
ECO-PRESERVATION OF WILDLIFE IN INDIAN CINEMA: A REVIEW OF *SHERNI*

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Sherni (2021) is more than a standard thriller; this Indian Hindi-language film, whose title is the Hindi word for “tigress”¹, explores the complexities of eco-preservation efforts in India. Set in the beautiful forests of Madhya Pradesh, the film tells the story of Vidya (played by Vidya Balan), an Indian forest service officer who is tasked with capturing a tigress accused of killing members of a small village community, while facing hostility and opposition by her coworkers and the members of the community as she attempts to protect the tigress. Merging a fictional story with the harsh realities that environmental conservationists and women face continuously. Vidya’s character provides valuable insight into the challenges faced by women in leadership roles. Through its storytelling, the film highlights the conflicts humans create with wildlife, the politicisation of environmental issues, and the challenges women face in male-dominated jobs and leadership positions as their male colleagues undermine their work. This review will aim to discuss and draw a connection between these issues and how they are present in Indian cinema, particularly in *Sherni*.

The film reflects a real-life incident that occurred in 2018, when tigress Avni was accused of killing 13 people in Maharashtra state in western India. Her capture and death ignited discussions about the validity of those claims, for which there was no clear evidence, and the lack of consideration given when they killed the tigress. Many asked

¹ And also lionness

critical questions, such as whether Avni was responsible for those deaths, why she wasn't captured sooner, and why a veterinarian or biologist wasn't present during the operation to ensure that guidelines for ethically killing an animal were followed, allowing the process to be conducted with as much care as possible (Khan). The real-life incident reflects the lack of care when dealing with human-wildlife conflicts and the involvement that politics has in these issues.

In its fictional treatment of these events, the film adds a dimension of gender to these environmental considerations. While reports of the real-life incident do not mention a woman being the main leader in the preservation of tigress Avni, in *Sherni*, Vidya is at the centre of the conflict and the main spokesperson for the preservation of the eponymous tigress. The movie thus adds a layer of discussion by using a female character at the centre of the issue, which allows the portrayal of difficulties women experience in their jobs, especially in male-dominated fields like the Indian Forest Service. Therefore, it creates a connection between the female forest service worker and the tigress in terms of gender. That is a positive aspect about this being a film rather than a documentary, allowing, through fictionalising the events, an eco-feminist message of how women can combat patriarchal structures that are destructive and exploitative of women as well as female nonhuman beings. Vidya is not simply fighting for the tigress but for herself as well.

The main conflict of the film arises when villagers in the area report the death of a man, suspected to have been killed by a tigress they have named T12, and accused of killing other local villagers. Her existence becomes a point of conflict between those who want her alive – the conservationists, such as Vidya and her colleagues – and those who wish to kill her: the opportunistic politicians, such as Gopal Krishna (Amar Singh Parihar), a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) whose main concern is gaining votes rather than preserving local wildlife. He is constantly increasing the fear of the tigress among the villagers to stir public emotion and encourage them to vote for him, portraying himself as their saviour. Throughout the film, Gopal consistently undermines the forest department, particularly Vidya's efforts to save the tigress. Vidya's superiors, including Bansal (Brijendra Kala), are more focused on appeasing the political pressures they encounter than on supporting conservation efforts, despite it being their responsibility. Since Vidya is tasked with capturing the tigress, when she visits the village, she observes their fear as well as the local leaders' eagerness to exploit the situation for

