



Demystifying the state of Minorities in Contemporary India: Reading Amit Masurkar's *Sherni* (The Tigress) from the Vantage Point of Marginality

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Abstract

Bharatiya Janata Party, the ruling party of an emergent Indian nation-state, has, from its genesis ventriloquized and brandished its exacerbating agenda of Hindu Fundamentalism in a flawed myth of an anecdotal Hindu Nationalist past where non-Hindus are conveniently ostracized. This political gambit is deployed to manufacture an overblown theory of a decline in Hindu culture, the best resonance of which is the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019, discriminating, and interrogating the legitimacy of specific communities on sheer grounds of religion. Amit Masurkar's film of 2021, *Sherni* (The Tigress) provides a critical insight into this brutal Racial Politics pervading an upper caste Hindu society, in the guise of a subtle subtext, camouflaged within a distracting narrative of Man versus Nature. This paper facilitates the reading of this hidden discourse of Realpolitik alongside the predominant cultural narrative of gender and natural domination. Through a palimpsestuous reading, it explores themes of racial exclusion and segregation in an Ultra-Right Hindu Nation that the film silently addresses. Furthermore, this paper challenges the dominant narrative of Ecofeminism, to instead investigate the categories of race and ethnicity that intersect gender issues.

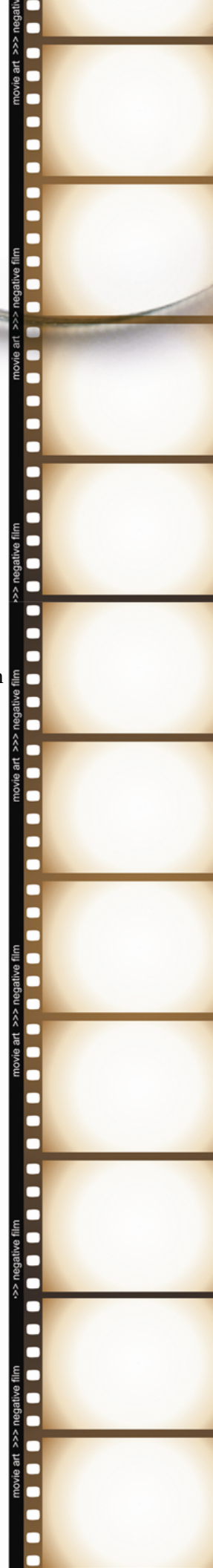
Keywords: Hindu Fundamentalism; Racial Politics; Segregation; Race; Gender; Ecofeminism



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Demystifying the State of Minorities in Contemporary India: Reading Amit Masurkar's *Sherni* (The Tigress) from the Vantage Point of Marginality

Purbali Sengupta

Introduction

Since the advent of the Big Bang and other theories of the scientific beginnings of the universe, human interest has radically shifted from Geocentrism towards the undefined limits of the universe and more recently, the outer space. Despite such extravagant expanses of human curiosity and engagement, Ecology and Ecocentric disquietude has also found an equal sympathetic ground in academic debate, textual discourse or in defiant praxis. Jhan Hochman stokes this very anxiety through vivid imagery; “The human obliteration of nature marks a twofold "literation". First, culture scrawls itself on nature's flesh. Animals are tagged, branded, genetically rewritten, fatally punctuated by bullets and arrows, and fatally scored by blades and traps. Animal skin is made into vellum and parchment. Trees, standing or pulped, are carved and written upon - their cellulose flesh processed into celluloid...Even as nature is destroyed and served up as the material on which and with which culture uses to write itself, nature is also conceptually cooked in a cultural cauldron, an often-toxic brew releasing scenic to horrific phantasms of represented nature” (Hochman, 1998). Hochman traces this nature-culture dualism from the Enlightenment division of mind and matter to the post-structuralist blurring of nature and culture “where philosophers like Adorno and Horkheimer critique a condition of reification, or naturalization, that situation where culture replaces nature as the realm of the given, the unchangeable” (Hochman, 1998). The closing credits of Amit Masurkar's *Sherni* (The Tigress) boldly portrays this cultural takeover of wildlife as the central protagonist Vidya Vincent (post resignation as forest divisional officer) is witnessed

