

Twisted Skeins of Women and Wilderness

Retelling Shakespeare's *Shrew* in Amit Masurkar's *Sherni*

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Abstract

Anthropogenic development has reduced the concept of stability to an imaginary state. Thomas Nail prefers the term "Kinocene" to Anthropocene or Capitalocene to describe modern times since it suggests a reconfiguration of human-nonhuman relations. This is where the interpretation of classic tales through contemporary lenses becomes relevant concerning re-imagining them in the context of marginalized voices. An example of this is the Bollywood film *Sherni*, which finds its tropes in the *Shrew* tales, famously used by Shakespeare.

This article is divided into three sections, followed by a conclusion. The first section introduces Thomas Nail's concept of border, allowing the analysis to focus on extensive and intensive movements. The former pertains to the observation of external manifes-

tations of hegemonical exercise perpetuated within India as a legacy of colonialism. Following the discussion of the colonial legacy, examining the intensive movement illustrates how Shakespeare's Shrew tropes emerge as the film expresses its resistance to patriarchy and creates empathy for the nonhuman actor.

Keywords: Kinocene, Anthropocene, non-human actor, colonial legacy, border

Introduction

Anthropocene is a term that was first used in 2000 to refer to the extent to which human intervention has altered the fabric of our planet profoundly over the last two centuries (Corlett 2014; Zalasiewicz et al. 2011). Using the term facilitates the understanding of how humans have utilized the resources of the planet, thereby disrupting the ecological balance. Conversely, by giving primacy to humans, it also confers an unfair advantage on humans relative to other species. It is this myopic view that causes humans to fail to recognize that the "critical zone" (coined by Bruno Latour; see Watts 2020) is controlled by the biodiversity of the planet, which enables Gaia to maintain her homeostasis (Lovelock and Lynn Margulis 1974). The process of extinction has always been an integral part of evolution; however, the unnatural acceleration of extinction as a result of human dominance has brought the loss of biodiversity to a level that has begun to threaten human well-being (Johnson et al. 2017).

The philosopher Thomas Nail introduces the concept of "Kinocene" (Nail 2019) to which Anthropocene and Capitalocene are only subcategories. The idea behind his "motion philosophy" is to emphasize the fact that our planet and its inhabitants have always been in motion. However, the kinetic transformation that the planet is currently experiencing has been accelerated by human players, who are increasing entropy by causing a disturbance in such a way that its impact can be observed in real-time. In this context, the question arises as to what can be done to convey to human actors the effects of their actions, which have been causing havoc on other nonhuman species on the planet? An approach that attempts to alleviate this problem and cultivate compassion among humans is the advocacy of anthropomorphism – the concept of finding ech-

oes of human life in nonhuman nature in order to defy human narcissism (Bennet 2010, xvi).

Since its conception, the cinema has possessed the unique capability of providing audiences with insight into other perspectives, whether human or nonhuman. Moreover, the interconnected elements of this medium, “a technology of the Anthropocene” (Fay 2018, 3), create a truly uncanny “Eearth”¹ that facilitates the evolution of “kinetic memory” (Nail 2019b, 31). As part of this article, we evaluate a film from India’s leading film industry, Bollywood, known for its hyperreal rendering of the world through the ‘fragmentation of the familiar’ (Devasundaram 2016, 110-14). Amit V Masurkar’s *Sherni* (2021) tells the story of taming the shrew, which culminates in the subjugation of a tigress. As a result of ecological disruption, a tigress is attacking humans in the villages surrounding a forest in Madhya Pradesh, India. The job of securing the villagers and protecting the tigress falls on officer Vidya Vincent, a female Indian Forest Services (IFS) officer. The officer becomes obsessed with safeguarding the villagers as well as the tigress as she recognizes how this nonhuman actor is challenging the sexist, patriarchal world of hunters, politicians, and bureaucrats in India. In saving the tigress, she believes she can save herself.

