

Ecocritical Study of Film Sherni: Film as Medium for Environmental Communication

Sudeshna Das

*Asst Prof, School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
REVA University, Bangalore, Karnataka*

Abstract

*Film are a popular media with remarkable audio-visual elements appealing to audiences from all walks of life. This study tries to look into the medium of film as a story-telling method to create awareness on environmental concerns. The film **Sherni** is taken for analysis on parameters of Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism and film narrative techniques to highlight the various components that can be used to depict films on various environmental issues like deforestation, human encroachment, wildlife conservation and so on. In terms of Indian Bollywood cinema, environment films are often considered for the class and not the mass as there remains a question mark on their box-office performances. But the rise of direct-to OTT platforms like Amazon Prime, Netflix, etc has opened up avenues to explore niche topics and also make them commercially viable. The study was conducted to check how ecocritical, ecofeminist can be represented through film narrative elements in films on environment themes.*

Keywords

ecocriticism, films, environment, ecofeminism

Introduction

Ecocriticism as a movement originated in the 1990's as a school of literary criticism that tries to explain the relationship between literature and environment. Ecocriticism in the present times has become an all-encompassing word that refers to environmentally inclined outlook on works of literature and art. It can be taken as a new critical

method to critiques environmental representation in various kinds of texts ranging from literature to visual arts and medium. Ecocriticism deals with different aspects of environment and impact of human on the non-humans. In this context various environmental man-made problems like climate change, deforestation, pollution, extinction of endangered species and other ecological

imbalances can be analysed within the purview of Ecocriticism. It is an attempt of disciplines of literature, art and environment from multidisciplinary aspect to reflect and apprehend sustainable and futuristic solutions for the remedy for contemporary man vs environment problems.

Films play a significant role in reflecting the society of that times. Films represent a slice of life. Films narrates incidents and events that reflects reality with story-telling techniques of film making. Many social issues get depicted in films and serves as a medium to generate awareness about these social concerns among the masses. Film is a powerful visual medium that is highly impactful because it combines the affect of captivating visuals, sound , dialogue, lighting, background score and special effects that can evoke profound feelings and make audiences thoughtful about their lives and habits.

In keeping with this view, films portraying environmental concerns can be looked upon through the lens of Ecocriticism. Films depicting environmental issues through easy to relate narrative style and already established visual grammar of shot compositions, film sequence, montage editing techniques, lighting, costumes can leave their mark to shape popular public perceptions on environmental concerns.

Methodology

In *The Diversity of Life*, Edward O. Wilson, Harvard entomologist, Edward O. Wilson mentions that around 27,000 varieties of living organisms approximately are lost every year. At this

rate, he estimates that 20 percent of the existing species will go extinct in the next 30 years. He also established the fact that human beings act as important agents in this process of destruction. Cheryll Glotfelty, American professor of Literature and Environment in *The Ecocriticism Reader* laments that

We have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planets basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse.

This concern with preservation of nature and improvement of the relationship of the humans with the non-humans are increasingly being depicted in cinema. As an extension of Ecocriticism is the term Ecofeminist, coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), delves on the concept of gender to analyze the relationships between humans and the natural world. Ecofeminist analysis delves into the connections between women and nature in culture, economy, religion, politics, literature and iconography, and addresses the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women. At the same time, the analysis goes beyond seeing women and nature as property, seeing men as the curators of culture and women as the curators of nature, and how men dominate women and humans dominate nature. Ecofeminism

emphasizes that both women and nature must be respected.

Narration or aspects of story-telling in films are highly significant on leaving a powerful impact on the minds and conscience of the audience. Narrative analysis in literature is analyzing narratives, both fictional narratives (poetry, folklore, fairy tales, films, etc.) or facts such as news. Narrative analysis means placing the text as a story (narration) wherein text is seen as a series of events or parts of events selected and discarded.

In the present study, the researcher is analyzing the film *Sherni* (transl.Tigress) Indian Hindi-language commercial film directed by Amit V. Masurkar and released on direct-to-OTT platform Amazon Prime Video on 18 June 2021. The film showcases Vidya Balan in the leading role of the protagonist who depicts an honest and hard-working Indian Deputy Forest Officer. The study therefore undertake a qualitative narrative analysis based on formalist theory of films and examines the concepts of Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism in the visual text of the film through parameters of film narrative analysis such as shot compositions, film sequence, montage editing techniques, lighting, and costumes. The film *Sherni* was selected for the study as explores the conflict between human and non-human, raises awareness about the conservation of wildlife and critically acclaimed as a well-researched docudrama depicting environmental concerns with a linear story-line of saving a tigress ensnared in the political, social and bureaucratic snaggle of the society inhabiting the Indian forests.

