

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165

*The Criterion*

# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**15** YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 15 ISSUE-6 DECEMBER 2024

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## Nature and Culture in Conflict: Ecocritical Reading of Movie *Bhediya*

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14606137>

**Article History:** Submitted-11/11/2024, Revised-18/12/2024, Accepted-22/12/2024, Published-31/12/2024.

### **Abstract:**

"The environment is where we all meet; where we all have a mutual interest; it is the one thing all of us share," observed Lady Bird Johnson, underscoring the universal importance of environmental preservation. The 2022 Hindi-language film *Bhediya*, directed by Amar Kaushik, provides a compelling site for ecocritical and cultural studies analysis, intertwining environmental themes with folklore and myth. Ecocritical theory, as Lawrence Buell asserts, interrogates the representation of nature and the human-nature relationship within cultural texts. Through this lens, *Bhediya* unfolds a narrative about environmental conservation, wildlife protection, and the clash between modernization and ecological balance. Set in the forests of Arunachal Pradesh, the film follows Bhaskar, a man bitten by a mythical wolf who gradually transforms into a werewolf-like creature. His transformation symbolizes humanity's growing disconnection from nature and the dire consequences of exploiting the environment for capitalist gain, as his construction project threatens the local ecology. From a cultural studies perspective, drawing on Raymond Williams's critique of *Culture and Society*, *Bhediya* offers a pointed critique of deforestation, corporate greed, and uncontrolled development. It reflects broader societal attitudes toward nature and modernization, blending indigenous cultural beliefs with urgent environmental concerns. The film engages with complex issues of identity, power, and the interaction between local and global forces, critiquing environmental degradation while urging a more respectful relationship with nature. Thus, this paper explores how *Bhediya* contributes to the discourse on cultural identity and ecological responsibility, urging a reconsideration of our place within the natural world amidst contemporary Indian society.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, cultural studies, folklore, modernization, environmental conservation, myth, nature.

## **Methodology**

This paper contains a qualitative assessment, particularly of the entire content of the film with respect to some selected rational discourses in *Bhediya*. It utilizes Lawrence Buell's ecocritical theory with a view to contextualizing the film within environmentalist discourse and incorporates the cultural criticism of Raymond Williams where it contrasts with the Marxist concept and how it is about modernity and capitalism.

## **Introduction**

Films have become increasingly important, in portraying sustainability issues and the impact of degradation and cultural problems using a /post-global approach in recent years. Ecocriticism is usually an approach mainly applied in literary criticism or works of a scholarly nature including fictional and non-fictional works. Thus, the examined use of ecocriticism in other forms of art, film in particular, has been lacking: *"Rarely has a cinema in general been viewed through an ecocritical lens, nor has there been much evidence in the main venues of ecocriticism of the sustained application of ecocritical strategies to film and cinema studies"* (Ivakhiv 1). Certainly, ecocriticism praises positive representations of nature in written texts, but Ivakhiv shows that reading only these qualities in texts, written or filmic, does a disservice both to the text being studied and the theory used to analyze that text (7). When giving an ecocritical reading of a written text, one observes the manner in which the environment is portrayed, to what degree the characters and the author exhibit anthropocentric characteristics (and to what degree this may be seen as advantageous to our understanding of humans' relationship with nature), how human characters act upon, and react to, the environment, how the characters and authors use place and space, how, and to what degree, nature is anthropomorphized, and so forth. These are the same qualities that ought to be observed when giving an ecocritical reading of a film. These are the same qualities which ought to be observed when giving an ecocritical reading of a film.

The 2022 Hindi film 'Bhediya' directed by Amar Kaushik is also based on the dense jungles of Arunachal Pradesh and thus provides plenty of scope for engaging these inter-related questions.

This research seeks to examine Bhediya concerning ecocriticism and identity politics, which politicizes cultural practices of environmental care and Indigenous peoples' struggles in the contemporary era of cultural homogenization. The struggle of nature and culture is present in the title of Bhediya. The film frames the struggle as a battle between two opposing influences: nature (which is represented by Arunachal Pradesh's vast forest cover and state animal, Bhediya) and development (represented by Bhaskar's construction business through which he is bringing 'change' to the region at the price of environment.) "Nature and Culture in Conflict" accurately captures the chief theme in Amar Kaushik's Bhediya. The movie portrays the clash between two contrasting forces: on one hand it depicts the natural environment represented by the forests of Arunachal Pradesh and the mythical Bhediya, the wolf, and on the other hand modern civilization embodied in the character of Bhaskar, who, similar to other movie villains, wants to carry out a construction project which will bring 'progress' and 'development' at the cost of the health of the forest.

