



ARTICLE



<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02405-3>

OPEN

Postcolonial ecocritical reading of Satyajit Ray's *Sikkim* and Goutam Ghose's *Padma Nadir Majhi*

Sujata Dutta Dey¹ & Rajni Singh²✉

This article aims to offer an interpretive analysis of two seminal cinematic works: Satyajit Ray's *Sikkim* (1971) and Goutam Ghose's *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1993). It posits these films as modes of inquiry, elucidating the ecological issues that have spurred a transformative reconsideration of humanity's relationship with the nonhuman world. Moreover, this study underscores the intricate comprehension of the interdependence between human and natural realms, portraying it as a foundational facet of postcolonial discourse. Postcolonialism has long recognized the inseparable linkage between the ideological constructs of nature and the exploitation of marginalized populations and their respective environments. The psychological ramifications of colonial rule have wrought an indelible impact upon the ecological landscape and the hallowed rapport shared between indigenous communities and their natural surroundings. The indigenous populace's allure towards Western cultural paradigms, preconceptions, and institutions has often induced a forfeiture of their own cultural heritage in favor of the ex-colonizers' ideologies. Both of these venerable cinematographers, through their cinematic oeuvre, have meticulously documented the enduring significance of nature within the tapestry of Indian culture, especially in the context of contemporary, globalized milieu.

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (ISM), Dhanbad 826004, India. ² Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (ISM), Dhanbad 826004, India. ✉email: rajnisingh18@iitism.ac.in

Nature has always played a vital role in the realm of film and film studies, influencing both positively and negatively the industry. There have been numerous films where humans were portrayed as heroes, while nature was depicted as a fragile and endangered entity in need of human intervention and protection. Regrettably, this portrayal grossly misrepresents the urgent threats of global warming and the rapid depletion of natural resources. While human actions have indeed contributed to the loss of countless non-human species, the survival of our own species hangs in uncertainty, whereas nature as a whole will persist. This distorted perception of human control over nature contradicts factual evidence and fosters a false sense of complacency. Many movies have glorified hunting, presenting the killing of animals as an accomplishment. Sadly, such portrayals harm nature and negatively influence audiences, as they may wrongly perceive harm to nature as something to be celebrated. Nonetheless, there have been films that have done justice to nature and ecological concerns. These films have been conscious in their portrayal of nature on the screen, and they have revealed profound implicit and explicit beliefs about natural systems and the relationship between humans and nature. In the realm of film studies, previous research on the portrayal of nature and environmental issues has primarily focused on specific films, yet it is essential to broaden the scope by examining a diverse range of films that reflect different cinematic traditions and production styles.

This essay presents a comprehensive exploration of the cinematic depiction of nature and environmental issues in post-colonial settings through a synergistic analysis of two films: Satyajit Ray's documentary *Sikkim* (1971)¹ and Goutam Ghose's film *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1993)². While *Sikkim* takes a documentary approach, providing a factual and observational lens to examine the ecological challenges of the region, *Padma Nadir Majhi* employs a fictional narrative that emotionally resonates with viewers, shedding light on the environmental struggles faced by marginalized fishing communities and prompting contemplation of the broader implications of human actions on the natural world. By interweaving these two films, this study enables a multidimensional analysis that delves deeper into the subject matter from informative and storytelling perspectives. Consequently, it stimulates profound introspection and offers innovative approaches to address the intricate relationship between humans and nature. Moreover, this exploration aligns with the concept of ecocinema, which encompasses films explicitly concerned with environmental justice, spanning across various genres and aiming to educate audiences about ecological issues while promoting an ecocentric worldview.

Notably, ecocinema recognizes and values the voices and experiences of marginalized and "Othered" communities whose ecologically sustainable lifestyles and cultural practices have been threatened by the relentless march of modern technology. It underscores the significance of their perspectives in shaping the ongoing discourse on the fate of our shared planet. Through its diverse array of films and genres, ecocinema provides a platform to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, including those affected by colonial and neo-colonial practices. It contributes to the postcolonial discourse by illuminating the complex interplay between humans and nature, raising awareness about the interconnections between environmental degradation, social injustice, and the enduring legacies of colonialism. The integration of ecocinema and postcolonial ecocritical theory enhances our understanding of the intricate relationships among culture, power, and the environment in postcolonial settings.

The understanding of the complex relationship between humans and nature, as a site of shared damage, is a fundamental

aspect of postcolonialism. Postcolonial theory has long recognized the inseparable link between the ideological framework of nature and the oppression and exploitation of impoverished (colonized) communities and their environments. DeLoughrey et al. argue that the "understanding of the environment are embedded in language, narrative, history and the cultural imagination" (2015) and some of the valuable "perspectives on ecological change are generated through postcolonial contexts and critique" (2015, p. 13). Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee also approaches these two theoretical terrains from an eco-materialistic perspective. In his book *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture, and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*, Mukherjee posits that "Post-colonial environments then describe the entire network of human and non-human material existence that is marked by the particular dynamics of historical capital at a specific stage and location" (2010, p. 15). However, the detachment of colonial empires from ecological consciousness erases the historical context of nature and gives rise to the concept of green orientalism. This misinterpretation distorts previous understandings of nature and fails to address the unresolved ecological challenges.

