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Mediating Ecology within the Context of Marxist Discourse: An Inquiry into the Hindi Film *Sherni*

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Abstract. In the contemporary mediated era, cinema plays a crucial role in depicting and portraying the ecological connections between humans and non-humans, nature. Given the extractionist approach of capitalists in shaping the Anthropocene and the resilient practices of the communities against uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, it becomes important to understand the changing metabolic rift between humans and nature. This study focuses on the Hindi film ‘Sherni’ (2021) as a reference point to comprehend the role of cinema in establishing the connection between society and the environment. Departing from typical Hindi film stereotypes, ‘Sherni’ addresses urgent issues related to human – nature, metabolic relationships, the environment, and the challenges faced by local communities to counter exploitative practices in the forest. The paper argues for the need to explore these changing metabolic rifts within the context of ecological communication. Using the Marxian concept of metabolic rift and content analysis, the film explores the complexities of human-environment relationships disrupted by forest and animal exploitation (tigress poaching), as well as displacement of local communities for capitalist gains. This brings forth the need to use ecological films as a tool to disseminate information and establish communication practices related to the environment in society.

Keywords: mediated world, popular culture, cinema, ecology, metabolic rift, human-nature relationship

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Экологическая медиация в марксистской парадигме: анализ индийского фильма «Шерни»

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Аннотация. В современную цифровую эпоху кинематограф играет важнейшую роль в отображении экологических связей между человеком и природой. Захватническая логика капитализма в период господства человека над природой и постоянное сопротивление местных сообществ бесконтрольной эксплуатации природных ресурсов обуславливают необходимость изучения изменений метаболического разрыва между человеком и природой. Данное исследование фокусируется на анализе индийского фильма «Шерни» (2021) с целью выявления значения кинематографа в установлении коммуникаций между человеком, обществом и окружающей средой. Отступая от типичных стереотипов индийских фильмов, лента отображает актуальные проблемы, связанные с человеком и природой, метаболическим разрывом, противостоянием местных сообществ эксплуатации лесных ресурсов. В статье обосновывается необходимость изучения этих изменяющихся разрывов в контексте экологической коммуникации. Используя марксистскую концепцию метаболического разрыва и контент-анализ, авторы исследуют, как фильм отражает сложности взаимоотношений человека и окружающей среды, нарушенных эксплуатацией лесов и животных (браконьерство тигриц), а также переселением местных жителей ради выгоды капиталистов. Результаты анализа определяют необходимость использования экологической коммуникации и фильма как ее инструмента для распространения информации и формирования в обществе коммуникативных практик, связанных с окружающей средой.

Ключевые слова: медиатизированный мир, массовая культура, кинематограф, экология, метаболический разрыв, взаимоотношения человека и природы

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Introduction

Cinema cannot escape nature. In relation to nature, film is either placed or, if 'the world is not enough', displaced. (Pick, Narraway, 2013, p. 21).

In the last thirty years, media has come to be seen as a crucial tool to foster public discourse on environmental issues and related concerns. In the modern mediated world, media plays a critical role in influencing public opinions, providing information, and shaping social viewpoints and actions related to environmental concerns, via newspapers, television, radio programs, and cinema. The environmental movements and nature portrayed in media can either support or contradict popular ideas about the environment and ecology. The environmental issues framed in media narratives create an impact on public feelings based on which policies are decided. The discussion of such issues on media channels is influenced by a variety of socio-political and economic aspects that exist in contemporary society. Media and communication processes are centrally implicated in both the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge pertaining to the environment. Moreover, they wield substantial influence over the generation, elaboration, manipulation, and contestation of environmental concerns (Hansen, 2018). Furthermore, they have a great deal of impact over the conception, development, exploitation, and refutation of environmental issue. Popular films, as well as televisual documentaries and animations, can effectively promote and challenge simplistic approaches to environmental issues and debates (Hansen, Cox, 2015). Cinema registers, records, or reveals the material reality of its objects. According to Tom Regan¹ the relationship between the film, plant life and inanimate matter, all are ecological matters in the broadest and most profound sense (Pick, Narraway, 2013).

