (1988), *Duma* (2005) and *Into the Wild* (2007). But in Bollywood Amit Masurkar makes an exception to make a movie on tiger conservation while the judicial case for the real incident is still under trial in Supreme Court of India. Though the film is an environmental thriller, it is devoid of any kind of creepy sound effects. It's not a spoon-feeding cinema and the director does not portray a conclusive



ending. It addresses a very important yet ignored issue and calls for an upgradation of taste of Indian viewers where the viewers have to interpret many things on their own. The issues like Capitalocene, if not Anthropocene, environmental ethics, conservation of endangered species and ecological crisis in an era when the survival of animals along with humans is under threat due to climate change.

HUMAN CALLOUSNESS TOWARDS ECO-CRISIS

When Vidya joined the forest department as a D.F.O., she encounters a faulty, rotten system that occasionally escapes from the problem regarding conservation and duty of maintaining ecological balance, leaving the system a failure. The blame cannot be put only on the forest department and the governmental endeavors, but also to the common people dependent on the forest. After two consecutive attacks on the villagers by the tigress, when the fierce villagers threatened the forest department, the prejudiced, frightened chief of the department foolishly arranges for a *puja / yagna* in expectation of restoring peace in the forest and neighboring villages.

On the other hand, this image is quite reverse. Two political leaders, G. K. Singh, the running M.L.A., and P. K. Singh, the ex-M.L.A. try to pave their way to power through brain-washing the local people. The slogans of those two leaders are the satirical portrayal of human greed over the dead bodies of the victims of the tiger attack. On one hand, the leaders engaged themselves in election campaign; on the other hand, the villagers are instigated to revenge on the tigress breaking the ecological balance. Simultaneously, Bansal, the chief of the forest department also shows his

incompetence and callousness in restoring the natural order.

This irresponsibility is also seen through the character portrayal of several upper level forest officers. During a function conducted by the forest authority, Saiprasad, an officer of the forest department, states something that reveals the aforementioned irresponsibility and callousness. While talking to Vidya regarding her tough dealings of the obstacles, he states,

Forest department is the legacy of the British Raj. So, work like them. Bring the revenue. Your superiors are happy, promotion guaranteed.
(My translation)

Saiprasad is the one who, in one sense, created the problem of man-animal tussle over territory. By planting teak trees in the grazing field of the village cattle, he seizes the grazing field and makes the villagers bound to graze their cattle in the forest. Now the cattle and the villagers are forced to trespass the forest again collapsing the ecological balance. When the second tiger attack takes place, the chief in spite of facing the problems, seeks a transfer to any other forest. Portraying this incompetence and callousness of the authority towards the nature and its balance Masurkar rightly defies the notion of eco-cinecriticism. Eco-cinecriticism takes on a range of queries such as:

Do films convey a true picture of nature or do they spectacularise the natural world though the use of framing devices in order to cater to the market driven demands? Examples range from the depiction of



charismatic megafauna in decontextualised, grand visual settings to a 'natural' world characterized by exaggerated thrill, speed and dynamism. (Rangarajan, 2018, p.140)

Masurkar not only defies the market-driven demands, but also try to picture the crisis and conflict in a very precise and vivid manner.

EMBEDDED ECO-FEMINIST OUTLOOK

Sherni's journey is parallel with Vidya's journey made hostile by men both inside the workplace and outside. The underrated strength that Vidya puts on Vincent is an unusual subject for Hindi cinema. There lies a strange interconnectedness between Vidya and the nature around her. According to the notions of ecofeminism, women have a close relationship with nature. "This is due to the female reproductive role and mothering nature, which brings them closer to the rhythm of nature" (Mukhopadhyay, 2016, p.106). Ecofeminism asserts that there are direct link between the oppression of women and oppression of nature; naturism and sexism is inseparable. Vidya Vincent, as a D.F.O. tries to do the right thing in the rotten system that is embedded with low level corruption, cronyism and the lethargy that a *sarkari naukri* [Govt. job] brings. Breaking the male-female stereotypes, Vidya fights several things simultaneously. Not only she is fighting the problems regarding the tigress T-12, but also she is fighting the patriarchal dominance in and out of the workplace.

Metaphorically, Vidya is the *Sherni* [tigress] attempting to mark her own territory. A newly powerful woman mirrored in the new mother T-12 thwarted by unexpected conflicts and obstacles in her journey. The identity politics that Vidya is involved into becomes important tool for resistance

and challenge in the phallogocentric society. Thus, Vidya's struggle to rescue the female tiger quickly turns personal for her to feel consequently valid and move one direction or the other.

THE 'MAN-EATER' FOLLY

The greatest folly that the director attempts to address is the *adamkhor* or 'man-eater' concept. Repeatedly through the presentation of the political and politicized characters, and through the brain-washed villagers, the cinema shows the illogical tagging of a tigress as a 'man-eater'. Masurkar satirizes illogicality and foolishness of the people around the jungle and of the hypocritical political leaders and the hunter when they in order to achieve their goals. The political leaders G. K. Singh and P. K. Sings have nothing to do with the conservation of the tigress, rather they tag the tigress as a 'man-eater' who is bloodthirsty. And they promise to the local people that if they come to power, they would solve the problem of tiger attack by killing it for trespassing into 'their' territory.