Postcolonial criticism, as a valuable theoretical framework, challenges various universalist ecological claims, such as "deep ecology," which assumes equivalence among all "ecological beings" (Naess (1995), 401), regardless of their material circumstances. In doing so, it sheds light on the historical and socio-political dimensions of environmental issues, emphasizing the injustices and exploitation endured by colonized communities and their ecosystems. In contrast to postcolonial criticism, deep ecology champions a holistic, ecocentric worldview, placing intrinsic value on all living beings and ecosystems. However, this concept has faced criticism from scholars like Ramachandra Guha in his article "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique." Guha argues that deep ecology fails to acknowledge the exclusion of many humans from this dominant worldview, particularly the impoverished and agrarian populations of developing and underdeveloped countries. Guha raises concerns about the dehistoricization of nature and environmental degradation caused by the deep ecological movement, which can be attributed to "overconsumption by the industrial world and urban elites in the Third World" (1989, p. 2). Guha's concerns underscore the inequalities within human societies and the pressing environmental issues that are often overlooked by the deep ecological movement.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, in their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, argue that the postcolonial field is inherently anthropocentric (human-centered) overlooks a long history of ecological concern in post-colonial criticism; while... eco/environmental studies privilege a white male western subject, or that it fails to factor cultural difference into supposedly universal environmental and bioethical debates" (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 3). According to postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental issues stem from anthropocentric activities that separate nature from human culture. As Huggan and Tiffin (2015) state in their study, "postcolonial studies has come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically-and persistently-depend".

The term "persistently" has played a crucial role in the rise of neoliberalism, which has intensified the exploitation of natural resources and perpetuated environmental degradation, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities and perpetuating a form of neo-colonialism. This contemporary form of colonial practice, camouflaged in new forms, has significant implications for ecocriticism and necessitates a reevaluation of environmentalism itself.

Sivaramakrishnan's (2009) research uncovers the multifaceted impacts of colonial interventions, such as deforestation, displacement of local communities, and disruptions to traditional ecological practices. It underscores the importance of recognizing the historical legacies and ongoing repercussions of colonialism on the environment and marginalized communities. In response to these issues, postcolonial ecocriticism emerges as a powerful tool to explore the intricate and conflicting relationship between humans and the nonhuman elements of the environment. By considering the environment as a composite entity that encompasses humans, animals, and land, postcolonial ecocriticism aims to address the dual concerns of these interconnected fields.

Both films examined in this study serve as visual and auditory mediums that convey a specific message to the audience by prioritizing the environment over anthropocentric ideas. As modes of inquiry, these films delve into ecological issues and environmental justice, seeking to raise awareness and sensitize individuals to environmental concerns. This essay utilizes ecocriticism as a theoretical framework to examine the significance of nature in Indian culture within the context of our current globalized world.

The two films depict a materialistic world of nonhuman entities intricately intertwined with human reality on various scales and levels. However, they also reflect the treatment of nature in the postcolonial era, where the long history of colonial exploitation of nature is often mystified by invoking pristine landscapes as untouched Edens, idealized spaces outside of human time. These spaces are connected with the ideas of colonial violence, where nature loses its virginity and disrupts the notions of human ecology.

The film *Sikkim* (1971) came into being amidst a period characterized by heightened ethno-nationalism in the Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim, triggered by Palden Thondup Namgyal's rise to the throne. Sikkim, which was under India's protectorate control, sought to overcome the restrictions on tourism imposed by India and strengthen its security, integrity, and global presence. The acclaimed filmmaker Satyajit Ray was selected to direct the documentary due to his unwavering commitment to the aesthetics of cinema and his vision of placing Indian filmmaking on par with its global counterparts in terms of intellectual and technical prowess. Ray's international acclaim, along with his remarkable oeuvre that included masterpieces like the Apu trilogy and *Charulata* (1964), solidified his position as the ideal choice. The film aimed to unveil Sikkim's mesmerizing cultural heritage and breathtaking landscapes while also acting as a vehicle for channeling the nationalist fervor of the time and dispelling any doubts regarding Sikkim's affiliations (Das 2014, 43–45).

Satyajit Ray's documentary *Sikkim*, with a runtime of approximately 60 minutes, masterfully weaves together the lives of the Sikkimese people and the awe-inspiring landscape, highlighting the profound connection between humans and nature. Through his evocative narration, reminiscent of the renowned naturalist David Attenborough, and the skillful use of long shots capturing the snow-clad Kanchenjunga and the delicate Orchids and Rhododendrons emerging from the mist, Ray compels viewers to contemplate the harmonious relationship between the simple, unmaterialistic lives of the Sikkimese people and their majestic surroundings.

The documentary provides a captivating glimpse into the lives of farmers in Lachung and Lachen, who cultivate terraced fields in the heart of the mountainous region. By skillfully interweaving montages of their daily activities, Ray emphasizes the inherent connection and lively communication between humans, animals, and nature. The Sikkimese people's idyllic and uncomplicated lifestyle, free from the complexities of urban existence, exemplifies a pastoral ideal that exists in perfect equilibrium with the natural environment.

