

Critique

J.A.H. Khatri

**Misplaced Priorities and Ecological Imbalance:
A Reading of *Sherni***



Sherni (2021) by Amit V. Masurkar

When a tigress kills a human, it is not prey just for her. The deceased human can become prey to many other 'socio-political' animals. We usually fail to understand that a wild animal encroaching on human boundaries and preying on a human is not a real issue. The real issue, which is also an outcome of many interrelated issues, is to know why an animal needs to cross its boundary in the jungle. It is equally riskier for the animal. The 2021 movie *Sherni* by Amit Masurkar raises some of the most pertinent questions about our wildlife and ecological issues. The political

nature of the problems, an emotional rather than logical approach to dealing with them, political interventions in normal decision-making, utter neglect of human concern and empathy, and not considering animal(s) worth a thought are some of the glaring problems identified by the screenwriter and director and presented efficiently.

The movie talks about a newly recruited female forest officer, Vidhya Vincent, and the task of capturing a man-hunting tigress identified as T12. However, this simple task becomes a big issue for the

forest officer and the forest department, as they are constantly under pressure from politicians, senior officers, and villagers. The villagers are constantly incited against the department's attempts to capture the tigress by the leaders of both ruling and opposition parties. Vidhya is trying to understand the problem of tigress holistically so that such issues can also be avoided in the future. While cooperating with the political power, senior officers are planning to kill T12 with the help of a hunter who wants to add one more number to his list of hunting down tigers. Ultimately, the tigress was hunted down, and the forest officer was transferred to a department where her empathetic approach to decision-making would not affect the political ecology and hegemony.



The forest officer, originally from the southern part of the country, is assigned duty in the northern part of the country. This appointment questions the idea of territory, uprooting and placing a person from her native to an entirely new province. Of course, it isn't easy to adapt to the new place and people. For example, all the officers, seniors and juniors are from northern India and belong to the Hindu faith, while she is a Christian from the southern part of the country. Being a married young female, she has challenges handling her home from a distance. She also must think about the

expectations of her husband, mother-in-law, and mother. In one sequence, both the mothers come to the village with Vidhya's husband, Pawan, as a surprise for her. They were invited to Prof. Noorani's house for dinner. Here, Vidhya was expected to wear all the jewellery her mother gave her, and Pawan preferred to wear a t-shirt and shorts. Thus, an expectation from a woman is different from one from a man. During that dinner, she got a call about an emergency in the forest, and she had to leave; Prof. Noorani also accompanied her as he was involved in the T12 case. Here, Pawan and the mothers insist that Pawan go with her, despite knowing that Vidhya is doing her duty and that going into the forest at midnight is not new to her. But because she is a woman, this is something normal in society.

Prof. Hassan Noorani is another crucial character in the film. He teaches zoology at a nearby college and voluntarily helps forest officers in their operations. Like Vidhya, he is an odd man out. He is a Muslim, and like Vidhya, he also thinks in terms of long-term holistic solutions to problems. He tries his best to create awareness among the villagers through street plays and training forest friends. However, the ruling party MLA often hijacked his street plays for his election campaigns.

These two characters from the minority groups are in direct conflict with the people in power and the majoritarian mob, who are not ready to look at issues from a logical perspective. Both local leaders have "Singh" (lion) in their names, and they are the ones who play politics on the issue of tigress. Both have only one agenda: inciting people against the other party over this issue. A feasible and

logical solution might mean losing an important issue for them. Both leaders always appear with a mob of supporters and try to thwart the investigation process undertaken by the forest department. The decision to hunt down Tigress T12 was also politically motivated and announced by the ruling party leader to the forest officers as if the officers did not know what they were supposed to do. The leader also brings the hunter of his acquaintance.

The problem begins when some villagers take their animals into the jungle for grazing, and the tigress hunts one of the buffaloes. The Forest Department immediately comes into action and tries to identify the tiger who did it, and in the cameras set up there, they found that it is a tigress, T12. Soon, T12 attacks one villager in the jungle, and he dies. Here, the tigress is not crossing the boundary of the jungle and encroaching on the village. Instead, the villagers are trying to encroach on the jungle. Vidhya, her team, and Prof. Noorani attempt to communicate with the villagers and advise them not to wander into the jungle area. However, the villagers do not have any other territory where they can take their animals for grazing. They had good, fertile land, but that was converted into a plantation field by the previous forest officer, and the villagers were not allowed to enter it. Thus, villagers have no choice but to depend on the jungle.

