



Rapid Extension of Human Territory Contributes to Eco-Crisis: A Comparative Study of Amar Kaushik's *Bhediya* (2022) and Ruskin Bond's "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright" (1993)

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Abstract

In this post-human era, people hardly act like sincere and conscious citizens and do not ensure sustainable development in praxis. This kind of contradiction between knowledge in theory and knowledge in praxis is being highlighted through the massive destruction of our environment. However, there are numerous aspects to focus on, but the way human beings are destroying nature and the animal world is horrendous. In this regard, I would like to explore the Bollywood film *Bhediya* (2022) and Ruskin Bond's short story "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright" (1993), which portray the strife between the wild and the civilised. Apparently, the word 'civilised' may be attributed to the human beings who live a normative life, but the film exposes the wild and brutal aspects of humans towards nature. It also shows how nature serves as a self-protector, protecting itself from man-made destruction in the name of development and progress. In a nutshell, the film revolves around the duality of the protagonist regarding the destruction and preservation of nature once he is bitten by a werewolf, aka *bhediya*. Bond has also highlighted the symbiosis of the lone tiger in the jungle and the people of the nearby villages. It is also clearly mentioned in the text that the tiger would not have visited the locality if the forest was in its full-fledged form. Therefore, both the film and the text point out that it is we, the human beings, who have penetrated into the territory of the wildlife, not the wild animals. Throughout the discussion, I would like to emphasise on the role of nature in self-defence and preservation. This film and the text are also apt references for showing how the development of human beings and environmental destruction go hand in hand, rather than focusing on sustainability.

Keywords: Environment, Destruction of the wild, Sustainable development, Self-defence, Eco-crisis.

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that each and every year, human territory is recklessly endangering the

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forest and wildlife in a very rapid manner. The solutions and remedies to keep the greenery safe and intact are innumerable; merely the lack of judicious utilisation of the same is turning the earth into a furnace. Throughout the year, many conferences, summits, and discussions are held to address the eco-crisis; the famous Cop26 speech by the foreign minister of Tuvalu, standing knee-deep in the sea, clearly showcases the alarming situation of global warming, climate change, and worldwide suffering. This global phenomenon of climate change has been discussed again and again, and 'zero emission' policies have also been adopted by many countries. However, the situation worsens a step further in the case of third-world countries, where, on the one hand, they are struggling with a growing economic crisis and, on the other hand, they must reduce pollution and protect their green surroundings. The recently introduced the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act, 2023, enacted by the Government of India, is also a matter of concern for ecologists, as it allows the removal of forests situated within a distance of 100 kilometres along the international borders, namely, to strengthen national security. (MoL&J-India, 2023) As a matter of fact, no Government can compromise with border security, and the conservation of forests and wildlife is also equally important. Thus, the question arises of which one to prioritise, and the situation becomes more challenging when the conservation of forests is integrally linked to the livelihoods of tribal people. Although a bit debatable in reality, the climate fast movement of Ladakh's Sonam Wangchuk hints at the conservation of ecology in the greater interest of the local indigenous people. Most importantly, the SDGs or Sustainable Development Goals have been introduced that can solve the eco-crisis to some extent when horizontal as well as vertical extension of human development directly encounters with the conservation of flora and fauna. To carry forward this discussion, this article would like to refer to Amar Kaushik's film *Bhediya* (2022) and Ruskin Bond's short story "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright" (1993) and try to explore the following questions: What makes the wild animals come to human territory? Do wild animals enter human territory, or is it human beings who expand their territory by merging with the forest? Can the judicious use of SDGs protect wildlife? Can the relationship of tribal people with the environment, if followed by all, be a game changing in the worldwide conservation of forests? However, this discussion will remain limited to the Indian geopolitical scenario, as the selected texts portray the eco-crisis in northern and north-eastern India.