Moreover, the captivating pastoral landscapes in the documentary enhance its atmospheric quality, and the gentle melodies of ethnic folk music serve to strengthen the underlying narrative theme. The opening song, invoking the terms "Den-zong" and "mayel lyang," symbolizes the Bhutia³ and Lepcha⁴ communities' descriptions of Sikkim as a bountiful valley and an earthly paradise, respectively (Arora, 2009, p. 63). As Ray's camera traverses the streets of Gangtok, the accompanying soundtrack seamlessly transitions to Nepali folk music, evoking the spirit of Kangchendzonga and further immersing viewers in the diverse cultural tapestry of the region (Das, 2014, p. 46).

Ray's deliberate use of point-of-view shots, directing the audience's gaze towards the untouched forests accompanied by tribal melodies, provides glimpses into the historical roots of indigenous cultures prevalent among the Sikkimese people (Das, 2014, p. 46). These visual and auditory elements create a powerful and immersive experience, invoking a sense of cultural and environmental nostalgia.

By showcasing nature in its raw form, Ray underscores the awe-inspiring grandeur of the Sikkim landscape in its pure and untouched state. The documentary's expansive shots offer viewers a breathtaking panorama of untouched natural landscapes, complemented by the symphony of sounds from chirping birds, gushing rivers, and cascading waterfalls. As Bhaskar Chattopadhyay aptly comments, "The misty mountains, the melting snow giving birth to mighty waterfalls, the lush green valleys, the roaring rivers, and the steep hillsides all create the picture of paradise on earth" (*Firstpost*, January 28, 2018). This sensory experience transports the audience into a paradise on earth.

The film's essence focuses on non-political aspects, but Satyajit Ray strategically juxtaposes specific sequences to highlight social inequalities and feudal practices. Palden Thondup Namgyal, as the king of Sikkim, not only embraces the colonial ideology but also projects the grandeur and magnificence of his state. British and Western culture profoundly influenced the reign of the king and his wife, Hope Cooke, in Sikkim, shaping their governance and societal development approach. From the Anglo-Gorkha war to its status as a protectorate, Sikkim's historical connection with the British Empire exposes Palden Thondup Namgyal to British values and administrative systems. Subho Basu (2010) discusses how the British colonial administration employed racial classifications and mapped Indian identities based on physical and cultural characteristics. Despite being bound by a treaty with India, the king sought to establish Sikkim's distinct national identity, aiming for greater sovereignty and international recognition. His marriage to Hope Cooke, an American, further amplified this cultural endeavor, adding a unique fusion of Western and Sikkimese elements to the region's cultural fabric.

Within the film, Ray skillfully showcases the stark class divide that existed in Sikkimese society. The upper-class natives enjoy privileges and have a greater affinity with colonial culture, while the poorer segments of society live on the fringes, serving their masters. The documentary vividly captures the contrast between the opulent landscapes and the tribals who develop their own ecosystems to meet their basic needs. Ray's screenplay deftly portrays themes of dominance and freedom, sympathy and forgiveness, and loneliness and empathy within the limited confines of space and time, set against the backdrop of the majestic Kanchenjunga. Furthermore, the documentary sheds light on the ecological changes brought about by environmental imperialism during the colonial era, altering the traditional relationship between tribals and nature.

The documentary explores the interplay between tradition and modernity, agrarian and industrial practices, and the contrasting elements of rural and urban life. The presence of the ropeway and the hoarding of Coca-Cola advertisements in Gangtok market

symbolizes the juxtaposition between the old and the new, the feudal and the capitalist, and nature and industry. Ray's documentary critically examines modernity as an impersonal and alienating process of rapid change. As Robinson points out, "Ray's unique authority is aesthetically expressed with the observant realist style of his camera" (Robinson, 2004, p. 275).

The ropeway, a prominent symbol of modernity associated with dislocation, separation, urbanization, and rapid industrialization, serves as a visual representation of the historical predicament of anthropology as a colonial by-product of European modernity. Ray strategically uses the ropeway to emphasize the impact of Western modernity on Sikkim's traditional practices. This is exemplified in the documentary when "two carriages advance towards each other [where] they're reaching this point [and he] cuts to a shot of a piece of telegraph wire" (Robinson 2004, 275).

Ray's camera techniques, including close-up shots and point of view shots, draw the audience's attention to the transition from agricultural to industrial practices at the 20-minute and 5-second mark. This transition parallels the Western concept of modernity, characterized by ideas of "ocularcentrism," urbanization, and a fascination with mass culture (Stonehill, 1995, p. 152). The documentary showcases the influence of Western ideas and practices on Sikkim's cultural landscape, highlighting the tensions and transformations brought about by modernization.

Amartya Sen astutely observes that Ray's films share, [...], a well-articulated anti-modernist standpoint by rejecting the "western" thought of modernisation (Sen, 2012, p. 123). Ray's humanism serves as a counterpoint to European humanism and its associated progressive modernity. The clash between Eastern and Western ideas of modernity, rooted in the dichotomies established by European Enlightenment, has perpetuated binaries such as primitive and civilized, authentic and hybrid, and tradition and modernity. Through his camera work, Ray uses high-angle shots to depict a royal feast in honor of elites, where the king and queen attend to their aristocratic guests separately at the buffets, while commoners enjoy their traditional food of plain rice, pork, and chung served on the ground (50 minutes 20 seconds - 51 minutes 2 seconds).