assuming responsibility as a curator of a museum for stuffed animals and replicas. As she discusses details of repairment of damaged animal replicas, the leitmotif of *Sherni* is briefly revisited through a clever narrative stratagem - however, this paper intentionally digresses from this overt theme of Nature/Culture dualism and Eco-critical anxiety and instead argues in favour of an additional (largely un-investigated) reading that charts the precarious terrain of racial politics in contemporary India. *Sherni* (The Tigress), released in the year 2021 is a trailblazer in the genre of environmental thriller, the domineering theme being that of conservation and predation at the heart of forest politics. In a world increasingly threatened by ecological hazards and environmental crisis, extinction of certain species of animals is unmistakably a grave and real ramification. *Sherni* (The Tigress) throws light on the dangers of illicit poaching, often conducted under political aegis. The crowning engagement of the film is the parallel plot (and the encounter/chase) of the resilient female protagonist Vidya and her confrontation with the supposedly 'man-eater' tigress (catalogued as T-12 in forest records). As inept forest officials and administrators fail to track T-12 who has been on the prowl in the particularly verdant parts of the forest where the tribal communities frequent with their cattle and for their quotidian subsistence, one might be prone to estimate that the governing motifs of the film are elementarily deforestation and/or poaching. However, as things gradually tailspin into catastrophe, and warring political parties enter the scene to haggle over personal baits, the socio-political context assumes increasing urgency to address the hitherto repressed narrative of endangered human races in a contemporary India. The ludicrous chase for T-12 is a cinematic eye-wash which conceals the peripheral sub-text of threatened communities; the supreme manifestation of which is demonstrated in the female solidarity between a malayali Christian and a low-caste Adivasi (translated as Aboriginal/Tribal) woman, shortly before the end of the film, in a celebratory gesture: an articulation of elation over the successful recovery of the cubs of the tigress. Thus this cracking tale superbly ends with the agency and empowerment of

two female subjects from minority classes and their successful endeavour, thereby drawing attention to the categories of race and ethnicity that cross-pollinate the theme of gender at a crucial intersectional matrix.

The rapid and alarming marginalisation of minorities in contemporary India, fanned by Ultra-right Hindu Ideologues has led to inconsolable race riots and abhorrent Identity politics. The Narendra Modi led Bharatiya Janata Party has diligently subscribed to Hindu fundamentalist (Hindutva) principles from the very germination of its power, which resonates in its majoritarian politics of appropriating historical discourses, manufacturing of counterfeit myths of origin to persecution of religious minorities like Muslims, Christians or Dalits, and this in its turn has become a permanent feature of Indian democracy. According to independent media houses like Scroll (2022), several international and foreign evaluation reports on religious freedom in India have pointed out how the civic space in contemporary Indian society has been steadily contaminated into a dangerous and volatile ground where freedom of expression and secularism are non-existent. It quotes the South Asia State of Minorities Report from 2020:

“Hate crimes against minorities have seen a spike – taking the form of mob lynching and vigilante violence against Muslims, Christians, and Dalits. BJP also strengthened and expanded a series of discriminatory laws and measures that target religious minorities. These include anti-conversion laws, blamed by human rights groups for empowering Hindutva groups to ‘conduct campaigns of harassment, social exclusion and violence against Christians, Muslims, and other religious minorities across the country’. Laws ostensibly meant for the protection of cows continue to provide institutional backing for similar campaigns against Muslims and Dalits.” *South Asia State of Minorities Report 2020*

