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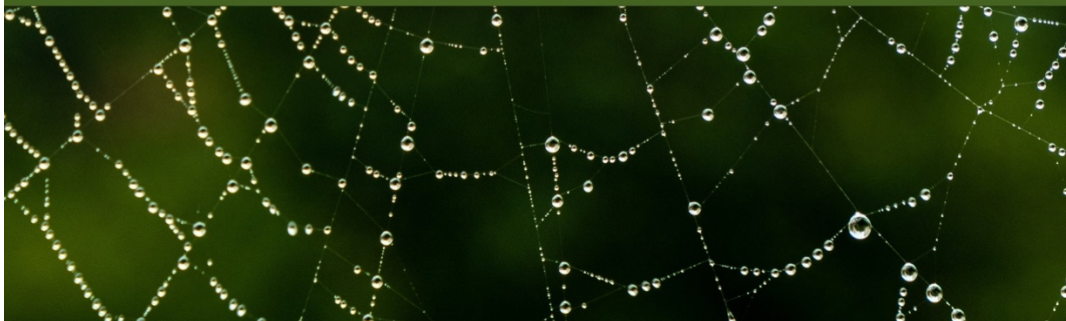
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Narrativizing Ecoterrorism in the Indian Film *Irada*

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Abstract

Concentrating upon the concept of Ecophobia propagated by Simon C. Estok and David Sobel, this paper intends to explore the Indian movie *Irada* (2017, dir. Aparnaa Singh) which narrativizes the substantial environmental impacts of chemical toxicity including water pollution and subsequent disruption of aquatic ecosystem caused by the Green Revolution in Punjab. Usually, Ecophobia is a fear of ecological problems in the natural world originating either by climate change or by human-made environmental hazards which tolled about trillion lives in the last two decades. Situating the dangerous nexus of waste, water, and corporatization, the movie captures the increasing reality of the notion of terror in the lives of the inhabitants in a fully industrialized locale. Also, the movie investigates the responsibility of media to instill indignation that evokes action for betterment of nature.

Keywords: Ecophobia, Ecoterrorism, waste, ecofilm, *Irada*

Introduction

The meteoric growth of ecological crisis felt throughout the globe directs the human being toward a “culture of terror” (Taussig). The ubiquitous existence of ecophobia in modern industrial society is apparently unrecognizable which eventually pushes the mass to ecoterrorism¹. While ecophobia is a subtle, complex, omnipresent and marketable thing, ecoterrorism which follows the theoretical outline of ecophobia, defines a transitional phase that charts the conditional shifting from naturalism to an anthropogenic milieu. Ecoterrorism, like the Estokian concept of ecophobia, maps the nonhuman agencies (like corruption, political nexus and man-made disasters) which operate the socio-economic environmentalism in a larger scale.

The select movie *Irada* (2017, dir. Aparnaa Singh) narrativizes the substantial environmental impacts of chemical toxicity, including water pollution and subsequent disruption of aquatic ecosystems, caused by the Green Revolution in Punjab. Situating itself into the nexus of waste, water, and corporatization, the movie captures the increasing reality of the notion of a presence of terror in the lives of people in industrialized nations. The movie thus, depicts how the anthropogenic society trivializes nature and turns it into a mere dumpsite.

The Estokian Ecophobia: Defining Ecoterrorism

In his 1988 article entitled as “The Politics of Ecophobia” the American journalist George F. Will defines the term ecophobia simply as “the fear that the planet is increasingly inhospitable” (quoted in Estok 10). For David Sobel, “ecophobia is more a fear of the environmental effects of human actions (quoted in Estok 10). Ecophobia, an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural

world, signifies how human beings continuously exploit nature for their material benefit without realizing that such nonchalant greed will destroy them too. So, ecophobia has two dimensions: it is *both* the hatred for nature *and* an alarm for humans. The functional pattern of ecophobia is like a wake-up call for humans.