Ray vividly illustrates how the cultural habits of the ex-colonizers have captivated the minds of the native. The camera captures the cryptic aristocratic behavior of the royals, who seek to charm the Westerners by engaging fair ladies in dances. The queen's disdainful exclamation, "it's wicked!" in response to an unflattering shot of a bureaucrat eating noodles, reveals her snobbish attitude (Robinson, 2004, p. 275). The king and queen's aristocratic mannerisms and their disconnection from the tribals not only highlight the class divide but also undermine the cultural practices of the Sikkimese people, who gradually succumb to the cultural habits of the ex-colonizers.

The documentary portrays how the historical association with the British Empire over a period of two centuries did not deter the native population from adopting and imitating the cultural practices, institutions, assumptions, and values of the ex-colonizers. As Ashis Nandy argues in *Intimate Enemy*, "the west is now everywhere, within the west and outside; in structures and in minds" (Nandy, 1989, p. iii). Ray's cinematography employs close-up shots to capture visual images of Coca-Cola advertisements (24 minutes and 7 seconds) and a shop selling foreign liquors such as whisky, rum, and brandy (24 minutes and 8 seconds). These portrayals demonstrate how the native people adopt Western cultural habits, assumptions, and values in an attempt to find identity, considering their own culture as demeaning and insufficient. The film illustrates that the post-colonial era does not mark the process of decolonization but rather an unconscious imitation of the cultural habits of the ex-

colonizers, making Ray's film a sharp critique of this phenomenon.

Goutam Ghose's masterpiece, *Padma Nadir Majhi* (2 hours 25 minutes), stands as a poignant adaptation of Manik Bhandopadhyay's⁵ novel of the same name. This cinematic gem follows the journey of Kuber, a Hindu fisherman of the Padma River, as he grapples with a life-altering decision that holds the power to shape his family's destiny. Hossain Miya, a prosperous Bengali Muslim trader, extends an invitation to Kuber, urging him to embrace a new beginning on the utopian island of Moynadip, crafted by his own hands.

The movie commences with a breathtaking wide-angle shot, capturing the Padma River in all its majesty—an expanse as vast as it is timeless. The persistent focus on the weathered sails dancing upon the water's surface serves as a testament to the profound significance the river holds in the lives of the impoverished fishermen. From the break of dawn until the sun sets, these resilient souls navigate the Padma's waters in their modest vessels, their hopes intertwined with the fate of their cast nets. Fishing serves as their sole lifeline, sustaining the destitute villagers who call the riverbanks their home.

Through the lens of the film, Ghose seeks to illuminate the intricate bond between these fishermen, the Padma River, and the broader natural tapestry that surrounds them. As they venture upon the Padma's currents, the confines of social and religious identities become suspended, giving way to a shared sense of solidarity and mutual support. The river Padma, far from being a mere natural phenomenon, emerges as an eternal font of youth, juxtaposed against the transience of mortal existence.

Ghose employs the art of close-up cinematography to present the landfalls of Ketupur village, where colossal trees plunge into the river's depths with resounding splashes (2 minutes 10 seconds - 2 minutes 13 seconds). These powerful visual cues symbolize the enduring presence of nature's giants. Following the tradition of Satyajit Ray, Ghose's filmmaking technique masterfully delves into the minutiae of the natural world. Human activity and the ebb and flow of nature intertwine harmoniously, showcasing an inseparable connection that ensures the survival and coexistence of both realms.

A pivotal moment in the film occurs when the houses of the village succumb to the fury of a storm during the Boishakh⁶ season. Ghose lingers on this scene, momentarily freezing the narrative, to illustrate the cyclical rhythm of nature and highlight its awe-inspiring magnitude. Amidst this backdrop, the Padma River assumes an indifferent stance, seemingly unperturbed by the villagers' desires for rewards or their sorrows. Kuber encapsulates this sentiment when he articulates, "Padma amago joto dey abar totoi loy" (It is true that Padma gives us abundantly, but in return, it also exacts a substantial toll).

As an ardent observer of society's marginalized segments, Ghose uses his cinematography to unveil the ceaseless struggles faced by these individuals in a society plagued by class divisions. In a revealing interview, Ghose shares, "In my travels, I have encountered countless marginalized individuals, particularly the tribals, who possess an innate kindness. Their simplistic lifestyles, dedicated to sustainable development, serve as a wellspring of inspiration. I hold a deep affinity for this so-called subaltern world. Unfortunately, unless disaster strikes, their stories remain untold. It is my duty to give them a voice" (October 01, 2019, film preview listed on Scroll.in).

These socially and economically deprived individuals are left with no choice but to brave the Padma's waters, clad in scant clothing, enduring the piercing chill of the wind. Their lives teeter on a fragile tightrope, wavering between hope and hopelessness. The constant threat of an unpredictable river storm looms overhead, capable of snatching away their very existence at any

given moment. Ghose's camera captures the kaleidoscope of emotions etched upon the weathered faces of these impoverished fishermen—smiles and tears, sorrows and joys—painting a vivid portrait of their lamentable conditions while simultaneously revealing the profound interconnectedness between mankind and nature.