Among the issues discussed in this article are the following: a) How has colonialism impacted the collapse of ecosystems in countries such as India?; b) How has the equating of nonhuman actors with their colonized counterparts affected the psyche of natives?; c) In what ways does the film *Sherni* challenge the patriarchy by anthropomorphizing nonhuman actors? Consequently, the article is organized into three sections, followed by a conclusion. The first section introduces Thomas Nail’s concept of border, which limits the analysis of the film to the extensive and intensive movements, a theme that is continued in the subsequent sections. Accordingly, the following section explores the hegemonical exercise fostered within India as a legacy of colonialism as well as the efforts made to maintain the division, illustrated through examples drawn from the film. Colonial heritage is also evident in the appeal of Shakespeare, whose writings have been adapted and nativized extensively in Indian contexts. Furthermore, the Hindi film industry, popularly known as Bollywood, has also had a longstanding relationship with Shakespeare, particularly the Shrew theme, whose mutations

can be seen recurring throughout Bollywood films (see Singh and Tholia 2022). As a result, the third section discusses the intensive movement, i.e., the qualitative change that is brought about through the division of men's world with that of the marginalized other utilizing Shakespeare's Shrew tropes. In this case, the analysis seeks to demonstrate the substantial change experienced within the shrew trope played in the film that serves to challenge patriarchy while facilitating empathy for the nonhuman actor.

Border: An anthropogenic phenomenon

Societies are essentially products of the border without which they would simply be called the earth: "a purely presocial, undivided surface" (Nail 2016, 4). Taking Thomas Nail's perspective, "society is first and foremost a product of the borders that define it and material conditions under which it is dividable. Only afterwards are borders (re)produced by society" (4). The film *Sherni* also addresses the issue of borders, mainly constructed by humans to assert their dominion over nature, as well as the limits humans enjoy imposing upon each other. It is possible for nonhuman agents to negotiate the border motion resulting from natural phenomena. Nevertheless, human-induced border movements, such as territorial conflicts, political and military conflicts, legal conflicts, etc., restrict the living conditions of nonhuman agents.

In the film, a tigress attempts to cross the jungle and reach the national park so that her cubs may be provided with a safe habitat. Unfortunately, the space between the national park and the jungle has been occupied by humans, encompassing them in the form of villages and cities. There is only one remaining path leading to her destination, which has also been converted into a mining site. Thus, she comes into direct conflict with humans, who declare her to be a "man-eating," ferocious creature. The incident turns into a politico-bureaucratic nightmare where both the authorities and the locals insist on killing her as a demonstration of their superiority.

In their hubris, humans tend to overlook that they have disconnected themselves from "natural" border motion by imposing artificial limits upon it. Humans exist within a "fuzzy zone-like phenomenon of inclusive disjunction" characterized by "neither/nor, or both/and" (Nail 2016, 3). Therefore, humans occupy "the thing in between the two sides that touch the states" (3). In this context,

the film focuses on the states that exist between regimes of social power, which are not considered “strictly a territorial, political, juridical, or economic phenomenon, but equally an aterritorial, apolitical, nonlegal, and noneconomic phenomenon at the same time” (2-3). Despite its in-betweenness, borders do not imply a lack or absence of human activity; rather, they facilitate the division of social space, allowing it to multiply. Consequently, Thomas Nail distinguishes between extensive and intensive divisions:

The first kind of division (extensive) introduces an absolute break – producing two quantitatively separate and discontinuous entities. The second kind of division (intensive) adds a new path to the existing one like a fork of bifurcation producing a qualitative change of the whole continuous system. The bifurcation diverges from itself while still being the “same” pathway.

Although borders are typically understood according to the extensive definition, this is only a relative effect of the intensive kind of division. Borders emerge where there is a continuous process that reaches a bifurcation point. After this point, a qualitative divergence occurs and two distinct pathways can be identified. The result of this bifurcation is that the border is experienced as a continuity by some and as a discontinuity by others. (3)

Sherni effectively describes this conflict of extensive and intensive movement of boundaries. This film contains characters such as hunter Ranjan, officer Bansilal Bansal, officer Nangia, legislator G K Singh, etc., who recognize a clear divide between the other and the men’s world and are determined to preserve it. There are also others, such as officer Vidya, prof. Hassan and some local villagers, who are willing to take on the challenges posed by the world order of men and become entwined with the faith of the tigress. As soon as the nonhuman actor crosses the anthropogenic limits imposed on the ecological order, it threatens patriarchal codes by challenging and assimilating the diverse categories of marginalized groups along with her. Even though Vidya and the others do not succeed in eliminating the man-nature divide, they experience a qualitative

shift in their perspectives, which results in negotiations with the limitations imposed on them by patriarchal institutions.