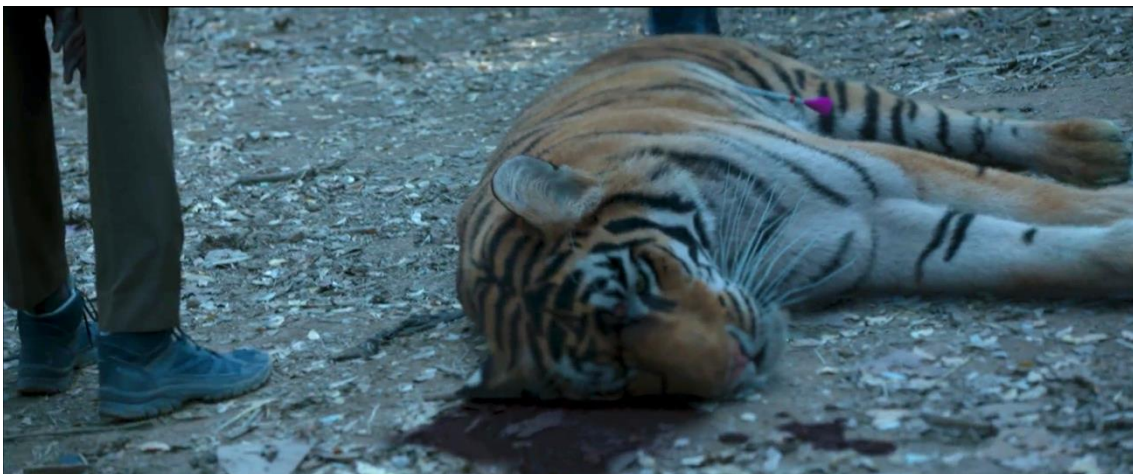
their political gain. Despite the pressure from others, she emphasises the importance of capturing the tigress alive to preserve the fauna of the territory. Vidya collaborates with her team and local zoologist Hassan Noorani (Vijay Raaz) to attempt to track T12 using cameras and traps before she is killed.

The film highlights an important environmental conflict, the human-wildlife conflict, specifically in India. These conflicts are caused by various reasons, including competition for natural resources, the transformation of land that destroys animals' homes, and severe changes in the ecosystem where animals live, which affect their survival (Nyhus, 143). The population of India is growing at an extremely rapid rate, being home to 18% of the global population, and this density is causing severe damage to wildlife habitats, which incites further conflicts. Siffer Nandi discusses various reasons why this is occurring precisely in India to better understand the origin of these issues. Due to its large population, fields need to be constantly expanding to keep up with the food demands and animals' habitats are frequently being destroyed for it, such as elephants entering those fields and damaging them because they used to be their migration paths. This will inevitably cause conflict between the farmers and the animals as they destroy the fields, which function as the space the farmers are profiting from while the animals' habitats are being destroyed. India has lost more than 6 million hectares of forest in the last decade (Nandi), which was home to an already declining wildlife, especially the animals that depend on the forests' patterns for movement.

Sherni's narrative illustrates how the tigress is not a malicious predator but a victim of humans damaging and expelling her from her territory. The forest, which should be her sanctuary and home, becomes a battlefield. The efforts made by politicians and villagers to remove her from her home demonstrate the anthropocentric beliefs that many humans hold. They believe that their existence is more important than that of the animals, that the forest is theirs, and any perceived threat must be eliminated without showing empathy for the tigress, whose home they have invaded, and later they demand that the tigress be removed from her environment. However, Vidya's emphasis on relocating the tigress rather than killing her reflects an ecologically sensitive stance that many others do not exhibit. As Abi T. Vanak claims, the film highlights the treatment of animals' habitats, such as the large "open-cast mine in the middle of an ecologically fragile tiger corridor", which are scenarios that are "repeated over and over across the country" (Vanak).

One of the film's main critiques through its story is how political interests and their interference often undermine conservation efforts. As Amrita Sen argues, the complex relationship between communities and environmental resources is shaped by "social and political factors" frequently influenced by local structures (Sen, 2). Acknowledging the financial benefits that controlling the environment can provide is crucial to understanding how political interests can alter conservation efforts. In this case, Gopal Krishna is an example of a local politician solely interested in winning votes, weaponising the villagers' fear for electoral gain. His actions, which include spreading misinformation to the villagers, hiring a hunter in secret, and dismissing departmental protocols for wildlife protection, reflect the reality of political interference in environmental issues. Research has noted that ecological decisions in India are often entangled with political interests, where local leaders exploit wildlife and manipulate ecological crises, as seen in both the film and the real-life case. As Gadgil and Guha claim, environmental conflicts in India can sometimes arise from the intersection of ecological degradation and political manoeuvring, where resource control becomes a tool for political leverage rather than an interest in protecting the environment (Gadgil and Guha, 45).