From one scene to the next, a delicate equilibrium between distress and joy resonates within the hearts of these marginalized individuals, allowing Ghose to triumph in his quest for authenticity.

In her book *What is Nature* (1995), the British eco-philosopher Kate Soper discusses the politics behind the concept of nature. She draws boundaries between socio-cultural ideas of nature and the way politics is both defended and contested in contemporary sociological movements. According to Soper, the idea of nature is always defined in relation to something else, hidden behind cultural interpretations. To address this issue, she suggests embracing clear-cut ecological ideas of nature.

Similarly, the representation of nature in cinema falls under the purview of ecocritics, offering insights into how we live on this planet and helping us understand the current ecological crisis. In his work, Ghose employs rich black and white aesthetics to highlight the natural phenomena in Ketupur village, which is contrasted with Hossain Miya's artificial island, Moynadip. Moynadip enters their social milieu like a slow poison, captivating the villagers with its allure just beyond the reach of everyday life. The sandy beaches, lush foliage, and deep shadows cast at night captivate Kuber during his first visit, filling him with both fascination and fear of never being able to return to his village (1 hour and 39 minutes), initiating a new existence where traditional ways become irrelevant.

The urban lifestyle showcased on this utopian island exemplifies the destruction of trees and the encroachment upon forest zones to establish new colonies. Ghose's film portrays how the virgin forests are gradually stripped of their purity through the exploitative activities of Hossain Miya, a representative of the white colonizers. Miya lures the native villagers and harnesses their energy to build his own colony, exercising dominion over it. Instead of engaging in fishing, these impoverished fishermen toil for Miya, cutting down trees and clearing the forest to cultivate crops.

From this scene, a palpable expression emerges: for wealthy individuals like Hossain Miya, the forest holds no value. It is merely an insignificant expanse of an exotic landscape, waiting to be plundered and exploited for personal gain.

The film sheds light on two fundamental environmental concerns: deforestation and the oppression of the tribals. Hossain Miya serves as a prime example of individuals who readily adopt the cultural habits of ex-colonizers. He not only parodies the idiosyncrasies of ex-colonizers' cultural habits but also assumes the role of a patron for these impoverished people. Hossain Miya entices the villagers of Ketupur to abandon their ancestral home and relocate to the newly constructed island, effectively severing their connection with nature and their natural surroundings. This act of displacement not only alters the natural landscape into a densely populated space but also poses a potential threat to numerous animal species, such as tigers, snakes, and other flora and fauna (Gadgil & Guha, 2004, p. 233).

In his essay *Why Look at Animals?* John Berger contends that industrialization has removed most animals from daily life, relegating them to the status of "human puppets" in society (Garrard 2004, p. 139). Ghose's film effectively portrays how individuals like Hossain Miya, driven by materialistic desires, are incapable of comprehending the intricacies of the forest.

The film serves as a vivid portrayal of the lingering presence of neo-colonialism in modern-day India. Despite gaining

independence, the nation continues to emulate the political, cultural, and economic models of the colonizers. This phenomenon suggests that developing economies in the third world face considerable challenges in establishing independent economic and political identities amidst the pressures of globalization. Ghose's film showcases how subaltern social classes become agents of their own socio-economic changes within the confines of a late colonial society. Moreover, the film underscores the crucial role played by nature in the lives of marginalized and socially deprived individuals.

Highlighting the paradoxical relationship between nature and human interactions, the film exposes significant inequalities between the fishing community and the privileged upper echelons of society. In a capitalist society, capitalists exercise control over productive resources, while the proletariat functions as a mere tool for the capitalists who own and profit from the products. The film also portrays the plight of the working-class fishermen, who serve as producers for the capitalists and contribute to shaping the environment within a deeply divided society. One's social class primarily hinges on their relationship to the means of production. This discrimination is exemplified through the character of Hossain Miya, who endeavors to enslave the ignorant fishermen on his utopian island, Moynadip. Miya's Moynadip symbolizes their entrapment, with no possibility of returning to their previous lives (Williams, 1980, p. 81).

Kuber, a character in Ghose's film, belongs to a class-stratified society where he faces social ostracization from the upper class. Consequently, he becomes a victim of his circumstances, trapped in a society characterized by illiteracy, poverty, and a relentless struggle for survival, leaving him with little hope for a better life. On the other hand, Hossain Miya, representing the true forces of colonialism, disrupts the fishermen's way of life. Despite recognizing Miya as their nemesis, the fishermen surrender their will to his desires and remain subjugated, clinging to the hope of a better life. While they act as producers, Hossain Miya's consumerist tendencies consume the production of Ketupur village and redirect it to Moynadip, solely for his personal gratification. Hossain Miya personifies the archetypal colonizer who perceives his self-created island as an enormous prospect, an untamed land that can be "mapped, imagined, and written into existence" (Parker & Starkey, 1995, p. 3).