Ecophobia is not a holistic claustrophobic fear; rather it draws a thin line between fear and hope. Actually, it denotes the symptomatic thin line between fear and an alarming situation where the nonhuman matrix of environments shows signals to be careful about nature. Like feminism, it is a consciousness-raising process towards nature. Ecophobia as a discourse is beneficial for human development but should be critical about the diverse ecophobia in a highly industrialized society. The multilayered term ecophobia has been used pervasively in different contexts and purposes. Being a uniquely human psychological condition, ecophobia has largely derived from modernity's irrational fear of nature and hence has created an antagonism between humans and their environment. Writers, social scientists and especially industries often perpetuate ecophobia through their unwitting representations of it, much as they have done with sexism, classism, racism and homophobia. In brief, ecophobia denotes environmental oppression.

Ecoterrorism has been used as a strategy to stop companies, organizations and governments from damaging or altering the fundamentals of environment. As the functional pattern of ecoterrorism follows the theoretical blueprints of the Estokian ecophobia, it is logical to theorize ecoterrorism *via* ecophobia. Estok's ecophobia clearly talks about the economical nexus between political and administrative sections that purposefully slow down the environmental crisis so that it exists for a longer period of time. Ecophobia can be involved in the transference of aggressions against the environment to the people who protect it. Simplistically, Estok tries to define ecophobia in tandem/compare with tragedy and terrorism.

The multiple attacks of terrorism throughout the world in the last two decades snatch millions of lives that instill a fear in people, just like natural disasters and the upsurge global warming. Ecocritic Patrick Murphy argues that "environmentally aware storylines do have the potential to contribute to the increasing public awareness of real environmental issues" (Murphy 35). Movies usually look for social justice and political progress in terms of natural amelioration, but ignore the need for the development of sustainable agricultural practices and ecological farming infrastructure. In most cases, the 'personal tragedy or a particular meteorological catastrophe that affects a particular community' (Murphy 35) needs to realize the fathom of impediment. The select movie *Irada* visualizes how the environmental exploitations bring the personal tragedy and en route the vengeance into motivation to make a generational change for a community.

An Ecophobic Analysis of the Fictional Film *Irada*

Set in the locale of Bhatinda¹, Punjab, the movie *Irada* critiques the problem of ground/drinking water that has been contaminated by waste. After the triumph of Green Revolution (1965) in Punjab, Bhatinda witnesses the politico-economic transition with the shift from the agricultural to an industrial society. Sarcastically, the movie introduces its lead characters, decorated Army officer *cum* motivational speaker and writer Parabeet Walia (Nasseruddin Shah), Chief Minister (henceforth CM) Ramandeep Braitch (Divya Dutta), journalist Maya (Sagarika

Ghate), business tycoon Paddy Sharma (Sharad Kelkar) and NIA³ officer Arjun Mishra (Arshad Warsi) in an award ceremony where the anthropogenic agent Paddy Sharma is felicitated with the Green Global Award for “his decade long commitment to sustainable business practices” (Singh 2017).

“...some areas of Punjab are so vulnerable that at least one cancer patient can be traced in each home...”

In the opening scene, the morning view of the locale has been projected as a blur to indicate the pollution. The obscure chimneys visible through smog simultaneously represent the industrial progress as well as ecological disruption. Right from the beginning, the assassination of Maya’s fiancé, RTI activist Aniruddh and the premature death of Riya (Rumana Molla), the daughter of Parabeet Walia, interweave with major issues of water pollution, chemical hazard and a broken health system that form the kernel of cinema narrative. All these major issues are intertwined with systematic corruption that creates nonchalance to nature. Both Maya and Walia hatch the vengeance against their personal losses, but they want to eradicate the systematic corruption and injustice from the very primary levels. Paddy’s illegal reverse boring in PPFPL (the name of a Paddy company mentioned in the film) and blood donation camps through Life Foundation Lab appears to be at the epicenters of those scams. But a sudden blast at PPFPL exposes all his hidden businesses that eventually marked him as ‘chemical mafia.’ Though CM Ramandeep is aware of the illegal dealings of Paddy, but in terms of party funding Paddy owns the state. She deploys Mishra to investigate the blast of PPFPL and to fabricate this news as terrorist activities to compensate the insurance money for Paddy. Riya Walia, who aspires to be a pilot, has been rejected in the UPSC⁴ examination due to physical unfitness. Unknowingly, she develops terminal cancer from the canal water she has been gulping regularly during swimming and now is waiting for her doomsday. Here, Riya’s state of mind can be compared with ecophobic anxiety as hydrological malfunction causing her immature demise and also signals the human indifference to nature. Subsequently, Aniruddh managed to capture the original blood samples and reports from the pathological laboratory run by Paddy. This path-lab deploys hired technicians to suppress the presence of Uranium that purposefully conceals the cause of cancer which spreads like an epidemic in the locale of Bhatinda. While Aniruddh decided to expose the genuine blood reports that may unmask Paddy, pushes him into a cold-blooded murder. If the personal tragedies of Maya and Parabeet Walia instigate them to protest against ecoterrorism, then CM Ramandeep and Paddy’s trepidations provoke them to do more atrocities to nature/state. By provoking fear, hatred and disgust, *Irada* as an artwork displays some scenes that evoke the sense of ecophobia.