Furthermore, Scroll highlights how “The report also found that India’s civil society actors, which include human rights lawyers, activists, protestors, academics, journalists, liberal intelligentsia, have ‘increasingly been under attack’ for speaking out against ‘government excesses and majoritarianism’. Besides, human rights defenders have increasingly come under attack for protesting discriminatory laws and practices and have faced restrictions, violence, criminal defamation, detention and harassment”. Interestingly, some of these societal excesses of racial segregation have cleverly percolated into the screen space of *Sherni* (The Tigress) with an agenda of stoking civic conscience through celluloid. The film exposes the malignancy of a corrupt Hindu majoritarian class whose vigilance and policing seeks not just the wild but also the lower echelons of society inhabited by minority classes. Thus, social actors like those from the intelligentsia, namely Vidya Vincent (the female protagonist) and her aide, college professor Hassan Noorani have been either condescended or forced to concede to the dominant ideology; the college professor and environmentalist, a man of science, finally gives up fighting the corrupt power structure/s by taking a transfer. A similar fate is assigned to Vidya, who overburdened with the political circumstances decides to opt for a quieter and less conspicuous job. The obstacles that are thrown at her path are mostly man-made, battling a bureaucracy that has depleted Nature by its ambivalent development programs, Vidya acknowledges that she shares a common bond with the underprivileged forest folk who hailing from minority classes have always been a political bait like the desperate man-eating tigress. The forest community has been sadly cut off from grazing land for their livestock, the consequence of which is widespread, including the prominent predation of the tigress in populated neighbourhoods for prey. Even if Vidya concedes to the fact that lack of political representation of religious minorities like herself and Noorani among others, has produced a monstrously corrupt socio-political fabric, yet she has to reluctantly ‘choose and pick her fights’ as her senior Nangia had once advised her. The political structure headed by a stern

Hindu patriarchy provides her with little hope for the future of a secular and egalitarian India, thus selecting a different battleground finally makes her a social actor with some amount of agency. Therefore the aim of this study is not only to examine the cultural narrative of Ecofeminist anxieties but also to provide a deconstructive reading of the cinematic discourse along the categories of Race, exclusion and Marginalisation.

Volition And Agency In *Sherni* (The Tigress) - An Ecofeminist Perspective Or A Neo-Darwinian Survival Of The Fittest In The Human Wild?

Sherni (The Tigress) represents an incandescent version of Bollywood that conflates Gender, Ecology, Class Conflict and Socio-Political insecurities within its narrative scope. Cinema of this kind, is a rare attempt at spawning serious ecofeminist concerns and also the concomitant urgency of Race that comes with Gender, Ecology and Conservation. Bollywood, as Mainstream Indian Cinema is known in popular discourse is a Pan-Indian Institution in its own right, consolidating diverse ideologies and regional politics, and exploring a wide national space that infuses myriad aspects of cultural life. This paper aims to engage with the predominant themes that this cinematic text depicts, with a juxtaposition of the two governing interpretations that best justify the thematic motif, and finally provide a conclusive reading which is more befitting with the larger politics of a hybrid and multiracial Indian society. *Sherni* (The Tigress) begins with a micro-cosmic image of the complex nexus of political wrangling and bureaucratic abuse that so define the Post-Coloniality of an Indian Nation-State, with the female protagonist planted like a deus-ex machina to resolve conundrums. At the very outset, her arrival to dissipate wrongs and rescue T-12, the tigress for safe disposal to a national park or a reserve forest, seemed to be inextricably connected with the

natural force - with the exception of the occasional jibes directed at her gender through which Vidya Vincent battles patriarchy at work and home, the apogee is steadily accomplished with this Nature-Gender analogy. As pressure mounts on her to locate and arrange for the capture and custody of T-12 to save an impoverished tribal community crushing under its menace, the female protagonist becomes increasingly perceived as an apt deliveress; an incarnate spirit of the forest. The parallelisms drawn between Gender and Nature preys on the plot throughout, with astute comparisons between the barrenness (childlessness) of Vidya and the sterile natural landscape reeling under the effect of deforestation, triggered by an aggressive capitalist expansionism and/or uncontrolled overgrazing. Britannica (2018) defines Ecofeminism/Ecological Feminism as “a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature...Ecofeminism uses the basic feminist tenets of equality between genders, a revaluing of non-patriarchal or non-linear structures, and a view of the world that respects organic process, holistic connection and the merits of intuition and collaboration. To these notions, ecofeminism adds both a commitment to the environment and an awareness of the associations made between women and nature. Specifically, this philosophy emphasizes the ways both nature and women are treated by patriarchal (male-centred) society. Eco feminists examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature. The philosophy also contends that those norms lead to an incomplete view of the world, and its practitioners advocate an alternative worldview that values the earth as sacred, recognises humanity's dependency on the natural world, and embraces all life as valuable.” Reviewing Marie Mies and Vandana Shiva's work on Ecofeminism, Helen R. Graham, points out how Shiva critiques the project of Modern Science as reductionist or mechanical, a "western, male-oriented and patriarchal projection which necessarily entailed the subjugation of both nature and women" (Graham, 1996). Elaborating further, Graham throws light on Marie Mies's predicament where she “discusses the pernicious