Ghose's film is a scathing critique of the bourgeois class, depicting them as a disruptive force within society solely driven by their insatiable pursuit of material gains. By skillfully intertwining the products of oppressive ideologies and prevailing material circumstances, the film unveils how these factors bind and subjugate individuals, rendering them subservient to the ruling elite. An embodiment of this exploitative relationship is portrayed through the character of Sital Babu, who takes full advantage of those like Kuber, representing the lower stratum of society. Kuber is tragically deprived of his rightful share of income, subjected to severe exploitation by the so-called "civilized" upper-class Bengali *bhadraloks*, of which Sital Babu is a prime example. This insidious lifestyle, as pointed out by Willem van Schendel, is built not only on educational privileges and cultural achievements but also on the back of the labor of less fortunate Bengalis, including "agricultural tenants, servants, women, and dependents" (2022, 108).

Ghose masterfully captures a poignant scene in his film, symbolizing the power dynamics between the privileged and the underprivileged. With a low-angle view, the camera emphasizes Sital Babu's dominance as he approaches Kuber, while a high-angle view perfectly encapsulates Kuber's reluctance to comply with the unjust demand. Despite Kuber's hesitance, Sital Babu employs manipulative tactics, ultimately convincing Kuber to offer him two Hilsa⁷ fish for free, showcasing the vulnerability of

the marginalized to the cunning exploitations of the affluent. This poignant portrayal of the disparity between the classes, however, does not stop at the moment of coercion. In a subsequent shot, both characters are captured in a single frame, where Kuber's skepticism is palpable as Sital Babu makes empty promises to pay later. This powerful imagery serves as a stark reminder of the unending cycle of exploitation faced by those like Kuber at the hands of the privileged class.

The film further problematizes class and power relationships and sharply critiques the colonial rulers and their manipulative exercise of power. It shows how the river-centric environment is no longer passive but plays a significant role in the class struggle for the survival of the poor. The exploitation of the poor is not limited to the land but is also visible in the territories of the Padma River. It acts as an entropy and decay inherent to it, raising the possibility of social relations within the context of riverine lives.

In the opening scene, the Padma River is introduced with an extreme wide shot, where Kuber and Gonesh are seen catching fish while the owner of the boat, Dhononjoy, monitors them. Dhononjoy, an authoritative figure, holds enormous control over these poor fishermen who work for him. In a scene, Kuber asks Dhononjoy to take a break from work, but Dhononjoy refuses and instructs Kuber and Gonesh to continue fishing so that he can earn more profit (3 minutes 40 seconds - 4 minutes). The film effectively illustrates the capitalist mindset of people like Dhononjoy, who always aim for surplus gains without considering the workers' profit and other concerns. When Dhononjoy takes the fish to the market, he drives away Kuber and Gonesh during his secret dealings with exporters, maximizing his gains from the deal (5 minutes 35 seconds). Leena Sarkar Bhaduri comments, "Here, fish is evidently considered a basic commodity, and its value in the market represents the relentless labor of fishermen. In this domain, the bourgeois class who own the boats and nets exert tremendous pressure on the fishermen, whom they unethically exploit, fooling them and depriving them of their fair share of profits" (2017).

These people are paid a pittance for the fish, and the abundance of fish is inversely proportional to their economic value, enriching the exporters while pushing the lower strata of society into penury. Ghose reveals the eternal struggle between the haves and have-nots, between the bourgeois who own the labor power for a specific monetary value and the proletariat, the majority of the world's population, who are considered uncivilized and underprivileged, living like tiny creatures on Earth, as if no one comes to write their story. This group of underprivileged people, whom Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha classified as ecosystem people because of their close relationship with nature and direct access to natural resources, believe that they are also a part of nature.

To resolve the conflict between humanity and nature, a profound revolution is needed in our current mode of production, coupled with a simultaneous transformation of our societal structure. The exploitation of nature for profit can only be halted by completely eliminating the profit motive from our society, achieved through a revolutionary movement driven by the majority of workers. The very foundation of capitalism lies in the control of means of production, where the vast population toiling for private capital must be liberated. A more harmonious relationship between humans and nature can be established by shifting our focus to production that meets our social needs and ensuring an equitable distribution system. In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Donna J. Haraway challenges readers to think critically about the anthropocene and our relationship with the natural world.

As an auteur, Ghose emphasizes the crucial importance of empowering marginalized communities and understanding their cultural heritage in order to protect the forests and traditions intertwined with them. The combination of widespread awareness campaigns among indigenous peoples and effective government policies⁸ plays a vital role in preserving Sikkim's rich biodiversity. Notably, Sikkim became the first Indian state to ban plastic bags in 1998 and has also taken measures to curtail the use of single-use plastic bottles. In 2016, the state government implemented two significant decisions: the prohibition of packaged drinking water and the ban on Styrofoam and thermocol disposable plates and cutlery. These actions were aimed at mitigating the toxic pollution and ever-growing garbage problem that posed severe environmental hazards.

While Sikkim has made commendable progress in implementing its green policies, challenges persist. The continued erosion of vast stretches of land along the banks of the Padma River remains a pressing concern, resulting in the displacement and destruction of numerous lives and homes each year. Furthermore, the exploitative practices affecting the mangrove ecosystems in the estuary of the Padma River inflict significant damage on the region's biodiversity. In his 2016 book *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh argues that contemporary literature and art have remained notably silent on the pressing issue of environmental concerns, despite their significant and immediate relevance.