However, it is essential to understand that ecological challenges are not something that exist in isolation; rather, their depiction in the media is intimately intertwined within the social, cultural, political, and economic components of society. Then a question arises: What is ecology? Foster (2000) underlines the necessity of understanding the historical evolution of ideas about nature, which occurred along with the emergence of materialism and scientific inquiry from the 17th to 19th century. He emphasizes the importance of Marx's materialist and metabolic approaches to comprehend current environmental degradation and anticipate transformational social and ecological changes. Marx's emphasis on the inherent contradictions between use value and exchange value, the conflicts resulting from wealth accumulation, and the pursuit of sustainable human development provides a methodological foundation for criticizing environmental degradation and advocating for a more sustainable future (Clark et al., 2019). The basic idea of the Marxist ecology discourse is that of alienation of human from nature, which rejects the idea of human dominion over nature as embodied in the myth of Prometheus. The argument within Marxism revolves around whether ecological concerns should be primarily focused on morals or whether more effort

¹ Regan, T. (1983). *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley: University of California Press. <https://archive.org/details/caseforanimalrig00regarich>

should be spent toward understanding the metabolic relationships between humans and nature. Randhir Singh (2009) defines the question of the environment as a question of how to change the world, and this change is envisaged through socialism, and not through the accumulation and commodification of nature.

In this context, this study aims at analyzing the Hindi film ‘Sherni’ (2021) using a Marxist ecological perspective. By placing the film within the context of Marxist discourse, we intend to provide light on how the narratives and experiences of individuals, notably women as shown in ‘Sherni’, contribute to our knowledge of the current environment. This discussion will focus on a few film-related questions, such as how the film depicts the metabolic relationship between humans and nature, how the local forest community is portrayed as insiders versus outsiders, how patriarchal ideologies regarding nature control are questioned, and how primitive accumulation results in dispossession and the erosion of local communities’ rights to the forest.

Theoretical Justification

It is not the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labour and capital (Marx, K., 2005).

Marx’s writings on the environment and ecology emerged in the mid-19th century, whereas ecological thought is commonly associated with the late 20th century. Despite this temporal disparity, there has been an increasing recognition that Marx’s ideas hold significant relevance as an early and influential voice in ecological critique. Nonetheless, there are those who contend that Marx’s ecological insights, due to the passage of time, have lost their historical significance and are only applicable to the era characterized by steam engine technology. Although Marx formulated his analyses in a different historical context, they offer invaluable perspectives on the intricate interplay between society, economy, and the environment that continue to hold relevance today. His recognition of the exploitative nature of capitalism, the inherent contradiction between use value and exchange value, and the alienation of labour from nature provide a fundamental framework for examining the ecological challenges of the contemporary world.

Further, Marxist ecology investigates the numerous linkages between human societies and the natural environment. Marx’s approach consists of three key components: the universal metabolism of nature, the social metabolism, and the metabolic rift. Universal metabolism consists of specific cycles and processes within the broader biophysical world that produce and regenerate ecological conditions (Foster, 2013), whereas the social metabolism refers to the process where humans through their productive lives and activities create a social metabolism between themselves and the rest of nature, which requires interchange of matter and

energy (Friedman, 2018). Thus, the social metabolism of humans takes place in relation to the universal metabolism of nature. The metabolic rifts refer to the crux of Marx's ecological critique of capitalism, denoting the disjuncture between social systems and the rest of nature.