The following section will examine how tiger hunting in India became a symbol of colonial power imposed on the native population by tying them to this nonhuman actor. A devastating result of anthropogenic activity on this planet has been the colonization of other populations, which has allowed a small fraction of humanity to not only dominate other races but also destroy cultures and disrupt ecosystems.

Tiger Hunting in India: A colonial legacy

In the film, one of the 'Forest Friend' volunteers from the village discusses the symbiotic relationship between the tiger and humans, emphasizing its importance as such: "If the tiger exists, so does the jungle. If the jungle exists, there's rain. If it rains, there's water. If there's water, there's human life" (1:13:00-1:13:20). This volunteer's opinion reflects an understanding informed by Indian cultural memory, which has always viewed the tiger as an integral part of the ecological chain. Essentially, his statement echoes the prescription regarding tigers in *Mahabharata's* "Udyoga Parva," which states: "Do not, oh, cut down the forest with its tigers, and let not the tigers be driven away from the forest. The tiger, out of the woods is easily slain; the wood also, that is without a tiger, is easily cut down. Therefore, it is the tiger that protects the forest and the forest that shelters the tiger" (51). In fact, tigers and wildlife have been so integral to Indian history that cave paintings dating from 1000,000 and 30,000 B.C. have been found in central India depicting them (Jhala et al. 2021, 283; Badam & Sathe 1991). So why has a nation whose people are culturally motivated to find resonance with non-human life, particularly tigers, become hostile to them?

Part of the answer may be attributed to British colonialism, in which native savagery was linked to tigers as a means of establishing their dominion over indigenous populations, as noted by Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher (2014): "For the British India the tiger – despite its power and "Royalness" – was regarded as dishonourable while the lion, the symbol of Britain, was regarded as noble" (373). Similar to the distress Derrida experienced with the "bottomless gaze" (Derrida 2008, 12) of his cat, the tiger's gaze, which Britishers innately affiliated with Indians, gave the British a similar experi-

ence of the “abyssal limit” of their naked savagery. As a means of overcoming this fallacy and retaining their superior semblance over the native population, the “New Mughals” had to surpass regional rulers, such as Tipu Sultan, who had employed tigers to symbolize their rule (Sramek 2006, 659). As a result, tiger hunting became associated with British masculinity (664), which even influenced native citizens. In order to please their colonial masters, Indians had to participate in similar activities. On the one hand, tiger hunting became a luxury, symbolizing VIP (Very Important Person) culture. In addition, deforestation became a necessity to ensure access to natural resources for revenue purposes.

Even after India gained independence, the British system left a lasting impression. As a means of connoting membership in an elite circle and belonging to the warrior castes, the middle-class, educated officers attempted to emulate the former British lords (Rangarajan 2001, 97-98). Apparently, the conquest of nature, which was widespread during the imperial era, gained greater traction after they left:

Monocultures were promoted even within wildlife sanctuaries to meet the growing demands of paper mills and wood-based industries. The federal government funded many such schemes to clear-fell forests with a rich variety of shrubs, bushes, grasses and a wealth of tree species to make way for single-species stands of commercially valuable trees. These could include sal, teak, pine, eucalyptus or wattle, depending on the region in question. (97)

During the 1970s, an intensive effort was made to protect wildlife with the enactment of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (WPA 1972), which led to a modern conservation program for tigers, regarded as a symbol of national pride.

Sherni references the continued exploitation of wildlife and the hunting of tigers as colonial legacies. There are two instances where this is explicitly stated: A first instance is when Vidya meets Saiprasad, the officer who previously held Vidya’s position. He offers her advice on approaching this challenging job in the same manner as he did: “Can I confess something? It was tough posting. The first two months were a nightmare. Then I learned how to handle

things... The Forest Department is a legacy of the British Raj. So work like them. Bring in the revenue, your superiors are happy, promotion guaranteed. You know the score. You're smart" (51:13-51:44).

