

## ENVIRONMENTALISM OF THE MARGINALISED: A STUDY OF TWO CONTEMPORARY BOLLYWOOD MOVIES

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### **Abstract:**

*Though ecology as a theme still remains commercially unexplored in Indian audio-visual media, a number of mainstream Hindi movies have started experimenting with the subject to voice serious concern about social issues that have disrupted the natural flow of human life time and again. The messages circulated through them include the degradation and depletion of ecology that have threatened traditional stable social structures and exacerbated poverty. Two contemporary Hindi movies, *Matrubhoomi: A Nation without Women* and *Peepli Live*, have grappled with such socio-ecological concerns- female foeticide and farmer suicide, problems that are plaguing the country at present. The inevitable outcome in both these situations is a colossal interruption in the ecological equilibrium as both women and farmers symbolize creation and sustainability; therefore, dreadful conditions of these two communities quite predictably account for the dilapidation of nature. The narratives raise questions against the existing social structure in our country, characterized by hierarchy, exploitation and domination, and attempt to offer a possible solution to the burgeoning challenges of the current ecological crisis in the capitalistic system. However, the tone and approach of these two socio-political dramas are dissimilar to each other. While one is sombre, the other uses light-hearted humour. Still the argument of both the film-makers is to highlight the phenomenon of ecocide in 21<sup>st</sup> century India with credibility and legitimacy.*

**Keywords:** *Black humour, ecocide, Hindi movies, marginalisation, social ecology, survival-struggle.*

The concern of the contemporary generation about environment has been seminal to almost all the forms of art work. Initially the most distinct forms that addressed ecology and environmental degradation were fictional and non-fictional literary works. The issues that they dealt with ranged from nature as a rejuvenator, a source of solace, to bio-diversity and various forms of environmental hazards regarding water, food production, toxins etc. However, with the passage of time, other forms of media have also started accommodating perspectives towards nature and ecological balance; but those demonstrations have been mostly limited to the western world since the interjection of popular media as a powerful medium to disseminate various points of views among the audience is well-established there. That is why, films, TV shows and popular theatre have expressed an urge to take into consideration nature and the various types of devastation that befalls her from time to time. Numerous television shows dealing with ecological sensibility, like *Wa\$ted* (2008), *The Lazy Environmentalist* (2009), *Frozen Planet*, advertisements promoting preservation of the natural world, and even exclusive television channels like *Planet Green*, *Green TV*, featuring twenty-four hour programmes on environmental issues are now a major part of the mainstream culture of the West. A number of documentary films like *Unacceptable Levels*, *Chasing Ice*, *The Eleventh Hour* as well as some fictional movies like *Avatar*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Happy Feet*, and *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* focus on an extensive assortment of environmental concerns. Compared to this, Indian popular media is still at a nascent stage in

demonstrating eco-consciousness. Apart from a few documentaries like *Bhopal Express*, *H2O*, an eco-reality television show titled *Lakshaya: Ek Living Planet*, and a handful of fictional films on environment like *Kaun Kitney Paani Mein*, *Char: The No Man's Land*, *Dweepa*, *The Truth about Tigers*, there has been a serious lack of attempt to utilise the celluloid to disseminate ideas and create consciousness about environment, and even these ventures have also encountered fair share of losses to gain an audience in real time. However, amongst this meagre amount of initiatives, the focus of our discussion will be on two mainstream Hindi movies, *Matrubhoomi: A Nation without Women* (2003) and *Peepli Live* (2010), which have tried to explore two very serious ecological concerns with two completely different approaches.

