

ECOLOGY, CASTE, AND GENDER: AN ECOFEMINIST INTERSECTIONAL READING OF *PAPILIO BUDDHA* BY JAYAN K. CHERIAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Jayan Cherian's 2013 film *Papilio Buddha* through the theoretical frameworks of ecofeminism and intersectionality. The film being set in ecologically rich landscape of Wayanad in the Western Ghats of Kerala, foregrounds the systemic violence experienced by Dalit communities, women, and the natural environment. Through an ecofeminist lens, the study probes into how the exploitation of land parallels the marginalisation of the female bodies within a patriarchal and caste-based social order. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, the study argues that environmental injustice in the film cannot be understood independently of caste oppression, gender marginalisation, and the struggle for Dalit land rights; instead they must be understood as a united single entity. The reading also gently focuses on how the Malabar Banded Peacock butterfly, referenced in the title of the film, symbolically represents transformation and resistance. Additionally, it examines the postcolonial implications associated with the butterfly being collected by a foreign researcher, suggesting a correspondence between the extraction of natural resources and the exploitation of local landscapes and communities. By examining the relationship between marginalised communities and their ecological surroundings, the paper argues that *Papilio Buddha* presents the landscape not merely as a background but as an intrinsic part of the struggle for land and identity. Ultimately, the study argues that ecological destruction in the film is closely connected to the social struggles of marginalised communities.

Key Words: *Ecofeminism, Intersectionality, Exploitation, Marginalisation.*

INTRODUCTION

The correlation between humans and the environment has become a substantial apprehension in contemporary literature and cinema. Cinema, as a powerful medium of visual representation, enables the portrayal of ecological spaces in a flamboyant manner and *Papilio Buddha* is no exception. The film opens not with characters but with the beautiful landscape of the untamed nature. Written and directed by Jayan K. Cherian, the film focuses on the atrocities committed against Dalits, women, and the natural environment. The narrative transpires in a fictional space called Meppara in Wayanad, picturing the beauty of the Western Ghats through striking visual imagery. Within this landscape, the film explores how environmental spaces form a setting for social hierarchies and structures of power. The title referring to the Malabar Banded Peacock butterfly found in the Western Ghats, symbolically connects to the region's biodiversity. This paper therefore examines *Papilio Buddha* through the theoretical frameworks of ecofeminism and intersectionality in order to analyse how ecological exploitation intersects with caste oppression, gender marginalisation, and struggles for land and identity.

The paper uses ecofeminism to apprehend how the oppression of women is linked to the exploitation of nature. "The new relationship of man's domination and mastery over nature was thus also associated with new patterns of domination and mastery over women" (Shiva xv). Ecofeminist thinkers like Vandana Shiva argue that the domination of women and nature are interconnected processes rooted in patriarchal and hierarchical structures. This outlook is distinctly relevant to *Papilio Buddha*, which has been primarily studied only through the lens of

caste. An ecofeminist reading reveals that the film not only critiques caste oppression but also highlights the parallel exploitation of ecological spaces and women. The natural landscape and the female body are both depicted as sites for control and domination. The paper also utilizes the theory of intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which refers to the interaction and cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination that shape an individual's life. As Crenshaw argues, "Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment" (Crenshaw 1249). Thus, systems of oppression do not operate independently but intersect in complex ways. This framework is particularly relevant to *Papilio Buddha*, where gender, class, and caste intersect to sustain the marginalisation of communities. The film demonstrates that these structures of inequality are interconnected, with individuals experiencing layered forms of oppression rather than a single, isolated form of discrimination.

Thus, the concepts of ecofeminism and intersectionality operate together in *Papilio Buddha*, contributing to the marginalisation of both nature and the indigenous people of Meppara. These forms of oppression are interconnected and function simultaneously, resulting in the exploitation and dispossession of both ecological spaces and marginalised communities. The character of Manjushree in the film can be understood as one of the victims of these intersecting structures of power, including patriarchal domination, caste-based marginalisation, and the systemic displacement of indigenous populations. The film begins with a variety of visual sequences of the lush landscape of Wayanad, a tool that Cherian uses to establish the ecological narrative as central to the text. This is followed by Shankaran, the protagonist carrying a dead peacock from a bushy area to the top of a mountain and lying beside it. The dead peacock thus turns into a visual representation of the ecological degradation which is prevalent not just in the fictional place Meppara but also around the world. The visual of the peacock feathers resting on Shankaran's face adds on a layer of intimate connection between nature and individual.