These elements offer a thorough perspective to look at the relationships and interdependencies that have existed historically between ecological systems and society. Within the capitalist paradigm, which is defined by its continuous pursuit of capital accumulation, Marx finds rising pressures on nature, resulting in increased strain on ecological systems and waste generation. These dynamics manifest as detectable metabolic ruptures, which interrupt natural cycles and processes. Marx's critique, particularly of capitalist agriculture, emphasizes its role in promoting ecological rifts within the soil-nutrient cycle. Such a relationship between human society and the natural world and its reciprocal interactions and effects can be better understood with the use of this analytical method (Clark et al., 2019). While Buttel (2002) highlights the significance of the metabolic rift as a core theoretical notion within environmental sociology, Foster's seminal work (2000) further elucidates Marx's environmental analysis, with a special focus on the metabolism of natural systems. Marx introduced the notion of the metabolic rift, which has multiple aspects that extend beyond the social, ecological, and historical domains. It is the core element of Marxist ecological critique, which argues that the human labour process itself is defined in *Capital* as 'the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence'. It follows that the rift in this metabolism means nothing less than the undermining of the 'everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence' (Marx, 1976, cited in Foster, 2000). Marx makes some crucial points that capitalism has created an 'irreparable rift' in the 'metabolic interaction' between human beings and nature (ibid.).

Metabolic rift refers to disturbances or imbalances in natural cycles in an ecological sense, whereas it refers to the causes and consequences of diverse societal interactions with nature in a social context. It has historically highlighted the contingent nature of relationships between the social and natural spheres (Schneider, McMichael, 2010). This viewpoint places environmental deterioration in the context of capitalist development, attributing it to systemic imperatives as opposed to fundamental aspects of capitalism. As a result, nature and society are compared as distinct entities, and their dialectical relationship is investigated in terms of mutual interaction and transformation (Clark, 2005).

Marx's ecological perspective can be understood through an analysis of cinematic narratives, images, and thematic aspects. Cinema, as a cultural product, reflects and strengthens existing ideologies and social institutions, particularly capitalist production relations. As a result, one might study how cinematic portrayals of nature, technology, and society interact with Marx's critique of capitalism and its ecological consequences. The aim of this study is to examine the changing interaction between humans and nature in the context of neoliberalism, as portrayed in film

narratives. By evaluating how the metabolic rift is shown in the film, the study hopes to get an insight into how neoliberal values and practices influence this relationship.

Materials and Methods

The research materials included: Foundational works by Marx (Marx, 1867/1976; Marx, 2005), contemporary eco-sociological studies (Foster, 2000; Clark, York, 2005; Foster et al., 2010), ecofeminist scholarship (Shiva, 1988; Ruether, 1997; Carlassare, 2000; Agarwal, 2008); key scenes from the film ‘Sherni’ (Masurkar, 2021).

The research methodology employed a comprehensive approach combining:

- Theoretical framework: the metabolic rift concept (Foster, 2000), critique of patriarchal environmental governance (Agarwal, 2008), analysis of capitalism’s impact on natural resources (Clark et al., 2019);

- Empirical methods: film content analysis (examination of narrative structure and visual imagery, study of character dialogues, investigation of multi-level societal conflicts (state-society-nature interface), gender analysis of character representations.

Comparative analysis: contrast between capitalist and traditional resource management approaches, contextualization within India’s real ecological conflicts (Agarwal, 1998).

Discourse analysis: comparative reading with Marxist texts (Marx, 1867/1976; Foster, 2000), interpretation of key character quotes (e.g., Masurkar, 2021, 00:45:23).

Critical approaches: gender studies perspective (Agarwal, 2008; Ruether, 1997; Shiva, 1988), examination of alternative social models (community-based conservation), critique of capitalist resource exploitation (Foster et al., 2010).

Analysis Framework and Discussion

The Hindi film ‘Sherni’ (2021), directed by Amit Masurkar features Vidya Balan, Vijay Raaz, and Brijendra Kala in the lead roles, and engages with the framework of the metabolic rift. The film revolves around Vidya Vincent (Vidya Balan), a female forest officer who is tasked with heading a team to chase down a man-eating tigress, T12 (name given to the tigress by the forest department), that has been causing a havoc in a village community. As a forest officer, she navigates bureaucratic hurdles and political constraints; and faces deeply rooted cultural prejudices regarding women in positions of power. Through the deliberate use of a tigress and a female lead character, the film challenges the patriarchal understanding of nature, where men hold ownership and control over nature. In a patriarchal understanding of nature, women are identified as being closer to nature and men as being closer to culture. Nature is seen as inferior to culture; hence, women are seen as inferior to men.