*Matrubhoomi: A Nation without Women*, a film by Manish Jha, portrays a world bereft of women. It highlights the pressure society inflicts on women to give birth to a male child and how it ultimately forces them to secretly abandon their female off-springs. As the subtitle indicates, the film projects an Indian village devoid of any female figure, where Kalki, the protagonist, a young tender girl from a nearby village, is literally sold by her father to a family of five brothers. The hapless girl is brutally raped every night by all the male members of the family, including her father-in-law. While only the youngest brother appears to be a human amidst all the brutes, even he had to pay the price for his humanity with his life. Such a ghastly mistreatment of her girlhood quite evidently leads Kalki to make an attempt to break away from the situation with the aid of a family-help. But unfortunately the endeavour turns out to be a disappointment and her condition worsens. She is kept in the stable where she becomes a bait for the sexual gratification of almost all the men folk of the village. Nonetheless, such a menacing, squalid and perversely atrocious view of patriarchal hegemony inevitably leads to the annihilation of the entire clan in a domestic wrestle, and the movie ends with a ray of hope as Kalki gives birth to a girl child.

Manish Jha's film delicately touches upon the contemporary issue of the alarming decline in the sex-ratio of India through the depiction of an imaginary village. The film directs unflinching questions at the ignorance of the current generation towards the issue of the extermination of women and expresses concerns that are no longer exclusive to a particular geographical territory. Just as the possession of land has always been considered as the prerogative of men, same has been thought about the female body in India. Her body is no less than a property, the existence of which has to have an ownership. In India, even in the twenty-first century, termination of pregnancy based on the sex of the foetus is a fairly common practice as a result of which an alarming gap has developed in the ratio of man-woman in this country. The present sex ratio in India at the time of birth is 112 males to every 100 females; the problem is undoubtedly widespread and the gender gap appears to be flaring with each passing day (Stallard1). What is urgently necessary is to look for an alternative approach to put an end to the devastation inflicted on the earth by men and also to determine an existence which is ecologically sound and would not put the survival of nature or of women into crisis. Right at this context, ecology reinforces its goals with another socio-economic apprehension, the question of gender and colonialism, and thereby integrates two social movements- environmentalism and feminism- from which emerged "a new term for an ancient wisdom" (Mies13), 'Eco-feminism'. According to noted environmentalist Vandana Shiva, the intensifying struggle that women undertake for survival in a developing world supports the time-honoured Indian cosmological perception of nature as 'Prakriti', and as "an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos" which "in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha) ... creates the world." (38)

For women...the death of Prakriti is simultaneously a beginning of their marginalization, devaluation, displacement, and ultimate dispensability. The ecological crisis is, at its root, the death of the feminine principle ... (Shiva 42)

Therefore, giving women their due respect would, in the long run, ensure durability of the entire human race. For critics like Tollefsen, "ecofeminism is ecological because the preservation of ecosystems is a prime objective, and feminist on the basis that it offers up ways to recognize and counter male favouritism." (91) This is precisely what Manish Jha tries to point out through his artistic creation.

In a panel discussion organized by *The New Indian Express*, noted Indian filmmaker Prakash Jha made a distinct categorization of the four types of 'gazes' that pervade the film industry. According to him,

The portrayal of the ideal woman in cinema is from the 'male perspective'. The first problem is the male point of view which is inherent in the stories that are told through cinema. The second is the gaze of the camera and all that it reveals about the woman to the audience; the third is the male character's response to the woman on screen, and lastly, the response of the men in the audience to the woman on the screen. All these factors ultimately culminate into the influence that cinema may have on gender equality. ("Portrayal of Women in Films")