As T12 is being accused of causing more deaths, media coverage of the situation intensifies, which only increases public hysteria in the village. Gopal Krishna hires the hunter Pintu (Sharat Saxena) to kill T12, undermining Vidya's authority and her conservation plans to protect the environment. Vidya attempts to relocate the tigress to another area, but she is stopped from doing so as she lacks support from her superiors and team. Despite Vidya's efforts and attempts to save the animal, Pintu tracks down and kills the tigress. The killing of T12, under the false guise of self-defence, is a manifestation of systematic failure rather than an act of necessity.



T12 after being shot and killed [1:53:34].

Forest service workers find themselves in complex positions, caught between the ethical responsibilities required by their jobs and the hierarchical obedience they must follow in order to maintain employment, creating a tension that leads to tragic outcomes. As I have mentioned, these workers are often placed in difficult situations by individuals with more power than they possess, and this issue becomes even more complicated when the worker is female. *Sherni* examines patriarchal systems within government institutions and exemplifies the patriarchal structures that marginalise women in workplace environments. Vidya navigates a male-dominated environment where her expertise and knowledge are consistently trivialised. Characters like her superior, Bansal, clearly depict indifference towards male-centric workplace dynamics where women are overlooked. Her attempts to handle situations ethically are dismissed by her coworkers, not out of disagreement, as they agree with her desire to protect the tigress, but because they do not take her seriously and reject the possibility of a woman having a higher position of power and being more knowledgeable than they are.

Indeed, despite Vidya being the superior of many of her coworkers, their dismissal of her ideas persists. Chapman and Vidisha argue that simply placing women in higher positions is not sufficient. While it does give women a collective voice and creates more opportunities, efforts to advance women's leadership must go beyond affirmative action and address the social structures that allow such dismissiveness to occur (Chapman and Vidisha, 8). These situations are substantiated by real-life evidence. The Indian Forest Service remains predominantly male, and women officers are often marginalised, excluded from fieldwork, and relegated to administrative tasks under the assumption that they are less capable than their male counterparts. In the film, Vidya does not respond with hostility when she is not taken seriously, but with resilience and hard work, demonstrating her commitment to conservation efforts and wildlife protection. Though Vidya is heartbroken over her failure to protect T12 and save her from those who were hunting her, and even as she criticises the systemic issues that led to this outcome, the movie ends on a note of hope for the future as Vidya discovers that T12 had cubs, which are now vulnerable without their mother. She takes steps to ensure their safety by organising their relocation to a sanctuary. Her character challenges traditional notions of

heroism because, while she cannot save T12, she instead embodies integrity and persistence, continuing her work and ultimately saving the cubs. In doing so, *Sherni* presents a feminist perspective on environmental leadership, one that prioritises systematic change rather than personal interests or gaining power.



The cubs when they were found alive [2:01:04].

The film concludes with Vidya continuing her work and efforts to protect the environment, embodying resilience and dedication to the conservation of the ecosystem. Ultimately, *Sherni* is not just a film but a political and environmental statement. It criticises the failures of conservation systems, the misuses of political power, and the difficulties that women face in professional settings, whilst maintaining a vision of hope for reform. Vidya's journey throughout the film is one of moral clarity in the face of institutional pressure to give up. And her final act of saving the cubs reaffirms faith in individual agency and the importance of carrying on even after adversities occur. Her character shows that while systematic change is difficult, it is not impossible, and it is crucial to continue fighting for it to happen. While the film does not end with a perfect outcome, it does end with hope for the future of the preservation of wildlife and women's role in leadership positions.

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