Firstly, in the film, the symbolic portrayal of the tigress as a strong force in the narrative subverts conventional gender stereotypes of domination and power. Nature has historically been anthropomorphized and masculinized, with ideas of power and control associated with men. However, by depicting a female tigress as the focus of conflict and tension, the film challenges these entrenched gendered norms, disrupting the patriarchal paradigm that holds male control over nature. Secondly, the character of Vidya Vincent embodies a multifaceted challenge to patriarchal hegemony. As a forest officer tasked with navigating the complexities of tracking the tigress, Vidya confronts institutionalized sexism and skepticism from her predominantly male colleagues and superiors. Her journey underscores the pervasive nature of patriarchal structures within professional spheres, where women are routinely marginalized, and their capabilities questioned. Consequently, her character becomes important for reimagining gendered relationships with nature and for advocating equitable and more comprehensive approaches to conservation efforts.

Thirdly, the film relates itself to the idea of people's rights, with a specific focus on gender. In doing so, it rejects the notion of patriarchal dominance over nature. An insightful scene in the film involves a group of young local female forest employees who assert that the paw prints in the forest do not belong to a tiger. However, their advice is disregarded by a patriarchal hunter who chooses to venture into the woods in pursuit of his own agenda. Vidya Vincent's character represents a female protagonist who confronts the challenges, both within her family and at her workplace, as her ideas are opposed by male forest department officers. By emphasizing female characters in positions of authority and agency, the film addresses the need to resist stereotypical gender roles and power relations while simultaneously highlighting women's essential contributions to the environment. The film 'Sherni' delves deeply into the complicated material dynamics inherent in human-nature relationships, emphasizing their interconnectedness and mutual reliance. It underlines the importance of human-nature metabolic relationships in preserving ecological balance, as pointed out by the character Hassan Noorani's (Vijay Raaz) remark that the local community and the forest ecosystem rely on one another for sustenance.

The film adeptly tackles the issue of primitive accumulation, highlighting the forceful displacement of many locals from their traditional means of self-sufficiency (Patnaik, 2019). The film also presents the locals' challenge to the concept of sanctuaries, which they perceive as a deliberate attempt to separate them from their forest lands and sources of livelihood. The commodification of labour and land resulted in the dispossession of people from their ancestral territories (Polanyi, 2001). This metabolic relationship can be understood through the lens of a social contract, wherein different species establish a mutually defined system of order and care, encompassing rules, duties, and rights (Theodosopoulos, 2005; Oma, 2010). The film employs the concept of social contract as a tool to explore the significance of animals within the social fabric. However, it acknowledges that humans and

animals are often seen as unequal partners, necessitating an eco-contract to redefine their relationship within modern society.

Agarwal (2008) argues for the active involvement of local village communities, including women, in the sustainable management of local forests and commons. Furthermore, Singh (2009) raises a crucial question regarding the unique value of local perspectives and their celebration of communitarianism in environmental discourse. ‘Sherni’ achieves a similar objective by highlighting the active role of the local community, along with Vidya Vincent, in safeguarding the environment and reshaping human-nature relationships. It sheds light on the resilience of the local community, which endures the greatest hardships caused by environmental degradation. Their protests against the forest department underscore the larger issues of post-independence development models, primitive accumulation, deforestation, and the establishment of national sanctuaries and parks in the name of national progress. This sparks a broader conversation within the complex interplay between development activities in the forest area and efforts to protect the environment. In this context, the forest symbolizes a communal resource shared by people, animals, and resources. It embodies a life-enhancing paradigm for the locals, enabling them to assert their rights to the environment. The binary of outsider and insider in the context of the forest has raised some very important questions regarding the understanding of the forest in the narrative of the film. The film challenges the very understanding of forest departments when one officer says, “India’s forest department is a gift of the British; we, as officials, should work in the same manner as they do. Bring in revenue and get a promotion” (Masurkar, 2021, 00:45:23). Locals challenge this notion of the forest department, and it broadens our understanding of the forest, where every agency is portrayed as an important agency.