In *Matrubhoomi*, director Manish Jha has tried to put emphasis on all these 'gazes' that lends credential to the construction of the voice of the subaltern, which in his case is the women. The storytelling technique that the director adapts for this movie is very straightforward. However, the intensity, direction, and quality of cinematography help the audience to understand characters, actions, themes and mood which add layers to the plot. The basis of *Matrubhoomi* is the ultimate impact that absence of women has on men- physically, emotionally, psychologically, and socially. Jha stirs up an association with a civic principle that in future will inexorably derange the environmental equilibrium of this green planet. By providing us with a glimpse of a dystopic state, the movie beautifully sums up an ecological concern that involves a sinister and sordid disruption in Nature as well as in the human world.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is Anusha Rizvi's directorial debut, 'Peepli Live', which depicts an India that the audience have rarely encountered on screen. The film offers a deep insight into the lives of another marginalised underprivileged community of our society, the farmers. The movie primarily germinated from the then Prime Minister's visit to Andhra Pradesh in 2004 where compensation was announced for families in a district that had seen nearly one-hundred suicides. In fact, Rizvi herself stated in the 60<sup>th</sup> Berlin Film Festival, 'In India there are so many schemes for the dead but none for the living,'(Chhabra) and this contemplation ultimately turned out to be the motivation for the script. Disappointment with such callousness on the part of authority, according to Rizvi herself, translated into a film like 'Peepli Live'. It is the story of Natha and Budhia, two farmer brothers from the village of 'Peepli' in 'Mukhya Pradesh,' the electoral constituency of the Chief Minister of the state. The brothers are under huge loans and are unable to repay those, for which their land is going to be auctioned very soon. All of a sudden, they come to know about a government scheme which promises to pay a heavy compensation to the family of a farmer who has committed suicide. Having no other way left, the elder brother, Budhia, forces the younger one to commit suicide so that his wife Dhaniya and two young sons get money and the family manages to avert the loss of property. Natha, however, is reluctant to undergo the ordeal; but at the same time, he is not bold enough to oppose his elder brother. But things turn out to be different as a local reporter from Peepli, Rakesh, accidentally gets to know about this plan of the farmer brothers and communicates it to a national English news channel. From there on, other media personnel get hold of this information and within no time, all of them start surrounding Peepli sensing the possibility of a sensational suicide story. Moreover, all these things take place at a time when the Government has announced an election because their policies towards the financially challenged sections of the society in general and the farmers in particular have come under serious scrutiny. In such a juncture, Natha's declaration of committing suicide creates a ruckus in the corridors of state politics. Both media and the political leaders of the ruling party as well as the opposition try to snatch some benefit from an unprecedented event like this. Instead of providing some relief to the family in crisis, the media starts filming up stories in theatrical styles on whether Natha is going to ultimately commit suicide or not. Meanwhile, the state government realises that Natha's death might consequently cause their defeat in the upcoming elections and thereby they try to protect their image in public by using some political gimmicks. While all these turmoil is going on, the local headmen kidnap Natha to take reprisals against the rival political party, and thereby make the life of

Natha and his family even more miserable. Their plan is, however, wasted since the media comes to know about this kidnapping, and in the midst of a huge confusion, Natha escapes from the barn in which he was kept captive whereas the local reporter Rakesh dies in the fire that explodes the place. Everybody confuses Rakesh with Natha and the government ultimately refuses Natha's family the due compensation on the ground that the death was an accident, not a suicide. The movie ends with the image of Natha working as a construction labourer in the city.

Agriculture has been an integral aspect of India as the Indian economy has been dependant on it for a very long time. Many festivals and ritualistic celebrations in different parts of the country have traditionally been a celebration of land, harvest, and Nature in general. India has always considered agriculture as the core of its subsistence; therefore, incidents of farmer suicides in this country are quite appalling. It actually hints at the indifference of an agrarian society towards its roots and its insistence on industrialization as a means to greater economic development. *Peepili Live* offers a thoroughly realistic account of this devastating trend of forced urbanization. However, more than expansion of industries which is usually accepted as the key reason for agriculture being neglected, Rizvi has tried to bring to the fore the conspiratorial mind-set of the policy-makers for whom farmers are mere puppets who can be manipulated to gain profit in vote-bank. Even the Union Minister of Agriculture in the movie, in an interview, promotes industrialization over agriculture. That is why, when Natha's decision to commit suicide comes to the fore, the government and the opposition, both try to take advantage of the situation by providing petty gifts to the family, like a hand-pump, a colour television and announcing a farmer-welfare card under the name of Natha. But at the end, when everybody assumes that Natha has perished by a fire in the barn, the government turns a deaf ear to the pleas of the bereaved family, thereby vivifying their opportunist stance. Along with the devious political representatives, there is a caustic dig in the movie at the television news channels that arrives at a commonplace village and converts it into a place of veritable chaos with their cameras and desperate hunger for sensational news. They intrude right into Natha's house and leave nothing related to the poor farmer untouched in the name of 'news byte.' In fact, one can easily find resemblances with various real-life TV journalists who have been spoofed in *Peepili Live*. The purpose behind such a mocking stance of the director towards media seems intended to put forward a stern condemnation of India's distorted advancement designs. However, the images of acres of parched land that belong to the farmers of the village, an old man dying an unnoticed death while making vain attempts to unearth ground water, the heaps of plastics and waste materials that remain scattered throughout the village after the entire episode of suicide comes to an end- all these are hints that the director drops for her audience to realise the extent to which environment has been degenerated in the process of a three-cornered struggle among the marginalised, the metropolitan consumerists and the new-cooperatives led by middle class agents of change which, in this scenario, is the media.