Results and Discussion

1) Shot Compositions



Scene1.1



Scene1.2



Scene1.3



Scene1.4

The Establishing shot or 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



Scene 1.5

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 as shown in scenes 1.2, 1.3 & 1.4 and sets the tone for the narrative of the film. This display of man's relationship with his natural environment stands true to the unusual combination environment and a humanistic discipline of film studies as is the wont of Ecocriticism analysis



Scene 1.6



Scene 1.7



Scene 1.8

The Scenes 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8 displays the political narrative that underlining the story. Here Scene 2.8 is where Vidya is seen addressing the villagers at the end of the Tiger play for generating awareness. The actor mimicking the Tiger is seen in the background of Scene 1.5. Following this in Scene 1.6 & 1.7, 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. Both Vidya and Tiger are seen displaced in Scene 1.8 and the camera is placed at High angle to capture the shot looking down upon the group showcasing their helplessness and powerlessness. This film sequence can be

analysed with Ecocriticism as we see the propagation of humans at the expense of the non-humans thereby leading to encroachment of forest areas and

endangering species of wild life. It is interesting and captivating for audience's visual literacy.

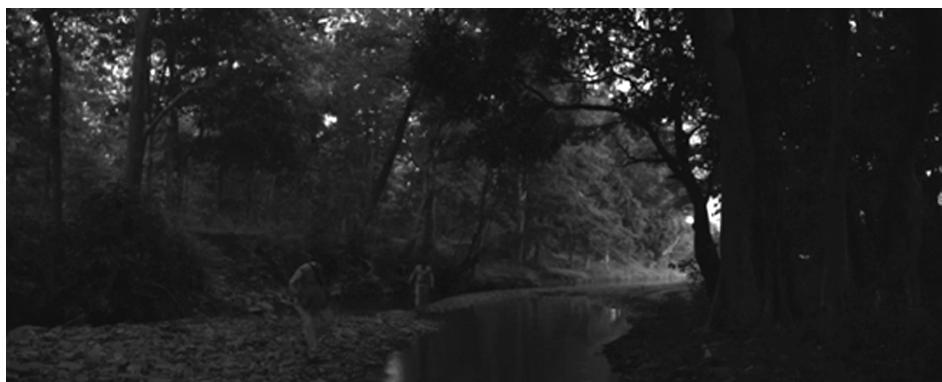


We'll check, madam.

Scene 1.9



Scene 1.10



Scene 1.11



Scene 1.12



Scene 1.13

Throughout the film, Extra-long shots are used to depict the majestic nature in the forest. Man is often depicted as only a minuscule in the imposing fabric of Nature. Scene 1.9, 1.10, 1.11, 1.12, 1.13 showcases the grand spectacle of nature where human look like ants in its vastness deriving a contrast of men dominating nature vs nature dominating men.

2) Transitions and Montages



Scene 2.1



Scene2.2

In film transition which is a technique used in the post-production process of film editing and video editing by which scenes or shots are combined. Most commonly this is through a normal cut to the next shot but Vsevolod Pudovkin Montage of Parallelism is used in the transition of Scene2.1 to 2.2 where the sequence of Vidya Balan character Vidya Vincent for the first time gets acquainted with the stray cat Mini introduced by her caretaker. Scene2.1 transitions to Scene2.2 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 as the story progresses.



Scene2.3



Scene2.4

Scene2.3 here is part of the storyline which shows the first mishap by the Tigress T12 when she kills the cattle of the villagers and consequently a Warning board is put by the Forest Department to keep people away from that area. This immediately cuts to the sequence of the office of Bansal, Forest Officer in-charge of the department and Scene2.4 is the first shot of the sequence showing the image of taxidermied birds kept inside the office. This transition from Scene2.3 to Scene2.4 is an example of Pudovkin Montage of Symbolism evoking an ominous feeling in the minds of the audiences as if the Warning Signboard is not meant for people but the tigress who meets a premeditated end by the nefarious mechanisms of the Forest Department.



Scene 2.5



Scene2.6



Scene2.7

Scene2.5, 2.6 & 2.7 are the transitions

shot which tells us about the first sightings of the cubs of T12. Here the visuals of the cubs is placed between shots of Vidya, as the woman nurturer of nature, and the hunter Pinto 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 believes in the oppression and domination of nature and puts no importance to the injustices against nature and environment.