Over the past few years, ecocriticism has been adopted as a useful critical approach in defining how nature interacts with culture, especially with aims at film and literary studies. Specifically, ecocriticism is a critical approach developed in the last decades of the 20th century that investigates the interaction between literature, culture, and nature. According to Lawrence Buell, one of the founders of ecocriticism, the environmental crisis has resulted in a crisis of imagination, or the ability of culture to conceive of itself and the place of humans in the natural world. This is the task that Lawrence Buell accepts in *The Environmental Imagination*, the most monumental work in the field of literature and nature up to the present. Ecocriticism addresses how and whether or not a text reinforces anthropocentric attitudes about the natural world, frequently condemning the exploitation of the environment for the sake of profit and the destruction of habitats. It stresses that the environment is not just a passive context of human actions and undertakings but an actor who co-constructs stories and cultures. Buell in his work *The Environmental Imagination* has written, "*environmental literature cultivates the ability to see the world as a community of interdependent parts rather than as a commodity to be exploited*" (Buell, 1995, p. 30).

Cultural studies theory, as advanced by scholar Raymond Williams, explores the ways through which culture is constructed and reproduced at socio-political and economic levels. Nevertheless, Williams in his literary work titled *Culture and Society* (1980) posits that aspects of culture are deposited in other structures like capitalism, class, and industrialism. Williams, for instance, while explicating the significant connection between culture and industry asserts that “In discussing the complex relationship between culture and industry, Williams notes that “*the expansion of mass media reshaped public perception and participation in culture*” (Williams, 1958, p. 148).” It is within this framework that one can explore how human behavior pertains to the physical environment in light of economic and political forces, particularly those that revolve around modernity, capitalism, and indigenous peoples.

Through synthesizing Ecocriticism and cultural studies, one is easily able to analyze the link between environmental questions and cultural and power relations. Ecocriticism argues against environmental domination while cultural studies analyze domination as a result of capitalist progression, modernity, and globalization. These two theoretical plans meet in *Bhediya* where the film works to lampoon environmental depletion, and, at the same juncture, demine cultural conferment and indigenous credence. It demonstrates effects of the modern development activities on the interconnections between humans and non-humans when particular emphasis is placed on the ecological and cultural implications. Through the use of these frameworks, this paper aims to show how *Bhediya* responds to environmental destruction that is associated with capitalists’ activities as well as exposes the deterioration of indigenous cultural practices due to the modernization process. The utilization of myth and folklore combined with modern environmental problems promotes greater sociocultural awareness and mutually, insists on an appropriate attitude toward nature.

### **Nature vs. Culture: An Ecocritical Perspective**

From the viewpoint of ecocriticism, it is possible to underline that the conflict in *Bhediya* reveals the interdependence of people and nature. Lawrence Buell suggests that ecocriticism concerns itself with how literature, including film, represents the relationships between people and the natural environment and the consequences we then experience. In *Bhediya*, the wolf, and the forests symbolizing nature itself fight back against human invasion. It would be quite misleading

to argue that Bhaskar became a werewolf; this transformation is an indication of the continuity of the bond between humans and the natural environment, and human's failure to recognize this continuity has dire consequences – be it due to the process of urbanization, industrialization or capitalist exploitation. This change presents among many the message that people are not in a context with the environment but are a part of it. The storyline was seen as an allegory to teach the readers against the ideology of seeing nature as a mere economic commodity. The concept of change that devolves from Bhaskar's awakening is from a capitalist mode of exploitation of existence as a source of profits to one that recognizes that nature is worthy of stewardship in its own right. The film's ecocritical message is evident: nature will revenge for all that has been done to it and such reactions may not be very tender. Consequently, Bhediya aligns with Buell on the matter that while nature forms the backdrop of most ecocritical works, it is never passive. Buell also notes that ecocritical texts should be appreciated not only for how they represent nature but also for how they portray the environment. He emphasizes in his work *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* the “need for ecocriticism to become more inclusive of diverse global and cultural perspectives on the environment”, recognizing environmental issues as universal yet locally nuanced (Buell, 2005, p. 87). In Bhediya, nature is not just a setting but a driving force of the narrative. Boarding the forests of Arunachal Pradesh, a highly acclaimed ecological zone, becomes the central thematic presentation for establishing conflict between anti-capitalist from environmentalism.