The directorial intention in case of avant-garde parallel cinema is very crucial to diagnose the unifying thematic principle of the figure of the subaltern. *Peepili Live* focuses on authentic representation of the lower caste, indigenous, subaltern farmers. The flawless performance of the actors- the sympathy-seeking face of Omkar Das Manikpuri, Raghuveer Yadav as the second lead, Vishal Sharma as the Hindi news correspondent, MalaikaShenoy as the English news reporter, ShaliniVatsa as Natha's wife, Farrukh Jaffer as Natha's mother, Nawazuddin Siddiqui as an aspiring journalist, and of course Naseeruddin Shah's compelling cameo- all are exceptional and none of them ever lose screen presence. The credit of efficiently capturing the rural essence of the film should be attributed to the brilliant craftsmanship of the cinematographer Shanker Raman who has been ably supported by the art and costume designers. Special mention should be made of the editor of the film, Hemanti Sarkar whose editing enables the plot to keep the pace intact. Rizvi has worked immensely hard on the visual landscape of her film. Starting from the newsroom to the village or the various symbolic daydreaming sequences in the film, each aspect gets detailed attention from the director. The costumes, dialect, songs, relationships, even the change of scene

to the city at the end get their own definition of spectacle which is quite rare in mainstream Bollywood cinemas. Apart from the leading actor of the film, Omkar Das Manikpuri who is the son of a daily wage laborer, there are several other villagers who feature as actors in *Peepli Live*, thereby emphasizing the commitment of the film with reality (Devasundaram 210). However, the most poignant aspect of this film is its tone. Rizvi has planned and executed all the mise-en-scenes with perfection to unfold the dark humor underlying the live drama. The minimalist mise-en-scène in *Peepli Live* is evident in the framing and composition of the setting of the scenes and the props visible in it, particularly in the shots of the parched lands and the close shots into the face of the poor farmer which reveal both his misery as well as bewilderment.

As far as the directorial gaze is concerned, Rizvi had been a journalist herself, and hence has been able to quite sharply critique the system of news production which is indifferent to the causes of the marginalized. The media industry which takes up the responsibility of projecting the 'reality' is actually a representative of the urban-psyche for whom even death is a commodity that needs to be advertised. That is why, though the action of the film takes place in the typical rural Indian countryside, what it actually represents is the connection between the urban middle class with their rural counterparts. The visual language of this sardonic story woven around the plight of the powerless peasants is replete with subtle and sincere sarcasm. The careful handling of satire becomes evident in the way it is sewn into the tragedy of the film. The movie, by no means, offers any optimism or resolution to the problem. Rather it provides the viewers with an impeccable insight into the modern discourse of development. The neo-realistic conclusion of the film is starkly in contrast to the light-hearted mockery that has kept the audience indulged throughout. Natha's escape to the city only to be trapped again as a migratory construction worker, gives the movie a pessimistic ending as it fails to give voice to the repressed.