Pintu Bhaiya, the tiger hunter claims to identify the tiger whether it's a 'man-eater' or not by simply looking at its eyes, which again satirizes the entire process of saving a tigress. Pintu Bhaiya, who is only eager to increase his records, argues,

I can say looking at the eyes of the tiger whether it is a 'man-eater' or not. If the mother is a 'man-eater', her cubs evidently will also be 'man-eaters'. (My translation)

When Vidya counters saying that they "don't have any proof whether they [cubs] are 'man-eaters' or not. No animal is a 'man-eater'. It's just hungry" while Hassan Noorani [Vijay Raaj], a professor and a



moth expert in a neighboring college, adds, “the notion of ‘man-eater’ itself is a wrong thing”. (My translation)

Calling the tigress a ‘man-eater’ initiates the entire conflict between human greed and eco-crisis. Human as a materialist

Who is ‘man eater’? Who is the ‘king’ of the jungle? These two notions of ‘man-eater’ and ‘king’ are attributed to the tiger/tigress to carry on an age-old delusive discourse. The ‘Sherni’ isn’t the ‘king’ of the jungle. Rather it is a part of the nature around us. The beasts appear as the ‘kings’ only in stories and fables. But in this huge jungle like world of humans, the real fierce beasts are the humans who in this movie quench their appetite by eating up an animal. Moreover, the extinction of the endangered creatures are happening due to the reckless plundering of nature- reckless cutting of trees, piercing the earth for mining etc.

ANTHROPOCENE, CAPITALOCENE, CONSERVATION AND CONFLICT

It is undeniable that the man has gone beyond all kinds of limits in plundering and exploiting the nature. Human activities are affecting rather controlling this planet’s geochemical cycles and atmospheric patterns. Amit Masurkar’s movie isn’t the exception in pointing out the current ecological issues through the portrayal of the materialistic issues and the capitalist greed, for which they are going to the extreme extent. If we analyze the reason behind the hazards apparently caused by the tigress, we’ll find the answers in environmental degradation. A degradation caused by the anthropogenic and anthropocentric capitalist activities. Towards the end

of the movie when the tigress is moving towards the National Park for her rehabilitation after giving birth to two cubs, she is confronted and stopped by a gigantic copper mine, an example of man-made exploitation of the nature, spread through the forest. The depth of the mine and the presence of the mine workers prevent him from crossing the jungle to reach the National Park. The mine separates the jungle from the National Park. Hassan Noorani, the moth expert states,

There was a dense jungle here till recently. Now there’s this, a copper mine. We’ve made a highway there, a factory here. All [the ecological balance] is destroyed. How will she make it to the National Park. (My translation)

Therefore, the human existence is trespassing through the limits or boundary that was created to separate the humans from the jungles. This interference reminds the conflict between nature and development; between Dokkhin Rai and Dhona in Amitav Ghosh’s graphic poetry *Jungle Nama* (2021) where human interference is strictly restricted in the area of Dokkhin Rai, the man-tiger. The *Jungle Nama* and the *Sherni*, is linked through this thread of trespassing.

The ‘Anthropocene’ Epoch is an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth’s history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet’s climate and ecosystems. It believes that human agency has considerably affected the nature and its resources, thus creating an ecological imbalance. On the other hand ‘Capitalocene’, coined by an environmental historian and sociologist at



Binghamton University, Jason Moore is “an argument about thinking ecological crisis. It is a conservation of geo-history rather than geological history- although; of course the two are related. The Capitalocene challenges the popular Anthropocene’s two century model of modernity- a model that has been the lodestar of Green Thoughts since 1970s. The origins of modern ecological crisis are Capitalocene. Here in *Sherni*, the reason behind the environmental crisis is the flourishing of Capitalocene. The capitalist idea of profiting from nature and its resources is embedded in the movie where the building of a copper mine, roads through the jungle and human intervention in forest are the sheer examples of Capitalocene. This idea of Capitalocene, if not Anthropocene, is the prime cause of conflict between man and animal. Low level corruption and cronyism of the political leaders and the forest department is something that paves the way capitalocene through nature’s lap.

CONCLUSION

The film asserts a question: who is the cruel beast? The so called vicious animals we see in the zoo or in the forest aren’t the cruel, fierce beasts. The actual beasts are rather the human being itself. The animals aren’t separate from us. They are an integral part of this ecology coevolving with humans and other organisms. This notion is well established through the portrayal of the moth experts’ view when he tells a mere teenager, a part of the unofficial ‘Forest Friends’, “This forest belongs to you. It’s your responsibility to the forest”. The boy’s reply sums up the entire objective of the film in few lines, “It is simple. If the tiger exists, so does the jungle. If the jungle exists, there’s rain. If there’s rain, there’s

water. If there’s water, there’s human life” (My translation). So, first we have to save the jungles and its animals. Animals and people are all one. Thus, though the title of the film is quite ambiguous, for ‘*sherni*’ means in Hindi a lioness not tigress. But, it is obvious that this nomenclature is very much intentional which smartly refers to all the animals and their conservation as well as the struggle of the protagonist Vidya Vincent as a lover of ecology. Finally this film is successful in its attempt to address the crucial, important and yet ignored problem of conservation during eco-crisis through the portrayal of capitalism as a medium of human greed. Most importantly, in *Sherni*, Amit Masurkar makes a case for conservation - of nature, of human, and most importantly, of our interconnected shared humanity.

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