effect on nature, women and other people of ‘the myth of catching-up development’, a path which is and will remain an illusion’ for women. This is so because the great values of the French Revolution (ie the promises of freedom, equality, and the self determination of the individual), ‘are betrayed for many women because all these rights depend on the possession of property, and of women’ such rights cannot be extended to all women in the world, since the self-interest of the individual is always in competition with the self-interest of others. When applied to ecological problem, the principle of self-interest leads to intensified ecological degradation and destruction” (Graham, 1996).

Instances of this principle of individualism and self-preservation abounds in *Sherni* where the political squabbles of two warring factions, machinations of the powerful in the high echelons of bureaucracy, and the puerile pride of poachers for trophy killings are weighed against the rudimentary survival skills of a dispossessed tribal community over a single bone of contention - the capture of T-12. Each group has a specific agenda to acquire, and against the backdrop of the wild, this admonishing tale of primal conflict transforms itself into some dark Shakespearean tragedy. As the Indian Express (2021) pronounces in its review of *Sherni* ; “This little village is a cauldron in which conservation, environment, politics, is simmering away, and the flash points are the deaths of those villagers who are forced to take their cattle to tiger country because their grazing land has been gobbled by the powerful mining lobbies. You get a bird's eye view of the dense, green forest, and in the far distance, a glimpse of a tiger, a heart-stoppingly beautiful animal being hunted by those who have encroached on to his land”. As the central protagonist Vidya Vincent charts her way, fence-straddling and fire-fighting the diversely motivated competitive camps around her, the feasibility of a grand narrative of Ecofeminism becomes increasingly fragile and the clash of conflicts become steadily imagined in a brutish state of nature rather than a material

jungle. As the Hindustan Times review (2021) outlines; “Sherni is part satire of Indian bureaucracy and part understated call to action. In Sherni, the filmmaker makes a case for conservation - of animals, of nature, and most importantly, of our shared humanity”. As a Neo-Darwinian (Encyclopedia.com, 2018, defines Neo-Darwinism as the modern version of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, incorporates the laws of Mendelian genetics and emphasises the role of natural selection as the main force of evolutionary change) combat of human power ensues, Vidya's agency and volition is put to test when T-12 is killed by a local poacher (Pintu), legitimately aided and backed by the power structures. Therefore, less than a skirmish between Man versus Animal or Man versus Woman (Vidya depicted as battling powerful patriarchy and casual sexism throughout), it finally becomes an All-Human endurance strife where women end up as disempowered and failed agents of conservation, thus disabling the basic principles of an ecofeminist ideology. Exploring the different schools of Ecofeminism, Chen Ling (2014) emphatically states; “However, when arguing the female value and significance in the environmental movement, the schools all hold that women and nature have the same dominated status in the history, pointing out that the patriarchal structure is the cultural origin which caused natural domination and gender domination, advocating the combination of natural liberation and women liberation, and calling on women to play a leading role in the ecological movement” (Ling, 2014). Though *Sherni* (The Tigress) is rife with Ecofeminist associations, as poignant as the equation of the beast (T-12) to the female protagonist Vidya Vincent, and her combat against deep-seated patriarchy, along with her role as the natural agent of conservation, yet this tentative reading loses ground with the catastrophic push back Vidya suffers over the capture and pre-meditated murder of T-12 by the rival power camp/s. Later, when the tragedy is eclipsed by the remarkable recovery of the cubs of the dead tigress, this striking narrative event not only helps wipe the tide of consternation but also contributes significant symbolism to the category of race that eventually