Bollywood movies are primarily centred on urban India and are yet to consistently situate some of the more recent films in rural India in an unrelenting custom. As a recent exception to this urban-centrism, we have *Peepli Live* and *Matrubhoomi*. Both the films indisputably evince the anxiety of the respective film-makers regarding some grave social subjects such as female foeticide and farmer suicide, and thereby (...) accept the basic tenet of social ecology that the idea of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human. Only ending all systems of domination makes possible an ecological society, in which no states or capitalist economies attempt to subjugate nature, in which all aspects of human nature- including sexuality and the passions as well as rationality- are freed. (Biehl 105)

The ill effects of what conservationists call 'urban arrogance' have gained momentum in the mainstream environmental pedagogy. Female foeticide and farmer suicide can be seen as the negative consequences of this arrogance which sabotages the importance of these peripheral communities. That is why, both the directors, through their respective art-work, bring forward the necessity of self-awakening of the oppressed who desperately need to give voice to their perennial subjugation. They question the patriarchal, mercantile, imperialistic system, and also call for environmental justice in their own ways. In India, the paradigm of green consciousness goes way beyond armchair environmentalism that is so much in vogue in the contemporary socio-geopolitical scenario. Indian ecocriticism surpasses the limitations of endangered ecologies or despoiled landscapes and incorporates regional approaches to social issues related to land, ethnicity, sustainability, poverty, terrorism, religious pluralism, caste, education, water policies and the like. In this case also, neither of the films is explicitly about ecology as such; yet both the movies subtly pull us to read into the tragedy of the life of a certain group of people whose violation of rights is tantamount to committing torment on nature. The ecological hazards of global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, destruction of forests and other ecosystems, pollution of air, water and land, in a way, ultimately result in human misery and social dislocation. But these are only some of the manifestations of the ecological disaster that humanity faces today which, in turn, contribute to many other problems: those of growing

marginalisation and the resultant social unrest, of human brutalisation, social and regional sectarianism, the breakdown of democratic social institutions, and of poverty itself. Thus the analysis of the oppression of nature and the marginalised, and the parallels drawn between the sufferings of minority groups and treatment of the land, accentuates the proposition of the two movies being manifestations of an ecological consciousness.

A further interpretation of the films from a socio-ecological perspective quite predictably directs the audience to make an evident inference of the concept of 'anthropogenic ecocide', which is basically the phenomenon of demolishing the natural environment of a specific province by the residents of that particular territory. One of the prolonged effects of extensive female foeticide is going to be an over-abundance of single men. This, unfortunately, may lead to an increase in trafficking of women and girls because in such a circumstance, there might grow a tendency amongst the men-folk to buy wives from poorer districts within their own countries or across international borders. There has also been some discussion on the effect that an increase in the number of men can have on society as a whole, with regards to amplification in instances of rape, robbery and sexual violence (Stallard 5). In *Matrubhoomi*, the society that is portrayed is on the brink of extinction because the men folk have demonstrated heights of moral decadence which is a catastrophic consequence of their being denied a natural life which includes women. They have failed to internalise the fact that annihilation of the female species in due course of time will implicate nothing but their own painful devastation. On the other hand, *Peepli Live* projects the menace that the farmers of this country have been subjected to, a community that has always been associated with the process of yielding and sustaining, but are now at the risk of being obliterated since the powerful authorities of the society have started considering them to be inconsequential. Therefore, when farmers and women, the most natural partners of environment, are depicted as being at the risk of survival, undoubtedly, there are ecological warnings which demand immediate attention. Just as a world devoid of women lurk under the threat of imminent catastrophe, a society that cannot provide at least the assurance of sustainability to farmers is also bound to anticipate its doom. In other words, when a nation makes its nonchalance towards the sources of sustenance obvious, perish of that population is unavoidable. Any hypothesis of development that is based on the dispensability of nature precisely undercuts the vision of contributing to making life wholesome, healing our planet and uplifting humanity since nature is essential for survival. The cinematographic materials in both the films make attempt to lay foundations for the ecological principle of revival of the earth as sustainer and provider through the means of revitalizing the peripheral sections of the society, the 'other'.