Discovering the grim reality in their respective investigations, Parabeet and Maya realize that the deaths of Riya and Aniruddh exemplify that “both blood and water are owned by Paddy” (Singh 2017). The poisonous groundwater in Punjab consists of Uranium, Selenium, Chromium, and Cadmium infused in the blood of people causes cancer. The groundwater used both for irrigation and drinking purposes has been the viable source of Uranium. Maya’s rigorous research and collections of classified documents about the illegal dumping, testing of toxic soils, water and analysis of its effects upon public health reflect how an environmental journalist can translate the scientific data into a simple one for public comprehension. It attests that some areas of Punjab are so vulnerable that at least one cancer patient can be traced in each home due to this Uranium mishap and it becomes the cancer belt of India that tolls the lives of nearly seven million people

annually. Tragically, there runs a train popularized as ‘Cancer Train’ that usually carries the cancer patients from Bhatinda² to Bikaner⁵, Rajasthan, seeking treatment at the cancer hospital there. *Irada* tries to capture this fatal health crisis through the scam of blood testing agency. Probably, the most iconic as well as terrific scene in the movie is the train journey that puts Arjun Mishra transmogrified. Usually, in local or mail trains, the hawkers sell toys, biscuits and water bottles, but unfortunately, the ‘cancer train’ hawks blood pouches and insurance packages among passengers as the buyers are either cancer patients or their relatives, so they require the blood for their transitional living and insurance to protect their families after deaths. Zümre Yılmaz argues that aesthetic representation of the nonhuman that maintains cultural mastery marks the version of ecophobia (419), therefore the hawking of such nonhuman things (here blood and insurance) qualifies for the same. Gazing at such a phobic scene as a part of cinematic representation, the viewers find themselves comfortably distanced from the nonhuman world. Exhibiting the results of real suffering (the unbearable pain of patients in hospital and train displayed in the movie) or to perform the so-called excesses (here, blood, cough, premature hair loss) of the body is ecophobic, but promoting ecophobic indulgence for its viewers cannot always be treated as discouraging or negative, rather it could be positive and as well preventive. As mentioned earlier, these nonhuman matrixes of environment shows signals to be careful about nature.

In terms of cinematic representation, the movie *Irada* provides an ideal lens to envisage the triangle relationship of waste, water and ecophobia focusing upon this landscape. Dumping garbage in the form of reverse boring and channelizing chemical waste into fields and canals gradually makes the groundwater toxic. It also pushes us to understand that “various kinds of waste ... raise fundamental questions about how we understand ourselves and our place in the natural world” (Anderson, 36). Christopher Anderson further suggests that “garbage exists on the border between the natural and the artificial, and by extension between human culture and wild nature” (35). It is important to recognize the cultural valence of waste. Ecophobic unconsciousness enhances the waste which not only increases the probability of climate change but also clarifies the fact that humans are defined by what they reject. So, nature for us becomes trash. Garbage is precisely alarming as it reflects the unpredictable and potentially dangerous agency of a thing that was once controlled by human being. Waste is thus central to a growing corpus of ecophobic visions that posits the polluted natural world as an angry agent set on destroying humanity and also set the backdrop of the said film. The movie *Irada* is situated where the natural environment has been used as a dumpsite. The kind of ‘indifference’ that Estok defines in terms of ecophobia has been well compared with the nonchalant corruption the movie showcases. The environment intentionally becomes the key antagonist and human ingenuity and indifference becomes the solution.