3) Mise-en-scène



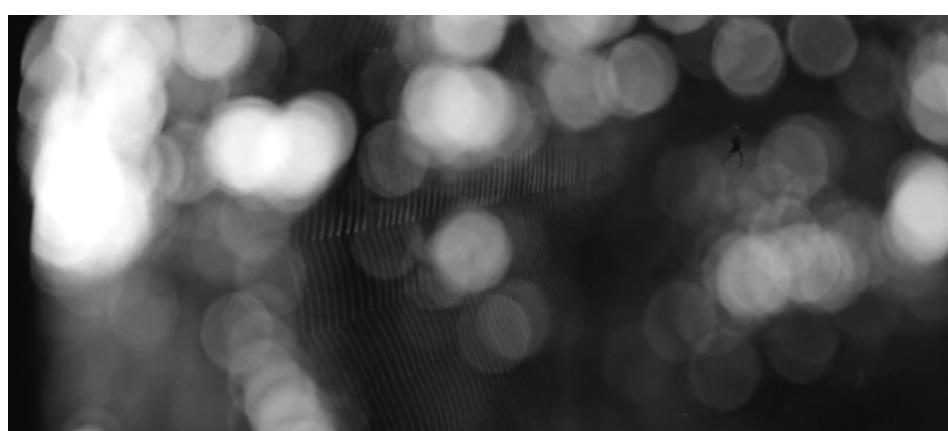
Scene2.8



Scene2.9



Scene2.10



Scene2.11



Scene2.12



Scene2.13

Mise-en-scene is the french for placing on stage and is narrative technique in films often referring to single scenes that are representative of a film. Mise-en-scene refers to everything that appears before the camera and its arrangement—composition, sets, props, actors, costumes, and lighting. The above mentioned scenes consist elements of Mise-en-scene.

In Scene2.8, the office of Bansal is depicted where his chair is placed in front of the larger than life portrait of a tiger. This picture depicts the ironical situation

where the fearless tiger needs protection from of official in charge who is ordered around and is petrified of everyone around ranging from the political elite to the bureaucracy.

In Scene2.9, the idealist character of Noorani, the zoology teacher in the local college and an ardent environment conservationist is shown in the shadow of imminent personalities of Mahatma Gandhi, APJ Abdul Kalam and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, representing the teachings of non-violence, scientific

temperament and sustainable development.

In Scene 2.10, the highly venerated and veteran forest department officer Nagai has the backdrop of powerpoint presentation during a conference of the forest department. This scene aptly represents his character as the bureaucratic elite who despite being aware of the wrong doings of the forest department remain hand in gloves with the political and business class setting their agendas of wealth and power at the expense of the forest which they are meant to protect and nurture.

Scenes 2.11 & 2.12 are nature imagery where symbolizing Tigress T12 is caught in the spider-web of political, social and economic tangle from which it has to escape. The pest infested leaves of the forest depict the overt inference of humans with the non-humans in the forest.

Scene 2.13 is the Mise-en-scene and also the final scene of the film where Vidya is shown amidst the fossils and taxidermied wildlife of yesteryears starting from the taxidermy of the first tiger shot by the Britishers is representations of nature in Postcolonial cultures and the environmental devastation consequent upon the colonization involving social and cultural transformations. This scene also brings the story to an end with a bleak outlook on wildlife and environment conservation. With this haunting and stark imagery of the protagonist Vidya in the museum in the final scenes away from the vibrant forests showcases the film director's appeal of rousing the conscience of mankind who with their prolonged destruction of nature might one day

become relegated lifeless in the annals of history.



Scene 2.14



Scene 2.15



Scene 2.16



Scene 2.17

Costumes are also considered part of the Mise-en-scene and contributes to the narrative. Here the protagonist Vidya is mostly seen (Scenes 2.14, 2.15, 2.16, 2.17) in clothes of earthy shades or colors found in nature- such as brown soil, green leaf, cloudy sky, as well as the red sun. These palettes adds to the nature-friendly dimension of her character and becomes a part of the mise-en-scene.

Conclusion

The environmental issues that were raised in the beginning of this study have been discussed namely the environmental issue, the relationship between human and nature, and destruction of environment by man, woman as the curator of nature, parallels drawn between woman and nature. Analyzing the film using the ecocritical lens and the story-telling using the film-making techniques helps raise the human consciousness about nature. The film exudes various aspects of Ecocriticism. In ecocritical terms, humans have no right to reduce richness, well-being and diversity of nature except to satisfy vital needs. Present human interference with the non-human world is proving to be excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs would be deeply different from the present which will incorporate awareness about environment and then take action to protect and preserve the harmony

between human and nature. Nature and women both represent the marginalized therefore women relate to nature as natal sisters are seen to be more proactive in matters of nature conservation. Film as a popular medium has numerous narrative techniques to highlight and emphasize meaningfully the aspects Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism.

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