However, the tone and mood that these two movies adopt are stunningly contrastive to each other. 'Peepli Live' picks up a tone of levity to address a menacing issue, whereas the screen in case of Jha's movie is enveloped by seriousness. If the manner in which the TRP hungry news channels and the unscrupulous politicians commercialize the misery of a poor farmer accounts for black humour, the male-centric dominion leading to the dreadful maltreatment of Kalki delineates a grim spectacle of human brutality. In fact, the director himself admitted in an interview:

I wanted to examine the emotional and psychological impact of a society without women. It is a very extreme situation ... a whole nation without women. It is usually comedies that work here ... but the film has to be dark and brutal. People get offended by the film. It is a very black film. ("Where Women are Extinct")

Nevertheless, a perceptive viewer will inevitably discern another striking contrast between the treatments of the socio-ecological apprehensions by the two directors in their handling of the ending of the movies. Even though Rizvi's approach throughout 'Peepli Live' has been one of lightness and flippancy, the movie culminates on a bizarre note as we see Natha's family being deprived of the due compensation and the farmer giving up his ancestral profession in favour of daily labour work in the city just to ensure his survival. On the other hand, the young woman who goes through ruthless physical and mental agony

merely because of her gender, still manages to keep hope alive by giving birth to a girl child.

Further, since the medium of social discussion in this scenario is celluloid, inevitably the aspects related to production and distribution comes into question. Apart from the plot, setting and the cast and crew, the success of any film in the cine-market largely depends on adequate promotion and sufficient distribution of the movie. In this connection, it can be noted that the majority of Indian film industry has a tendency to portray a very elitist image and way of life through their narratives. In most of the cases, addressing socially relevant issues is a way to hit the bull's eye at the box-office in order to get tax exemption as well as to assure some noted awards. That is why, whenever there is an attempt to play the marginality card, the technical brilliance and artistic excellences are undermined by the pretentious hypocrisy presented through the films and hence, immediate questions arise on whether the film is created to cater to box-office norms, or it aims to mirror a true reflection of the oppression. In case of *Matrubhoomi* and *Peepli Live*, the socio-ecological messages addressed by both the young directors have received unequivocal critical acclamation worldwide; *Matrubhoomi* represented India in Venice Film Festival 2003 and *Peepli Live* was India's Oscar entry in 2010. But as far as commercial accomplishment is concerned, *Peepli Live* has been triumphant in collecting financial success too, whereas *Matrubhoomi* failed to impress the mass in terms of monetary profit. A major factor in this case is the film units that have taken up the responsibility of distributing the films respectively. *Peepli Live* has been produced by 'Aamir Khan Productions,' a major name in Indian movie industry, and distributed by UTV Motion Pictures, a huge production house that has the honour of representing India at the prestigious 'Academy Awards'; therefore, the share of fame that this movie enjoys is pretty comprehensible. On the other hand, *Matrubhoomi* has been marketed by 'Diaphana Films' (France) in association with 'Svensk Film industri' (Sweden) whose attempt to project before the Indian cine-goers the astute and brutal incarnation of female infanticide has not been accepted quite open-heartedly. In fact, the attitude of presenting a serious topic in a lucid tone is what the modern audience looks for, and that is where perhaps Anusha Rizvi's movie thrives. Nevertheless, the social success of both these movies can be summed up by accentuating the truth that they have neither romance, nor action, nor suspense nor song and dance numbers; still the raw, real, straightforward and simple presentation of the socio-ecological theme has attracted a wide range of audience. In fact, the understated events, characters and their interaction against an authentic backdrop in both *Matrubhoomi* and *Peepli Live* have a lot of potential drama, but the directors take a mature step by refusing to dramatize them; no wonder, these honest films quite successfully manage to mesmerize and fascinate the audience with their low-key celluloid statements on significant socio-ecological concerns.

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