In the course of the film, Vidya finds herself entangled in a mess of bureaucracy, where her attempts to save the tigress are met with stiff resistance from her superiors, only to realize that this "government of big cats" (Mathur 2021) works within a framework of "conspiracy of silence" (167) that places profits and prizes at the top of the agenda. This is where she observes the "extensive division" that the authorities wish to preserve, the status quo, to exploit the system to their advantage.

A second instance in which the film expressly depicts the colonial exploits of tiger hunting occurs at the end of the film when Vidya sees an embalmed tiger that was killed by Britishers 70 years ago. This frozen tiger represents a frozen moment in time in which nothing has changed, and patriarchal society still exploits the weak and vulnerable, including the wild beauty of tigers, a species not immune to the wrath of humans. The unnerving gaze of helplessness lingered on Vidya's face for a few fleeting seconds before she abruptly removed her attention from the frozen beast. However, the silence surrounding Vidya does not come without some resistance, in that the killing of the tigress prompted a rage inside her, and as she speaks, it unsettles the rotten system of bureaucracy.

Taming the Shrew: Women and Animals in the (m)Anthropogenic world

Anna Kamaralli (2012) defines a shrew as "a woman who makes the wrong kind of noise, who says things that people do not want to hear.... History is full of attempts to silence women, but just as full of representations of women as talkers" (204). Shakespeare has been one of the leading dramatists in carving many representations of "female talkers" and showing the attempts made to silence them. The term 'shrew' is rarely used today, but the "power of the concept remains unchanged since Shakespeare first coined his remarkable range of vocal women" (1). Silence is not typically regarded as a virtue among men. However, they are bracketed as saints or prophets if they practice silence. On the other hand, this has not been the case with women throughout history, as their primary virtues, "obedience, chastity and silence" (1), are considered paramount.

Tales relating to the shrew, whether derived from folklore or Shakespeare, are shaped by two key elements. First, there is the vocal woman, who contests the notion of masculinity in men, thereby challenging them to tame her. To further control the woman, the man (lover or husband) degrades her to the level of an animal, while at the same time, in these tales, a real animal is punished as a means of intimidating the woman. Essentially, the situation evoked presumes that the men respond to the verbose women who need to be silenced. In this case, the problem is similar to that described by Donna Haraway concerning humans and animals (by humans, she clearly means men) that “only the Humans can respond; animals react. The Animal is forever positioned on the other side of an unbridgeable gap, a gap that reassures the Humans of his excellence” (2008, 77). Women and animals are intertwined through their shared faith, in such a way that when one is brought into the equation, into the process of othering, the other is not far behind. Judith Still points out in “Women and Other Animals” (2015) that when the man “*insists* on the difference between man and the animal then it seems that it is also woman who silently enters into play as the non-man, the other to man” (306).

Within the ecological masculinities of the (m)Anthropogenic (Pulé & Hultman 2021) world, *Sherni* plays out quite explicitly this shared equation of women and animals. The ubiquity of Shakespearean literature in bits and pieces, referred to by Poonam Trivedi as “Shakebyte” (Trivedi 2022), is quite evident within the mainstream of Bollywood storytelling. Several Bollywood films have incorporated Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* subtly or overtly (Authors 2022). However, Bollywood romance films or romcoms tend to overuse a trope in which the hero is adamant about winning the heroine regardless of whether or not she rejects him. It is not crucial whether the heroine suffers or not since she is what the hero desires. Ultimately, she must succumb to the hero’s wishes and return his love.