Popular culture plays a prominent role in questioning and raising awareness about any issues. Popular Culture can be defined as "any Cultural product that has a mass audience" (Zeisler, 2008, p. 1). Popular Culture and its artefacts, such as cinema, television shows, fiction, and even social media, aimed at large audiences and portray the sentiment of the masses. It can be utilised for the dissemination of awakening programmes among masses all across the world and "popular culture documents provide unique insights into the concerns, anxieties and desires" (Jones et al., 2011, p. 3) In a similar tone, Amar Kaushik's *Bhediya* portrays the role of nature in the form of a shape-shifting werewolf as its own protector and challenges the role of human beings who merely tend to destroy it in the name of development. Although the film belongs to the magic realism genre and is also a horror-comedy, it presents a werewolf that bites a man who comes to Ziro, Arunachal Pradesh, with a project to build a road through the dense jungle by removing a large part of it. Interestingly, the project manager, Mr Bhaskar Sharma, after being bitten by the shape-shifting werewolf, who is actually a woman named Dr Anika, the protector of the jungle, occasionally turns into a werewolf and kills many people associated with the project. According to Ecofeminist thinking, women have a close relationship with nature. As Arpita Mukhopadhyaya argues in her book *Feminisms*, "This is due to the female reproductive role and mothering nature, which brings them closer to the rhythm of nature" (2016, p. 134). Ecofeminism also asserts that there is a direct link between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; feminism and sexism are inseparable. It links the exploitation of nature with the oppression of marginalised groups, particularly women. In *Bhediya*, the female forest spirit embodies this intersection. She is both protector

and avenger, symbolising the feminised figure of nature that resists patriarchal exploitation. The film's narrative suggests that ecological destruction is inseparable from social injustice, reinforcing ecofeminist claims that environmental ethics must be tied to gender and community justice. This can finely echoes through Vandana Shiva's words,

The recovery of the feminine principle allows a transcendence and transformation of these patriarchal foundations of maldevelopment. It allows a redefinition of growth and productivity as categories linked to the production, not the destruction, of life. It is thus simultaneously an ecological and a feminist political project which legitimises the way of knowing and being that creates wealth by enhancing life and diversity, and which delegitimises the knowledge and practise of a culture of death as the basis for capital accumulation. (1988, p. 12)

However, the film suggests that the proposed road can be laid out on the outskirts of the jungle, thereby saving thousands of trees and wildlife. Moreover, the lives of local tribal people who are solely dependent on the jungle might be affected by this project. At the end, one of the oldest men in that village, named Ojha, bows down his head before the Yapum or shape-shifting werewolves and that stops the ferocious werewolves from attacking some of the forest officials. Unfortunately, the officers of various departments in Ziro, instead of thinking about the vast ecology, simply extend their assistance for the project only for their personal monetary profit. The project could have been planned around the jungle without harming nature. But in order to save the cost and make it more profitable, the project manager, on behalf of the contracted company, approaches the local youth and local officials with bribes. But many of them had to pay with their lives for their misdeeds, and they got killed by the werewolves. However, no such killing had taken place earlier in that village before the beginning of this project. Thus, the film clearly points out that the coexistence of human beings and nature will ensure the survival of both of them. On the contrary, human beings hardly think about the conservation of the environment, and they only prioritise the immediate benefit above all. If human beings fail to conserve nature, then nature will activate its self-defence mechanism.

Along with the issue of making the environment as other in the sense of human and other, the binaries of self and other, and of local and outsider, are also evident in the portrayal of the characters. Zomin, a native of the village, makes fun of Mr Panda, who is brought up in Ziro but does not belong to the local tribe, and often considers Mr Panda an outsider. However, Mr Panda criticises Zomin, as he has been assisting the project manager, Bhaskar, in convincing the local people to remove the jungle and build a road through it rather than around the boundary of the jungle. According to Mr Panda, the one who takes care of the home and its surroundings, as he has been doing, cannot be termed an outsider; rather, Zomin, despite being a native to Ziro, should be considered an outsider due to his inability to feel the eco-crisis. Such insightful words prompt the audience to reconsider the binary between local and foreign. On the other hand, Zomin also complains and feels upset as he has always been treated by Janardan, cousin cum close friend of Bhaskar, differently, and he also calls him 'Chinese'. Therefore, Zomin says that this is how all the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh are termed, and they hardly get equal recognition in the mainstream socio-political scenario of the country. Alongside the boundary line between the human world and the environment, the otherisation of the north-eastern tribal people also raises emerging issues in this film. These racialised categories portray the ethnic groups of the Northeast as inherently anti-modern, tribal, and rebellious. Thus, it is positioning them in opposition to the modern, capitalist state and the supposedly civilised citizens of the Indian mainland. These limited portrayals erase the multiplicity of North-eastern identities and histories, reinscribing hierarchical distinctions between the "self" and the "other." These portrayals, while partially reflective of reality, often reduce the region to a monolithic entity, ignoring its diversity and complexity. Such imagery reveals a deep-seated epistemic violence, wherein the subaltern is not merely silenced but rendered incomprehensible within dominant cultural narratives (Spivak, 1988). To expand, the definition of "Self" and "Other" was fabricated through a pseudoscientific racial stratification,