In the face of these imminent environmental threats, the role of both the filmmakers in raising awareness and fostering ecological consciousness assumes profound importance. One notable perspective, articulated by Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, contends that the deliberate use of long shots and slow pacing in films serves to inspire contemplation and deep introspection (2010, 52). These techniques draw audiences into a mesmerizing visual portrayal of nature, allowing them to connect emotionally with the innate beauty and vulnerability of the natural world. This captivating cinematic approach finds resonance in the works of both auteurs who have skillfully embraced the power of visual storytelling. Through an artful abundance of long shots, they artfully heighten the audience's engagement, transporting viewers to the heart of the environmental landscapes they depict. Their films become compelling windows into the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature, inviting viewers to confront the pressing ecological challenges faced by marginalized communities who depend on the land and its resources for their livelihoods. By foregrounding the plight of marginalized communities, their films underscore the pivotal role of politics in the realm of ecocinema. Consequently, these acclaimed cinematographers meticulously capture the intricate relationship between viewers and the natural world. Far from conforming to the standard reel representation of nature, their films eschew high-tech lighting techniques that merely conform to the screen. Instead, they adopt a more nuanced and restrained approach, refusing to be categorized as either purely artistic or commercially-driven ventures.

Immersing audiences in a virtual realm, their movies offer an alternative perspective on nature, challenging conventional norms of representation. Stephen Rust and Salma Monami echo this sentiment in their study, affirming that the "ecocinema studies enables us to recognize ways of seeing the world other than through the narrow perspective of the anthropocentric gaze that situates individual human desires at the center of the moral universe" (Rust et al. 2013, 11). In effect, postcolonial ecology disrupts anthropocentric agendas, fostering a nuanced discourse on ecology and its historical interconnectedness with the environment. This approach adopts a holistic stance, emphasizing the interplay between humans and nature as subjects of study.

The rise of ecocinema can be attributed, in part, to Roger C. Anderson's influential study, *Reflections: Ecocinema: A Plan for Preserving Nature* (1975). Anderson's work depicts a world where living organisms are portrayed within simulated conditions, meticulously resembling natural environments. Through this endeavor, Anderson seeks to cultivate greater awareness and appreciation for the study of ecology within the realm of cinema. Indeed, ecocinema encompasses a broad spectrum of genres, ranging from thought-provoking documentaries to captivating feature films, further solidifying its popularity and impact.

Paula Willoquet-Maricondi draws a subtle distinction between environmental films and ecocinema. According to her, environmental films present pro-environmental, pro-sustainable, and pro-conservation perspectives while challenging anthropocentric values. On the other hand, ecocinema redirects viewers' attention to environmental issues and diminishes human subjectivity. It aims to shift audiences "from a narrow anthropocentric world-view to an earth-centred, or eco-centric, view in which the eco-sphere [...] is taken as the centre of value for humanity" (Seymour 2012, 221–222).

Willoquet-Maricondi expresses her concern regarding Hollywood films, condemning them for their ideologically evasive and commercial nature. She argues that their commercialization hinders the promotion of advanced ecological ideas, leading her to classify them as non-ecocinema. In her view, "it is not surprising that ecocinema is more likely to reflect an independent and experimental approach to production, plays at film festivals, art houses, and on public television, and often be distributed through the internet or grassroots organizations" (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 48).

Stephen Rust and Salma Monami challenge Willoquet-Maricondi's exclusion of popular cinemas and express their interest in the field of ecocinema studies. They argue against dismissing commercial films based on their effects, contending that such films have exceptional potential to engage and mobilize audiences, unlike art house movies that attract a narrower audience. They point out that attention has been given in recent years to eco-disaster films and environmental documentaries such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), which reflect prevailing environmental perceptions and the shifting dynamics of environmental hegemonies over time (Rust 2013, 192).

While Maricondi believes that avant-garde and experimental cinema create conditions for alternative ways of engaging with both the cinematic experience and the natural world, she supports her perspective by citing Scott MacDonald's work. MacDonald's eco-cinematic exploration, known for its experimental and avant-garde films, is used as an example to validate her stance. According to MacDonald, avant-garde films are indeed reflected in ecocinema, serving as a means to challenge conventional media spectatorship and encourage alternative modes of perception (2004, 109).

The representation of nature in films serves as a powerful tool for ecological awareness and critique. T.V. Reed points out that our aesthetic appreciation of nature in various forms of media often masks the underlying causes and consequences of environmental degradation (2002, 145–162). However, filmmakers like Satyajit Ray and Goutam Ghose challenge this veil by engaging audiences in visual narratives that emphasize the interconnectedness between humans and nature. By portraying the marginalization of indigenous communities and the impact of colonial exploitation, these films critique the prevailing anthropocentric worldview.

Furthermore, the use of cinematic techniques such as long shots and close-ups in these films not only enhances the narrative but also transcends the limitations of traditional storytelling.