transcends female agency in the crowning scene of the camaraderie between Vidya, a Malayali Christian and Jyoti, a tribal Low-caste. Drawing from this collaboration of minority races and developing on its potential for resistance, the following section explores the dynamics of Race, Exclusion and Belonging in a Contemporary India, to provide that critical reading of the film which can be considered equivalently apt and topical for its present-day relevance.

The Tigress (T-12) As The Straw Man – Re-Negotiating The Symbolism In T-12 As An Objective Correlative Of Coeval Racial Politics:

As the narrative of *Sherni* (The Tigress) develops, deep fissures of cataclysmic race politics are transpired, camouflaged in-between the more benign narrative of gender politics and ecological disaster. Drawing from the argument of the last section about a Neo-Darwinian conflict of primal instincts that topple the human world of power struggle; one can opine that the only concomitant reading of *Sherni* is that of Conservation of races. The New Indian Express (2021) presents an apt synchronization of the theme; “A multi-layered bureaucracy, manned by officials often serving their own agendas, spells doom for the striped cat threatened by constant habitat loss”. The review goes on to further underline how the film “does showcase how human greed knows no bounds, and how it is perfectly capable of profiteering both from the poor's desperate forest dependence and the tiger's annihilation”. In this brutally divided world, races seem to be clearly polarised in the sharp opposition between Good and Evil. While Vidya, a Christian, has as her allies : a Muslim College professor Hassan Noorani (a passionate environmentalist at heart) and a tribal (aboriginal) woman Jyoti (voicing the concerns of her marginalised community), the rival camp is comprised entirely of Hindu Males : Vidya's ineffectual boss (Bansal), her once honest college senior and

now-corrupt forest department head (Nangia), a blood-thirsty trophy hunter (Pintu poacher), warring local politicians (PK and GK) and her own North Indian conservative husband (Pawan). The Hindustan Times review (2021) stokes the pulse of this hidden political debate; “Sherni is a cleverly veiled allegory for modern India. Never is this clearer than in an early scene, when a street play about peace, love and understanding is interrupted by a local politician spouting violent rhetoric. Granted, he's talking about tigers. But is he? Misinformation spreads like wildfire among the villagers, and majoritarian blind faith overpowers facts”. The fundamentalist forces of a solipsistic Hindu patriarchy that a Christian, a Muslim and a Tribal crusades against, depletes T-12 of its flamboyant connotation of predation, and the symbolism of marauding rapidly transmogrifies to a contextual semantics of Majoritarian politics: an aggressive and systemic politics of subordination of religious minorities; *it is not the tigress which hunts and preys; it is the dominant majority that does*. The seemingly apparent reading of Gender and its Ecofeminist concerns that the film unwittingly provokes, however leaves un-negotiated the intersectional context of race that comes with such gender categories. In the critical thought of post-modern feminism, a woman’s oppression is judged through the lens of her multi-positioned subjectivity. For instance, a white woman may have the privilege of race and yet be a victim of patriarchy. Likewise, a woman of colour may be subjected to a scheme of double oppression, her race and gender position her in a more precarious zone than her white counterpart. This section is based on exploring how the cinematic discourse of *Sherni* (The Tigress) celebrates the strife and victory of contemporary minority races in India who have often displayed great resilience in battling quotidian oppression. In the conflict of Justice and Unfairness, Vidya and her aides have to choose sides in order to evade peripheralization; thus T-12, the beast is merely an extended metaphor, resonating with the urgent crisis of endangered minorities and a call for equality of marginalized ethnicity. In this context, National Catholic Reporter (2019) reports; “Lynchings against

minorities in India, especially Muslims, have increased drastically since Modi came into power for the second time. Data shows that 90% of religious hate crimes in India in the past decade have occurred under the Modi government. In most cases, despite overwhelming evidence, the accused have walked free”.