developed by European powers to justify their domination, colonisation and imperial authority. The film thus stages a dramatic encounter between the "centre" and the "margin," between the figure of metropolitan authority and one of insurgent resistance, encapsulating the spatial and psychological fissures that continue to shape postcolonial India. (Devadoss & Cromley, 2018)

Similarly, Ruskin Bond's story "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright" (1993) portrays the plight of a tiger that used to be the king of the jungle of Hardwar, which falls on the left bank of the Ganga in the foothills of the Himalaya. The opening line of the text provides us with an alarming note:

Hunters, however, have found the area an ideal hunting-ground during the last seventy years, and as a result, the animals are not as numerous as they used to be. The trees, too, have been disappearing slowly; and as the forest recedes, the animals lose their food and shelter and move on further into the foothills. Slowly, they are being denied the right to live. (Bond, 1993, p. 136).

Sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, the destruction of the jungle for human needs is a true denial of animals' right to live. The situation becomes worse when hunters, only for the sake of trophies, kill wild animals. Time and again, we, the human beings, have cleared the jungles in the foothills of the Himalayas and in the dense jungles of the North-East, which used to be home to numerous animals, to build refugee resettlement camps, industries, highways, and more. There would have been no disturbances if all these projects had been executed in accordance with sustainable development norms. Bond's story, as well as Kaushik's *Bhediya*, confirms that the SDGs are neglected to a large extent in praxis; sustainable development remains within the pages of orders and conference halls. In most cases we tend to compromise the ecological balance for short-term gain or profit and deliberately neglect the consequences that may occur in the long run. Bond depicts how the tiger, which had never wanted to kill and eat buffaloes of the Gujjar tribe in the jungle of Hardwar, could not maintain cordial relations and attacked buffaloes one after another. The close reading of the text helps us to understand that the tiger did so only for the sake of his survival, as there was a wildfire in the recent past caused by the negligence of a man. Due to that fire, almost all the animals that could be the prey of the tiger fled away to another jungle. Similarly, the Bollywood film *Sherni* (2021) directed by Amit V. Masurkar showcases how a tigress along with its cubs could not go to a nearby National Park; rather, it kept hunting cattle and, unfortunately, killed human beings too. The film suggests that no animal tries to visit the locality or comes into close proximity to human territory unless there is a dire need for food. If there were a dense forest like that of a National Park where the tigress could easily manage food and survive along with its cubs, it would not come to the locality. Most importantly, in the film, it can be seen that there lies a large copper mine between the jungle and the National Park. This large mining area does not seem to be a safe passage for the tigress, and it remains stuck near the human territory, and finally, it is killed. By portraying the authority's incompetence and insensitiveness towards nature and its balance, Kaushik rightly criticises the notion of eco-cinecriticism. Eco cinecriticism gets hold of a range of queries, such as:

Do films convey a true picture of nature or do they spectacularise the natural world through the use of framing devices in order to cater to the market driven demands? Examples range from the depiction of charismatic megafauna in decontextualised, grand visual settings to a 'natural' world characterised by exaggerated thrill, speed and dynamism. (Rangarajan, 2018 p. 164)