According to Stephen Rust and Salma Monami, the study of ecocinema broadens our perception beyond an anthropocentric gaze and encourages us to consider alternative ways of engaging with the world (Rust et al. 2013, 11). In the context of post-colonial ecocriticism, these films challenge the colonial legacy of resource exploitation and advocate for the redemption of marginalized communities.

In the realm of cinema, auteurs like Satyajit Ray and Goutam Ghose provide nuanced narratives that expose the contradictions and complexities of human-nature relationships. Their films question the identity of postcolonial societies that continue to adopt cultural values imposed by former colonizers, perpetuating a cycle of alienation from nature. Through their aesthetic representation of both the benevolent and harsh aspects of nature, these filmmakers prompt audiences to reconsider their perception of the environment and the social structures that impact it.

Received: 13 March 2023; Accepted: 16 November 2023;

Published online: 15 January 2024

Notes

- 1 Satyajit Ray, director, *Sikkim* (Gangtok: The Chogyal of Sikkim, 1971), DVD.
- 2 Goutam Ghose, director, *Boatman of the River Padma* [Padma Nadir Majhi] (Kolkata: West Bengal Film Development Corporation, 1993), DVD.
- 3 Bhutias are the people of Tibetan origin, migrated to Sikkim. They are the major inhabitants of North Sikkim where they mostly recognized as the Lachenpas and Lachungpas. The language spoken by them is Sikkimese.
- 4 Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim, and they existed much before the Bhutias. They speak the language Lepcha. Though their language is not well developed but is rich in vocabulary related to the flora and fauna of Sikkim.
- 5 Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908–1956) one of the major figures in 20th century Bengali literature. He distinguished himself with the focus on the life of ordinary rural people with the serene beauty of nature that was always in the background in his novels.
- 6 Boishakh is the first month in the Bengali calendar, lies between the second half of April and first half of May. The month is notorious for the afternoon storms named Kalboishakhi, a storm usually starts with strong gusts from the north-west direction and caused severe destructions.
- 7 The Hilsa, is also known as Ilish, a very popular fish in the Indian subcontinent. It is the national fish in Bangladesh and in West Bengal.
- 8 The Gazette notification published by the state government of Sikkim on 4th June, 1998 mentioned in the item no 10, "That you shall not deliver any goods or materials purchased or otherwise to any person, firm shop, company or any other agency or organization in plastic wrappers or plastic bags."

References

- Anderson RC (1975) *Reflections: Ecocinema: A Plan for Preserving Nature*. BioScience 25:452–452
- Arora V (2009) Framing the image of Sikkim. Visual Studies 24:54–64
- Basu S (2010) The Dialectics of Resistance: Colonial Geography, Bengali Literati and the Racial Mapping of Indian Identity. Modern Asian Studies 44(1):53–79
- Bhaduri LS (2017) Marxist ideology and colonial interpretation of the Boatman of the Padma. South Asia Research 38:82S–95S
- Das S (2014) "Sikkim the place and the Sikkim the documentary: reading political history the life and after-life of a visual representation." *Himalaya, the Journal for the Association of Nepal and Himalayan*. Studies 33:42–56
- DeLoughrey, EM, J Didur, and A Carrigan, eds. 2015. *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*. Routledge
- Gadgil, M, and R Guha. 2004. *The Use and Abuse of Nature*. Oxford India
- Garrard G (2004) *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, New York
- Ghosh, A. 2016. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Penguin UK
- Guha R (1989) Radical American environmentalism and wilderness preservation: a third world critique. Environ Eth 11:71–83
- Haraway, DJ 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press
- Huggan, G, and H Tiffin. 2015. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge
- MacDonald S (2004) Toward an Eco-Cinema. Interdiscip Stud Lit Environ 11:107–132

- Mukherjee, U 2010. *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Springer
- Naess, A 1995. "The Third World, Wilderness, and Deep Ecology." *Deep Ecology in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by George Sessions, 397–407. Boston: Shambhala
- Nandy A (1989) *Intimate Enemy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Parker M, Starkey R (1995) *Post-colonial Literatures: Achebe, Ngugi, Desai, Walcott*. Macmillan, Basingstoke
- Reed, TV 2002. "Toward an environmental justice ecocriticism." *The environmental justice reader: Politics, poetics, and pedagogy*: 145–162
- Robinson, A 2004. *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*. Berkeley
- Rust, S 2013. "Hollywood and climate change." *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*: 191–211
- Sen A (2012) *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian history, Culture and Identity*. Penguin Books, India
- Seymour, N 2012. *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*. 221–222
- Sivaramakrishnan K (2009) Forests and the environmental history of modern India. *J Peasant Stud* 36(2):299–324
- Soper K (1995) *What is Nature: Culture, Politics and the Non-human*. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford
- Stonehill B (1995) The Debate over "Ocularcentrism." *J Commun* 45:147–152
- van Schendel, W 2022. "Rebuffing Bengali dominance: postcolonial India and Bangladesh." *Critical Asian Studies*: 1–31
- Williams, R 1980. *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*. Verso
- Willoquet-Maricondi, P 2010. "Shifting paradigms: From environmentalist films to ecocinema." *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*. 43–61. University of Virginia Press

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Rajni Singh.

Reprints and permission information is available at <http://www.nature.com/reprints>

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2023