The character of Bhaskar himself is portrayed as the spirit of modernity – a construction that is intended to develop the land for the benefit of business. At the beginning of the film, Bhaskar says: “*Jungle ka kya hai? Yahan bas ped hain. Inko kaatke ek bada project banayage, sabka bhala hoga*”. This statement sums up the clash between capital and ecology, a theme present throughout the movie. The main character, Bhaskar, becomes a werewolf-like creature after being bitten by a mythical wolf and this represents detachment of human beings from nature. He changes physically to mirror his spiritual and psychological transformation, regaining the connection with the earth he wanted to plunder. This transformation emphasizes Buell's idea in *Writing for an Endangered World* that “*environmental crisis is as much a cultural crisis as it is an environmental one*” (Buell, 2001, p. 2), suggesting that the alienation between humans and the environment has deep and lasting impacts on both.

Lawrence Buell is one of the pioneers of the literary field which is called ecocriticism, the analysis of literary works considering the relation of the culture to nature. Buell's pioneering book *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) is devoted to the study of how the natural world is represented in literature and how these representations define the relationship between people and landscape. He asserts that "*literary representations of nature can influence real-world perceptions and ethical behaviors toward the environment*" (Buell, 1995). As a way of reading *Bhediya*, the above framework developed by Buell will be useful in attempting to understand the environmental awareness imbued in the film.

In *Bhediya*, the Arunachal Pradesh forests aren't background scenery; they're a character involved in the action. This reflects Buell's notion of "environmental texts," where the environment is not a passive backdrop but a dynamic force that shapes human experience. To such an extent, Bhaskar's transformation into some kind of werewolf-like character as a result of being bitten by a mythical wolf can be understood as a representation of the Sophiological error of humanity that distances it from the natural world. While depathologized, Bhaskar gradually starts tempering his plans of constructing a modern capitalist building that will embody the degradation of the environment.

Buell's idea of "toxic discourse" also finds relevance in *Bhediya*, as the film portrays the effects of deforestation and the destruction of natural habitats. The construction of the project undermines the structure of the forest which is a mirror image of the current capitalist activities in the world that only aim at the development of infrastructure. As Bhaskar states early in the film, "*Yeh jungle ka kya hai? Sirf ped hain, inse to hum paisa kama sakte hain*", encapsulating the capitalist view that nature is a resource to be exploited for profit. According to Buell, such toxic discourse appears when nature is commodified as an exploitable material by the capitalist economy (Buell, 2001). Additionally, Buell's idea of "environmental justice," which addresses the ethical concerns surrounding environmental damage that disproportionately impacts marginalized groups, is reflected in *Bhediya*. The indigenous people in the film who hold the forest as their enchanted land are the worse off due to several environmental wrongs that result from Bhaskar's project. This situation raises questions about the ownership of natural resources and whose needs are favored in the name of development as Buell criticizes.

In Bhediya, Dr. Anika's transformation into a werewolf-like creature holds a significant role in the film's environmental and ecofeminist themes. Unlike Bhaskar (Varun Dhawan), whose transformation symbolizes the harmful effects of capitalist exploitation and environmental degradation, Anika's metamorphosis embodies the ecocritical, feminist principles of nature's resilience and the power of feminine energy in restoring ecological balance. This transformation highlights the film's deeper engagement with ecofeminism, which connects the exploitation of both nature and women under patriarchal structures.

Anika's character, portrayed by Kriti Sanon, serves as a direct reflection of Carolyn Merchant's concept of the feminization of nature. Merchant argues that nature, like women in patriarchal societies, has historically been viewed as something to be controlled, used, and commodified. However, she also suggests that nature possesses the power to resist such exploitation and can restore balance when necessary (Merchant, 1980). Anika's transition into a werewolf (Bhediya) illustrates this dynamic: she starts as part of the modern, rational world, represented by her profession as a veterinarian, but her physical transformation connects her to the primal, untamed side of nature. This duality symbolizes nature's ability to fight back against the patriarchal and capitalist forces that seek to exploit it. This transformation also connects to ecofeminist views, which assert that women, much like nature, are often objectified, oppressed, and marginalized in patriarchal societies, but they also possess the strength to challenge and change those systems (Berman, pg, 261).