Kaushik's presentation not only flouts market-driven demands but also projects the crisis and conflict with great precision and vividness. Thus, it subtly points out the role of human beings who have used the natural environment solely for their own benefit and have very often ignored the existence and survival of other animals and plants. In Bond's story, it

can be seen that two little boys, Ramu and Shyam, who seem to be very much concerned about the existence and survival of animals, and the readers get the narrative from a quite distinct perspective of these children. While talking about the scarcity of rain, they not only think about the problems that men and women of their village might experience, but also express their concern over the prospective problems that animals will face if the lake gets dried up –

And what about the animals?" Some will stay here and die. Others will go to the river. But there are too many people near the river now – and temples, houses and factories – and the animals stay away. And the trees have been cut, so that between the jungle and the river there is no place to hide. Animals are afraid of the open – they are afraid of the men with guns. (Bond, 1993, p. 139).

It remarkably brings forth that human beings must think the way these two children look at the plight of the animals, with the changing scenario of the forest landscape. The way human beings have been changing the geographical map of a place, it clearly indicates that animals are sometimes endangered due to man-made problems. Interestingly, Bond's story makes the readers sympathetic to the tiger and ends with a positive note that the tiger, despite being hit by a bullet, successfully escaped. It finally arrived at another jungle with the flow of the river and detected the presence of other tigers in that new land. We become hopeful for a renewed life for the tiger. While Shyam said, "The king of our forest is dead... There are no more tigers", Ramu raised an objection to this remark and claimed, "There must be tigers... How can there be an India without tigers?" (Bond, 1993, p. 154). These compel all readers to think deeply and also make us hopeful. Martha Nussbaum's *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility* argues that "Each animal is a teleological system directed toward a set of good ends centering around survival, reproduction, and, in most cases, social interaction" (2022, p. 102). It is certainly striking how Nussbaum seeks to force the argument. She claims, "natural ecosystems do sustain themselves stably, it is only on account of various forms of human intervention" (Nussbaum, 2022, p. 217). She maintains, for instance, that "There would be no rhinos or elephants left in the world if humans did not intervene" (Nussbaum, 2022, p. 218); by this, she ostensibly means that they would go extinct without humans willing to patrol protected areas. This rather deflects attention from the fact that the chief threats to both species are the wildlife trade, habitat loss, and climate change, all of which are caused by humans. Jeff Sebo, in his book *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves: Why Animals Matter For Pandemics, Climate Change, and Other Catastrophes*, claims not only that many acts of animal confinement are impermissible, but that they are likely harming us as well as their animal victims. He also suggests that our treatment of animals has now brought humanity to the brink of a moral superstorm. People currently kill over 100 billion animals per year through factory farming, and anywhere between 1 and 3 trillion animals annually through industrial fishing (Sebo, 2022, p. 42). But these practices are now exposing us to serious, and possibly existential, risks. One fact that Nussbaum's account rather neglects is that as we have extended the human footprint into previously wild habitats, we have facilitated the spread of zoonotic diseases, to devastating effect. Both deforestation and the wildlife trade have, in that sense, had hugely negative implications for human health. So too does factory farming. These practices, then, are bad for both animals and humans.

To conclude, it can be said that the number of human-wildlife conflicts in India is escalating, so we must understand the gravity of the problem. In the article "Waking to the call of the wild", B. Aravind Kumar has clearly pointed out, "Shrinking animal habitats caused by mining, quarrying and developmental activities along the fringes, encroachments and breaks in corridors along which the animals move, all contribute and heighten the problems" (The Hindu, 2024). To mitigate such problems, we should often prioritise the SDGs. It can also solve the eco-crisis to a large extent, as with the growing population, we cannot even imagine the jungles remaining untouched or unharmed by human activity. In this regard, we should have a good number of well-trained forest service officers who can always serve as a bridge between man and animal. Thus, the werewolf figure becomes a metaphor for ecological retaliation, where

nature resists exploitation through mythic embodiment. The road project, framed as progress, is revealed as destructive, echoing Naess's critique of modernity's utilitarian view of the environment.

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Bio-note

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