The report further documents; “While most reported cases of persecution are against the country's Muslim population, Christians have also come under attack... When India's Hindu nationalist party, the B.J.P. (Bharatiya Janata Party), declared victory for the second time in the general elections this year, a sense of unease engulfed the country's minority communities, who make up 18.2% of the country's population. Since 2014, under Modi's watch, religious persecution rose..... In the past few years, Christians in the country's Hindi heartland have been facing a series of attacks from Hindu extremists. More recently, outright violence has taken a backseat, and coordinated efforts are in place to shut down institutions... A recent example is the police raid conducted at the home of Jesuit Fr. Stan Swamy, a prominent human rights activist. Swamy, a critic of the government, has been an advocate of indigenous people undergoing trials who he said were falsely accused and imprisoned for protesting violations of their constitutional rights”. The Report further illustrates how systemic persecution of Christian institutions speak of a new, diverse India; “Christians in India have been active contributors to its education system. But in an atmosphere of growing right-wing fundamentalism, Catholic educational institutions have come under attack. They often face criticism and are accused of proselytism”. Thus T-12 acts only as a straw man, drawing attention to the larger politics of the film : it is not just wildlife that needs saving, the endemic persecution of minorities in a fundamentalist Hindu state demands a powerful politics of resistance; an assertion of which is represented through the clash of interests in the film. It is crucial to overthrow the dominant ideologies that underpin social and political institutions in

contemporary India, from the patriarchal household to the manipulative bureaucracy - effective counter-tendencies that foreshadow an egalitarian society is consciously depicted in the narrative of the film, through the unconventional alliance of the minorities and their independent struggle. Before resigning from her position as a forest officer, and embarking on a new journey, Vidya performs her final mission - though T-12 could not be saved, recovering her cubs for safe custody is a victory of this short-lived alliance; which contains the potential of spawning seeds of opposition and resistance against all forms of oppression and escalating persecution. In a politically charged climate, where firebrand extremist nationalist ideologies are sprouting like beanstalks, racially subalternised communities on the fringes of a dominant Hindu society find themselves precariously balanced in a culturally void limbo. From historical appropriations to construction of mythical narratives of an anecdotal Hindu past, where the only discord is the presence of the non-Hindu outsider: the charade of Hindutva (the ruling ideology of the B.J.P.), finds extreme expression in the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019 whose discriminatory nature drew flak from all quarters. The Economic Times (2019) explains how, “The Act seeks to amend the definition of illegal immigrants for Hindu, Sikh, Parsi, Buddhist and Christian immigrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh who have lived in India without documentation. They will be granted fast track Indian citizenship in 6 years. So far 12 years of residence has been the standard eligibility requirement for naturalisation”. However, the report also emphasises that the “Bill discriminates against Muslims and violates the right to equality enshrined in the constitution”. Quoting the argument of the opposition; its chief detractors, the Report emphatically underlines; “The CAB ring-fences Muslim identity by declaring India a welcome refuge to all other religious communities. It seeks to legally establish Muslims as second-class citizens of India by providing preferential treatment to other groups. This violates the Constitution’s Article 14, the fundamental right to equality to all persons. This basic structure of

the Constitution cannot be reshaped by any Parliament. And yet, the government maintains that it does not discriminate or violate the right to equality”.

Documenting the ramifications the CAA Act, DW News (2020) reports; “Months of unparalleled mass protests followed - many of which turned violent - leading to a nationwide crackdown and the worst communal riots New Delhi has seen in decades”; the news report also elaborates how the act “excludes Muslims, a move that has been denounced for undermining India's secular constitution”. In this politically symbolic context, *Sherni* (The Tigress) is therefore a manipulatively masked fable of racial persecution (and not simply ambush of beasts or women), and a call for prompt action against all forms of racial supremacy, mastery and bigotry.