Ecofeminists claim that *under patriarchy, women are disempowered to the extent that they must take on their husband's name, are viewed as sex objects, and are treated as literal objects in the legal system* (Berman, pg, 261). Further, the result of a patriarchal society in which members of that society live by the false construct that women and nature are equated is that nature is objectified in that it is treated as material goods that can be sold for profit (Berman, pg, 261; Haraway, pg, 147).

Anika is also a protagonist of the movie that also refuses to adopt the anthropocentric vision in which human beings dominate nature. She represents on the one hand, gives a voice to the character of a professional who is directly involved in the care of animals and plays on the other hand, an



element of the chronicler who tells society that nature is not an object to use and abuse but rather an entity to protect. Her character, therefore, stands for the tenets of the ecocritical appeal to concerns the separation between Man and Nature as an illusion. She embodies the concerns of the physical environment over the capitalist and industrial themes that dominated the culture then and now.

Such a change is not only a spontaneous transformation but also reveals a new perspective in terms of ecological awareness. In this regard, Anika animates a posthuman, postcolonial, postmodern, and eco-feminist orientation to the world, to nature, and women as not silent objects to be subjected to destruction but as agents of life contrary to male-led destruction. Such a transformation represents a shift back to the concern for the environment along with the reciprocal interaction of people with the resources of the biosphere. By portraying the character Anika, *Bhediya* tries to make the viewers come out of their comfort zone and try to answer some questions on their attitude toward nature and embrace the concept of the ecocritical approach to repair what has been damaged. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell discusses ecocide and says “*In the Cold War era, ecocide was always a more serious threat than nuclear destruction. In literary history since World War II, the resurgence of environmental writing is as important as the rise of magical realist fiction*” (Buell, pg, 7). This statement highlights the severe repercussions of environmental harm, framing ecocide as a major existential risk during a time characterized by geopolitical strife and a growing awareness of environmental issues.

In the film *Bhediya*, the character Anika critiques ecocide by emphasizing the importance of empathy and respect for nature in fostering environmental preservation. Anika represents the nurturing and healing qualities of the natural world, which aligns with Buell's claim that environmental literature and activism are vital in combating planetary destruction. In contrast to the destructive transformation of Bhaskar, Anika's character illustrates that understanding, care, and a deeper connection to the environment are essential for reversing the damage inflicted by human activities. This perspective supports the idea that while ecocide is a serious threat, the path to solutions lies in empathy, recognizing the inherent worth of nature, and a united effort to restore ecological balance.

## **Culture in Conflict: A Cultural Studies Analysis**

From cultural studies, using Raymond Williams's analysis of culture as a forum, the movie *Bhediya* brings to the fore and condemns how modernity mainly induced by capitalist forces destroys culture and its associated ways of living that at the same time degrade the environment. The construction project of Bhaskar which is potentially detrimental to large tracts of forest lands symbolizes ecological violation as well as interminable encroachment on the cultural and religious entity of the First Nations people. The film depicts capitalist modernization as a force of erasure, aiming to wipe out local identities, values, and connections to the land under the pretense of "progress." This seems to echo Williams' argument that culture is shaped by and responds to economic forces (Williams, 1980). While for the indigenous groups depicted in this film nature is not simply a commodity; it is an intrinsic spiritual part of who they are. The forest, as considered holy, is not an exclusively environmental concern it is also a social one.

Bhaskar's evolution from a development-focused outsider to a protector of the forest illustrates the film's critique of how capitalist forces alienate individuals from their surroundings and cultural heritage. This resonates with Williams's claim that culture, as a "whole way of life," is connected to historical and social contexts, including economic systems (Williams, 1980). As for what is going to happen to the forest in *Bhediya*, the construction project resembles uncontrolled capitalist development that does not take into account the indigenous peoples' systems of knowledge and wisdom that are always aimed at including the native people in the environment as Bhaskar gives up his corporate lenses and listens to the wisdom of local tribal people whose spirit has it that the mythical wolf represents their connection to the forest and its shield.