The significance of what *Sherni* does is to return to the roots of the shrew tale, which allegedly originates in India and has travelled to the west (Brunvand 1966). Jan Brunvand discusses the folktale Type 901, which may have originated in India, in which an animal is subjected to severe punishment in order to frighten the wife. In most cases, the punishment is imposed on a cat (347). However, the pun-

ishment meted out to the wild cat in *Sherni* does not silence the woman this time. Shakespeare, being the genius he was, was able to illustrate women's inventiveness even by being silent about how, despite pretending to obey their lords, they actually achieve their goals through men. While deriving its inspiration from the shrew, Bollywood rarely depicts the ingenuity of women in a Shakespearean manner and tends to portray mainly male-dominated stories. *Sherni* breaks the tradition of women being tamed, as punishing the animal makes the woman more rageful. In Shakespeare's *Shrew*, Bianca's silence is "not absolute...but relative, compared to the noisy resistance of her shrewish sister Katherine" (Maurer & Gaines 2010, 101). Vidya's relative silence during the film is broken when she becomes confrontational following the death of the nonhuman actor and calls her superior officer Nangia "pathetic" when he fails to initiate an appropriate investigation against hunter Ranjan.

With the film's opening shot showing a man prowling like a wild beast, the film clearly conveys to the audience that the world they are about to experience is dominated by the beast known as man. As the story unfolds, the audience comes to understand the animal to be more human than the men in the story. Throughout the story, all attempts to make an anthropomorphic connection between the characters and the audience are thwarted by the men. For instance, when it is discovered for the first time that T12 has two cubs with whom she is crossing the jungle towards the national forest, Vidya watches their innocent demeanour, when her (and the audience's) attention is interrupted by the voice of hunter Ranjan who demands not to be fooled by their innocent faces. A clear boundary is drawn in the film, which indicates that it is primarily a drama of men where killing animals or othering subjugated groups is only collateral damage. As the men brewed in colonial hangovers strive endlessly to kill the tigress, women (and a few men) have taken charge to protect the tigress. In the film, it is clear that women and tigresses share a strong affinity when one of the female forest guards reveals that she has begun to "see pugmarks in my dreams" (1:23:40-1:23:45).

Conclusion

With its attempt to anthropomorphize nonhuman actors, what does the film achieve? When viewed within the "limitrophy" (Derrida 2008, 29) applied to the analysis of the film, one may observe the

extensive and intensive development that feeds and multiplies in the confines of the limit by “multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, folding, and diving the line” (29), thereby achieving two distinct objectives. In the first instance, there is resistance against the extensive limits whereby people wish to maintain the status quo as it currently exists. In its attempt to resist the desire to keep exploiting the vulnerable, especially nonhuman actors (animals and nature), the film makes a strong statement against it. In accordance with Haraway’s adage that all beings “except Man can be killed but not murdered” (2008, 78), *Sherni* describes the killing of the tigress as murder without any semblance of hesitation. The liberal idea of justice is “based on human exceptionalism and separation from the rest of the natural world” (Schlosberg 2014, 75). Such an idea conveniently ignores the harm caused by humans to the nonhuman world as well as “our integration within, and responsibility for, broader systems, communities and practices of humans, and nonhumans alike” (75). The biocentric approach can no longer work as it must be replaced with a Zoe-centred egalitarianism, which is an “unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life” (Braidotti 2013, 61). As a result, this Zoe-centred approach generates a desire to integrate nonhuman actors into community life, which Haraway refers to as ‘living in a companion-species world’ (2008, 134). The “conception of *integrity* accomplishes for nonhumans what dignity does for human beings” (Schlosberg 2014, 75).

As the characters (and perhaps the audience) are brought to terms with the notion of integrity in the film, where after Vidya and the Forest Friend volunteers come together to look after the cubs, a question posed by officer Nangia looms in the forefront that he had posed earlier in the film: “Is a balance between development and environment essential? But if you choose development, you can’t save the environment. Save the environment, then you break development’s heart” (54:50-55:26). In finding the answer, the film shows the reflection of the “hospitable Anthropocene,” a concept dealing with human dominance “but a refined one” having a “conscious control of our interaction with the environment” (Arias-Maldonado 2014, 26). Perhaps that would be something humanity as a whole should strive for in order to make this planet habitable for all species.

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Note

- 1 Taking inspiration from environmentalist Bill McKibben, Jennifer Fay uses this term "to propose the idea of a planet that appears to be our home, but with a difference" (2).