Therefore, it is incumbent to deploy a critical reading which focuses on the wielding of power by a section of the religious minority (in the hands of Vidya Vincent, Hassan Noorani and Jyoti), who singlehandedly combat systemic structures of abuse and domination. Under the pretext of conservation, these lead characters, acting as proto-types of their race, wage an unprecedented battle that chime with the contemporary politics of the post-colony. First Post (2021) probes this aspect of exclusion which underpins the cinematic text; “The forest is not the only space where *Sherni* finds harmony in nature. The Christian is a species on the verge of extinction in Bollywood. Up to the end of 1980s, Christian women were a regular presence in Hindi films, rarely as the leading lady and usually as the ultra-westernised cabaret dancer or gangster's moll in a supporting role. In those days, a sexually active Hindu heroine in skimpy clothing was largely deemed unacceptable and Christian women - who were stereotyped as dregs of a permissive foreign culture - were used for both purposes to provide a frisson of electricity to the heterosexual male audience. By the 1990s though, as it became increasingly acceptable to portray Hindu female protagonists

as not virginal and not traditionalist, Christians were more or less discarded. Sherni's heroine is not just Christian, she is Malayali with a North Indian husband and comes bearing not a single stereotypical marker this film industry once insisted on associating with Christians". Recalibrating the dynamics of exclusion from the history of cinema to the coeval history of racial politics in a post-colonial India, *Sherni* (The Tigress) may offer a favourable vantage point to engage with realpolitik. Dissecting the recent drive towards systemic ethnic cleansing in a Hindu majoritarian India, *The Atlantic* (2022) notes; "For Indian Muslims, in particular, the situation is dire. During the recently passed holy month of Ramadan, they saw their houses and shops bulldozed, their businesses boycotted, and their religious gathering heckled by Hindu-nationalist mobs. Open calls for genocide against Muslims have become commonplace, as have violent clashes and lynchings. Although the authorities generally avoid the appearance of explicitly endorsing these kinds of actions, they rarely go out of their way to condemn them. A recent open letter signed by more than 100 former civil servants accused the Indian government of being 'fully complicit' in the subordination of the country's religious minorities as well as in the undermining of the country's constitution." *The Atlantic* (2022) further states how; "Muslims and Christians alike have faced a surge in communal violence in recent years. A raft of new laws has reached into their daily lives to interfere with the religious garments they wear, the food they eat, where and how they worship, and even whom they marry". Hassan Noorani, the Zoology professor who becomes Vidya's confidante in taking on the bureaucratic authorities in *Sherni* (The Tigress), is mostly seen in this stereotypical light, the particular episode where he invites Vidya's (North Indian) Hindu in-laws for dinner is striking for the conversational ethos that grows around the dinner table. For instance, Vidya's mother-in-law is more intrigued by the food served at the table by the Muslim family and keeps hysterically insisting on the exact recipe of *Biriyani*, a renowned Islamic dish. The fact that Hassan's professional expertise is undermined and overshadowed in

favour of archetypal cultural and communal connotations that override subjectivities in a Hindu dominant society raises grave concerns about the perceived positions of the dominated minorities in a contemporary India. Hassan Noorani thus, becomes visible only as a stock character, a prototype of Indian Muslims whose cultural habits are what draws attention to the Hindu majority.

Debating this present climate of systemic racial persecution Heewon Kim (2017) notes; “Efforts have been made to reconvert disadvantaged Muslims and Christians to Hinduism; an aggressive ‘cow protection’ movement has been launched directed primarily at Muslims and lower caste Hindus; anti conversion legislation has been used to undermine religious freedom; and there have been notable episodes of violence against religious minorities, especially in states with pending elections. Traditionally, the BJP and its associated organizations have made a distinction between religious minorities for whom India is ‘not only a fatherland but a holyland’ (Buddhist, Jains, and Sikhs), and others (Christians and Muslims) whose “holyland” is elsewhere”.

While *Sherni* (The Tigress) validates minority leadership over incompetent administration, in realpolitik, the present leadership of the head of the state whose rags-to-riches story may have enticed many, has however not helped Prime Minister Narendra Modi deliver the promises of secularism or create an egalitarian India as anticipated. In this context, Heewon Kim (2017) aptly points out, “Arguably the twintrack approach – of working towards a cultural revolution while operating within the constraints of the existing political system – is also apparent in the ambivalent rhetoric of Modi. Professions of tolerance of religious diversity and harmony have been accompanied by studied silence in the face of inflammatory provocations from the Hindu Right”.