The movie provides visual imagery of anthropogenic environmental destructive agents. It addresses the broken health system of a state that most environmental film-texts prefer to escape. Positing the film under anthropogenic influence, it gives a lesson that governmental emphasis on corporate analysis for health management in tandem with unscrupulous functionaries, rather than on sustainable adaptation to environmental changes tolls millions of young lives in cancer. Director Singh criticizes the idea that industrial pollution combined with tech-chemical-based agriculture will destroy the biosphere rapidly. The denial of anthropogenic forcing replacing with significant ecological idea opens the premise for sustainable development. The slice of the city portrayed in the film is not the result of natural process but of anthropogenic delusion that depicts a clear linkage between the greedy industrialist Paddy and his illegal dumping of the carcinogenic

industrial waste from thermal power plants. Both reverse boring and industrial contamination are considered as criminal offences but he owns the state in terms of funding the ruling party.

Steven Hartman and Patrick Degeorges argue that when state becomes the hegemonic form of human political organization, ecophobia becomes enshrined in the myth of nature's adversarial role in an incessant anarchic war against civilized humanity (Hartman and Degeorges 461). Again, the inclusion of humans in the political order of a state is achieved through the exclusion of all ecological, cultural and ethical bonds from their roots. Paddy's parallel business in reverse boring and the pharmaceuticals cause chemical contamination that is the potential reason for cancer in a certain geographical locations. Aniruddh's assassination demonstrates the influence of domestic politics and the vested interest of local industrial community that actually manipulates the environmental policies for their own belief. The end credit of the movie discloses shocking statistics which articulate the menace of environmental terrorism that retards the growth of Punjab. Terrorists only kill a few thousands of people, but this organized ecological butchery destroys the lives of generations with poison. Estok's idea of ecophobia wants to flag out this grass-root economical causes that lead towards generational destruction. Walia's exoneration by Mishra tries to establish this fact that ecological concern is not always planting tree or advertising 'save nature,' but also to destabilize the economic power that blatantly suck commoners. The collective attempt to fight against socio-ecological injustice can only be effective if the State apparatus (Mishra and Walia) and media (Maya) work together. Estok thinks that it is essential to focus on the unacknowledged ethics in our everyday consciousness that contribute to environmental problems, ecophobia ethics in human consciousness of which we are simply unaware and therefore powerless to control it (Estok 141). The Press Conference scene in the movie highlights the possibility of good intentions. CM Ramandeep's resignation and Paddy's exposure before camera not only confirm the annihilation of systematic corruption but also indicate the elimination of anthropogenic disruption. The poetic justice to Maya manifests in the form of environmental justice.

Conclusion

Raising awareness of ecophobia as a genuine social issue addresses the crisis necessary for a systemic change and preventing the catastrophe at-large. The emerging trends of ecofilms that released in India during the first decade of 21st century show their courage to visualize the threatening ecological disruption that relegates the environmentalism and human health to the periphery before the mounting pressure of politicized corporatization. Implementing the idea of ecoterrorism, Singh's cinematic venture envisages the urban development that fails to provide a holistic approach to development, which should be prevented collectively. Situating into the suture between fear and hope, *Irada* visualizes the horrified plight of nature caused by excessive human avarice but at the same time projects few good Samaritans who ultimately save the ecology, usher positivity and remind the viewers about their socio-civic responsibilities.

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Notes

¹ David N. Pellow defines the concept of ecoterrorism put forward by Ron Arnold as a term that “invites and courts confusion, misinterpretation, and misuse.” (<https://keywords.nyupress.org/environmental-studies>)

² Bhatinda: it is a city situated in the South-western part of Punjab, India.

³ NIA: National Investigation Agency. It is India’s counter-terrorist task force.

⁴ UPSC: Union Public Service Commission. It is the central recruiting agency for conducting examinations and appointments of All India Services.

⁵ Bikaner is a city situated in the northwest part of Rajasthan, India