Another such human intervention in forest life is a copper mine. The tigress T12 is heading towards the national park from this small jungle, where she would have enough food and water. But then, there is this copper mine in her way, and on the other side, there is a highway and factories on the opposite

side. Thus, all the paths for T12 to move ahead are obstructed by human intervention. All these developmental works are done without considering the impact on other ecological beings within the same environment. While undoubtedly crucial for humans, these developmental works are anthropocentric and directly harmful to other living beings in the environment. The developmental works are so necessary in the human ecosystem that humans are not considered “advanced and modern” without them.



There is a constant conflict between logical reasoning in solving a problem and incitement and an emotional outlook on the issue. A couple of people in the forest department make logical and holistic decisions, incorporating the villagers in the decision-making process. While there are politicians who favour emotional incitement so that they can leverage the votes of the villagers, the tigress, the villagers, and their problems—both ecological and economic problems are just a matter of electoral issue. Then, a third group of people, primarily senior forest officers, are not taking their rightful stand on the issues. They simply observe the orders of the political power, keeping themselves safe. Despite their knowledge of the root of the problem, they

prefer to act otherwise just to stay in the good books of influential people.

The logical reasoning and solutions are further thwarted in the process of considering the “feelings” of the local people as expressed by their political leaders. The person who died in the jungle was killed by a bear, but nobody wanted to believe the evidence. Even the minister said that if six out of ten people believed that a tigress killed the man, then the man was killed by a tigress, and he did not even care about the evidence. This kind of decision to please people affects the ecological balance and animosity among the wildlife and people living nearby. Another incident is when Pappu Bhaiya, the hunter assigned to kill the tigress, 'wrongly' identifies T12 poop, and he remains adamant despite the correction from the forest officer that it was a leopard's droppings. The forest officers are trained in identifying all these aspects of wildlife, but merely out of ego, Pappu Bhaiya does not agree. One more such instance is when Pappu Bhaiya proposes to kill not only the T12 but also her two cubs. He argues that since the mother hunts humans, the cubs will also grow into man-eaters. Such an argument has no scientific basis, and Prof. Noorani and Vidhya had to fight against this proposal to save the cubs. On another occasion, Pappu shoots at a tiger, but fortunately, a forest officer saves it. Pappu argues that it was T12, the tigress, while the forest officer identifies it as Pasha, a male tiger. Here, Pappu is a symbolic representation of upper-class toxic masculinity who enjoys political impunity and who is simply interested in the increase in the numbers of his hunts and ready to go to any extent and do illegal things as well.

The people living nearby and dependent on the jungle are primarily from tribal communities. Like the wildlife, they also belong to the periphery of society; their betterment is not a priority for the authorities. They are also seen as workers for the industries that developed around them. Most of them are not educated and are educated only up to school level. They do not see the wildlife as their enemy; instead, there is a nice balance between the village and the wildlife. But as soon as human “development” enters, the balance no longer sustains itself.



Even the media enters the picture not to raise the issue and create a discussion for a better wildlife solution but to make it a political issue and get maximum TRP from it. The entire debate is framed there as "*Insaan ya sherni*" (human or tigress), as if there were no other possibilities of looking at the problem. In anthropocentric discourse, the answer is clear: the human, and hence the tigress, must die. So, the very perspectivization of media programs was presented as anti-tigress. The television media brings the politicians to discuss the issues, but they will simply prefer to talk from the side of humans, as that is their vote bank. It is clearly understood that there is no representative of tigress, as those wild animals can't speak for themselves and are not invited to the studios of the news channels. In an ideal society, the

Forest Department should be representing the side of wildlife, while here, the department authorities are taking the neutral stand, silently allowing the political chaos. The director brings up all the issues that our society typically faces as a branch of the main issue; most of them are directly raised by poor political management and intensified by media coverage. In both cases, the solution to the problem has never been a priority.

The title of the film "*Sherni*" is a misnomer, as the entire story revolves around a tigress, T12, and in Hindi, it should be called "*Baghini*". However, the problem associated with T12 and its socio-political implications is very well represented in the movie. Both the positive characters attempting a solution

are coming from minority groups. The victims of the tigress are the tribal, and hence, the solution to the problem is seen from a completely different perspective where political mileage is the priority. The title here is a metaphor for the lead character, Vidhya. Like Tigress, she is a female, coming from a minority background, and struggling to survive in an unknown territory. The titular misnomer *Sherni* is also indicative of how we misrepresent and mistreat the issues and do not try to think about holistic, long-term solutions to the problem. Through the cinematic narrative, we can see that a very different form of toxicity and feudalism is active under the garb of electoral democracy.

Dr J.A.H. Khatri teaches in the Bachelor of Journalism and Mass Communication Program at Navracahna University. He specialises in Media semiotics, Film Studies, and Linguistic Anthropology.