The argument of this paper is based on this very act of exploring empowerment and agency of the minority classes whose segregation is a calculated result of the complex politics of ultra-

right majoritarian Nationalism (broadly known as Hindutva) under the headship of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Conclusion: Cutting Through the Typology of the Moniker: Investigating The Underlying Connotative Text of *Sherni*: Return Of The Repressed?

The Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

(The Tyger, Songs of Experience, William Blake, 1794)

Criss-crossing the terrain between an English Romantic William Blake's allegorized exploration of the unity of oppositional energies to that of a Neo-Darwinian survival of the fittest, everywhere in the spectrum of the wild, one surveys conflict, struggle and dominion of power. Never has this been more profound than in the cinematic discourse of *Sherni* (The Tigress) which transports this encounter to the human jungle where received categories of race and ethnicity embroil in symbolic power struggles. Cinema has always served to reinforce such established ideologies or restate fresh ones, its often projected narratives of inclusion or exclusion makes it unarguably the standard vehicle for mimesis. *Sherni* (The Tigress) is a splendid fable that converges some serious issues of contemporary environmental disaster, gender subordination and racial oppression. The argument of this particular paper is predominantly constructed on the poignant sub-text of racial

politics that is subtly cocooned at the heart of the narrative: without being agitprop, this brawny approach justifies the text's engagement with the disputable politics of communalism. The narrative of Ecological responsibility and conservation from the vantage point of Gender is therefore, not the only interpretation that *Sherni* (The Tigress) offers. Latent underneath is this potent discourse of racial apartheid, discrimination and subjugation of the religiously marginalised. This paper attempts to draw attention to the state of religious minorities in present-day India : their two-fold predicament; either forceful assimilation into the centre or further dissolution into the periphery; and from this imbroglio arises the necessity of creating alternate spaces of opposition from minority positions to subvert the dominant power structures, which the film graphically portrays. *Sherni* (The Tigress) is a superb demonstration of struggle and resistance of the marginalised to reclaim power from their spaces of exclusion; it explores the necessity of addressing the topical concerns of interior Colonialities hidden in the shadow of Post-Colonial Nationhood in the Global south. This critical reading of the film that the paper specifically tries to focus on, is an attempt at celebrating minority agency, empowerment of the racially peripheralized and their role as active agents of change through their powerful representations in contemporary Indian Cinema. In a milieu that breeds and propagates popular Bollywood cinema based on Hindu mythology and political history, *Sherni* (The Tigress) could have been easily dismissed in favour of *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior* (2020), *URI: The Surgical Strike* (2019), *Samrat Prithviraj* (2022) and *Brahmastra* (2022) among others, had it not been for its striking agenda and powerful portrayal of the disempowered minorities under a Hindu fundamentalist regime. What sets *Sherni* (The Tigress) apart is its subtle take on the BJP led Ultra-Nationalist propagandist regime that conveniently marginalises and subjugates minority classes in the name of public policies and constitutional and legal reforms. The film did draw flak from a section of nationalist watch dogs

that accused it of propagating Hindu phobia. In a post-colony that after years of British colonial rule finally found its own place in the world, Secularism unfortunately, is still a redundant value, falsely inscribed in the constitutional agenda, it vaguely exposes the promises made by numerous governments post-independence and the total mutilation of it under the present-day BJP rule. Granting agency to the characters (in *Sherni*) carefully selected from subalternised faith communities, is an aesthetic weapon that successfully delivers on the idea of poetic justice and a fulfilment of cathartic experience for the sensitive and critical viewer. *Sherni* (The Tigress) is a tale of fortitude and defiance that vocalises volumes about resistance movements and power struggles that have occupied centre stage contingently in any multicultural society where racial and cultural domination of tribal nationalist regimes have often forever segregated the religiously displaced.

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