In his very first political economic essay, ‘Debates on the Law on Theft of Wood’, Marx (1842) discussed ecological issues and human-nature relationships. He quoted one incident when peasants were arrested for picking deadwood in the forests. He believed that by carrying out this act, the peasants were merely exercising what had been a customary right but was disallowed with the spread of private property (Foster, 2011). In the film, the state restricts the local community from gathering deadwood and food for their animals, highlighting the clash between government regulations and traditional livelihood practices. This depicts a conflict between conservation policies and the socioeconomic requirements of vulnerable local communities. The film highlights the state’s approach to forest management and the socioeconomic issues that the local community faces, emphasizing the importance of animal health and resource preservation over the complex dynamics of human-nature relationships and ecological considerations. Furthermore, it emphasizes gendered perspectives by narrating a story in which male characters are portrayed as more knowledgeable and skilled than their female counterparts.

As discussed above, in the patriarchal understanding of nature, masculine attitudes are given higher status than others. This is how the male dominates and controls nature. In the film, the subordination of women, whether it is the forest officer, Vidya Vincent, or the local women, reflect Shiva’s (1988) point where she

says that the violation of nature is linked with the violation and marginalization of women in the third world. Films reflect this notion while showing how locals are subjugated by the local leaders and, on the same side, the forest officer Vidya Vincent's subjugation. However, the film narrates the idea that social and ecological changes occur through personal transformation and changes in consciousness when Vidya Vincent fights to save the T12 and goes against her officers in the department.

The film's story dives into an ecological investigation of the human-nature relationship and the metamorphosis of forest department officers. The role of Hassan Noorani is essential to this investigation since he acts as an intermediary between the forest officer, Vidya Vincent, and the local community. The depiction of the human-nature dynamic relationship provides an experiential understanding of how people interact with the natural environment. This interpretation emphasizes the idea that notions are created by intersubjective interactions and shared experiences rather than being limited to individual perceptions (Bakhurst, Sypnowich, 1995). Furthermore, the film brings forth the detrimental impacts of mining and development activities on forest ecosystems, demonstrating how these activities affect animal habitats and the environment. It eloquently highlights the fight for existence experienced by the animals and human inhabitants of the forest area through the agony of an unseen tigress attempting to navigate a forest devastated by mining. The film resists portraying nature as separate from human realities, instead focusing on the actual experiences of local communities living in forest areas. The narrative's emphasis on the everyday interactions between humans and nature exposes viewers to the real essence of the forest environment, creating a greater appreciation for its intrinsic value.

'Sherni' emerges as a cinematic project that goes beyond conventional portrayals of nature, focusing on a nuanced exploration of the human-nature relationship in the setting of local communities inhabiting forested landscapes. It emphasizes the urgent need for a more harmonious and sustainable approach to human-nature relations by criticizing industrial development and its impact on forest resources. Finally, the film serves as a powerful reminder of the need to maintain and respect the delicate balance between human activity and the natural world.

Conclusion

The study highlights a few important aspects that are portrayed in the movie. First off, 'Sherni' becomes more than just a film text; it becomes an important medium that goes beyond the screen, providing a deeper examination of the relationships between humans and nature to a wider audience. The film methodically depicts these relationships, going beyond the customary visual depictions of Hindi cinema and diving into the transforming path from traditional to contemporary human-nature dynamics. Second, the film critically examines the dynamics of the insider-outsider binary as well as the concept of primitive accumulation, shedding light on how insiders are separated from their sources of livelihood. The analysis gives depth to the story and encourages reflection on the socio-economic systems

that shape our relationships with the natural environment. Third, ‘Sherni’ emphasizes the importance of local communities in environmental and ecological issues, highlighting their critical role as proactive stewards of their surroundings and disputing the concept that environmental preservation is primarily the domain of centralized institutions like the forest department of the state. Finally, the film depicts everyday interactions between humans and animals to show how nature is an important part of the lived experience of humans. In doing so, it advocates for a nuanced understanding of the human-environment relationship, rejecting romanticized images in favor of a direct encounter with the realities and complexities of these interactions.

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