Similarly to *Bhediya*, Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity can also be applied to the film, as it merges contemporary issues of pollution with traditional folksy tales. Such hybridity is characteristic of the dynamics of colonization when modernity gradually infiltrates indigenous territories and cultures (Bhabha, 1994). Through blending indigenous and the modern world, the film denotes that there is a struggle between these two worlds though they are in equal proportions. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," where cultural meanings are negotiated and redefined, is exemplified in the film's portrayal of the wolf as a symbol of resistance against modernity (Bhabha, 1994). Finally, the character of Bhaskar turning into a werewolf-like figure

represents a fusion of these two realms, where the rural and the preservation of forest represent a harmonious blend with the modern progress incorporating such a figure.

Raymond Williams' critique of industrial capitalism's effects on nature, as discussed in '*Culture and Society*' (1958), provides an alternative lens for examining *Bhediya*. Williams argues that the destruction of nature is tied to the commercialization of the territory for capital gain (Williams, 1958). This concept is the elementary one in the film because Bhaskar's development initiative puts the forest and indigenous people at risk. In the beginning, Bhaskar regards the forest as something that hampers development, which is clearly explained by capitalist logic. The film's portrayal of indigenous communities resonates with Williams' idea that capitalist development sidelines traditional ways of living. About the construction project headed by Bhaskar, he fails to consider the indigenous ways that have sustained this forest ecosystem in the past. Williams's notion of "residual culture," which refers to the persistence of older cultural forms in resistance to dominant capitalist influences, is evident in the Indigenous characters' attempts to safeguard the forest. This is why their respect for the mythological wolf – the symbol of the guardian of the forest, is indicative of this remaining cultural knowledge, which opposes capitalist encroachment.

Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" also applies to Bhaskar's evolution, as it disrupts his sense of belonging and identity (Bhabha, 1994). As Bhaskar grows closer to the forest and the indigenous belief systems, his previous capitalist perspective is challenged, placing him in a transitional, "unhomely" state where he feels disconnected from both the modern and indigenous worlds. This supports Bhabha's idea of a space of culturalism deformation that proclaims special zones of hybrid and Post-Colonial contestation where identities are being constructed and reconstructed.

### **Identity, Power, and Ecology**

This is therefore a political film because, in addition to environmental destruction as a theme, power and identity are also interrogated. The change of Bhaskar may be interpreted as the experience of losing ethnicity while going through the process of modernization. These creative make him gain the perception and value system of nature over the capitalist manner of life he

once had. This shift aligns with William's argument that "*cultural identity is not static but shaped by socio-economic and historical forces*" (Williams, 1980). Also, there are comical performances of corruption and how these big companies victimize natives in Bhediya. More precisely, construction topped by Bhaskar may be analyzed as the encroachment of external capitalist actors into the indigenous space. We find here the whites as the super-dominating power and the natives as a group of people doing nothing but cower in front of their impending doom as far as their land and their resources are concerned. This aligns with Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," where marginalized voices challenge dominant ideologies and assert their agency (Bhabha, 1994).

### **Conclusion**

Thus, it might be claimed that Bhediya offers an engaging narrative that showcases the negative effects of postindustrial globalization on the environment and Indigenous peoples. The focuses on how Lawrence Buell expounded the principles of ecocriticism, as well as Raymond Williams' cultural analysis, and Homi Bhabha on the aspect of cultural hybridity, which should enlighten the film on how humanity has to reconsider the relationship between the natural and the cultural under capitalist exploitation. Bhaskar's transformation from a supporter of development to a defender of the forest encapsulates the film's key message: the concept of genuine progress defines that progress can and should entail ecological responsibility, and respect for cultures, not profit and exploitation. The apartheid in the interaction between the men and the women shows how the modern culture pursuing the development of the spaces where they live distanced them from their culture deeming it backward and thus the need to strike a balance between development and preservation of culture, that is Indigenous practices. Bhediya places emphasis on a positive, environmentally sustainable, and socially inclusive model of progress to help society change its outlook which sees success in dominating nature instead of sharing it. In terms of the overriding themes of environmentalism, sustainability, and the question of the Indigenous subject, Bhediya goes far in expanding the discourse on development and cultural stewardship in present-day India and well beyond.

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