To understand how the female characters in the movie are exploited, it is important to analyse the different ways in which violence targets both indigenous women and the natural environment, and how these two threads run side by side. Cherian visually juxtaposes shots of degraded hills and landscapes with moments of explicit violence against women. In one such sequence, images of environmental degradation are immediately followed by police raiding two indigenous women. The police officers do not hold back, instead they humiliate the women with language loaded with sexual threats. This incident is not just a dramatic choice of Cherian but a key to ecofeminism. The film leans into an ecofeminist stance, showing that patriarchal power doesn't just dominate nature or women in isolation. It ties the two together, so the ruined landscape and the abused bodies both end up as sites of control and exploitation.

The character of Manjushree offers a significant example of gendered oppression within the film. As a woman who earns a living by driving an auto-rickshaw, she openly defies traditional gender roles, this results in hostility from male drivers. A targeted campaign of sexualized verbal abuse similar to the earlier treatment of indigenous women follows. However, she refuses to be a passive subaltern; she actively resists the aggressors by confronting one of the men. Her realisation becomes explicit when she tells Shankaran, "I thought his problem was me being an auto driver. Now I realize, it is because I am a girl" (35:16–35:20). This moment highlights how her identity as a woman becomes the basis of her marginalisation. When Manjusree shares her experience of harassment to Shankaran, he responds by reducing it to her body, aiming to say that such attention is inevitable because of her physicality. This response reveals how the female body is seen as something to be desired, used and consumed rather than respected. Manjusree does not hold back her anger at such kind of objectification. The entitlement and tone of

consumption that the male figures in the film embody reflect a larger pattern, where nature too is considered as something to be taken, used and controlled. The female body and environment are exploited without consent.

Further, outsiders who claim to support indigenous struggles often view the landscape merely as a site of visual beauty to be captured through the camera, reducing nature to an object of aesthetic pleasure. In a similar way, Manjusree and the other indigenous women are subjected to the patriarchal gaze, where they are viewed as objects for voyeuristic pleasure. This parallel becomes striking in the scene where an earth moving machine removes the last tree from a hill, symbolising the violent stripping of the environment. Just as how the environment is valued only for its resources and beauty before being stripped of its dignity, women too are stripped away of all their identity and dignity. The brutal gang rape of Manjusree within the bushy fringes of the forest serves as the film's most visceral metaphor for the dual exploitation of nature and the marginalized body. By staging this assault in a natural space that has been rendered 'unprotected' by the state, Cherian establishes a direct parallel between the desecration of the topography and the violation of the female subject. The act of the attackers urinating upon her is particularly significant; it functions as an act of abjection, reducing the woman to the status of 'waste' or 'dirt' in the same way that the industrial-patriarchal state treats the landscape as a site for toxic disposal and extraction.

Cherian utilizes the image of a tribal pregnant woman being brutalized to illustrate the intersectional vulnerability of the displaced subject. As the woman intervenes to prevent the extrajudicial 'dragging' of her husband into a police vehicle, the officer's boot to her stomach symbolizes the patriarchal State's desire to abort the resistance movement itself. Within an ecofeminist framework, the bleeding of the pregnant mother mirrors the 'bleeding' of the Wayanad soil; both the maternal body and the earth are treated as sites of extraction and disposal. The police officer's violence highlights a chilling reality: in the eyes of the hegemony, the indigenous womb is a threat that must be disciplined, while the indigenous man is a criminal for demanding his right to the soil. Ultimately, the ecofeminist trajectory of *Papilio Buddha* establishes the idea that the degradation of the Meppara landscape and the systemic violation of female bodies are two branches of the same patriarchal tree. By visually putting together the excavation of the hills and capturing the Dalit land with the sexualized disenfranchisement of indigenous women, Cherian argues that the state's developmental agenda is essentially for extracting the fertility of the earth and the autonomy of women. The film suggests that the rape of the land and the rape of the woman are part of a singular, phallogocentric logic of conquest.

Intersectionality is another important theoretical framework that can be traced throughout the film. Although Kimberlé Crenshaw primarily developed this concept in relation to African American women, it is equally relevant in understanding the experiences of indigenous communities in *Papilio Buddha*. Intersectionality highlights how multiple forms of oppression operate together rather than separately. As Britannica notes, "Crenshaw introduced the concept to address experiences of oppression that could not be adequately understood as the result of ordinary patterns of discrimination" (August Samie). In the film, caste, gender, ethnicity, and class collectively contribute to the marginalisation of individuals and communities. The experiences of Manjushree, as discussed earlier, demonstrate how indigenous women are not oppressed solely on the basis of gender but through multiple, overlapping factors. While she faces harassment as a woman, her marginalised social background and economic condition further intensify her vulnerability, "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If ... the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is more deeply in the shadow" (Spivak, 2013). Class, in particular, plays a significant role in shaping her lived reality. Her economic circumstances compel her to take up work as an auto-rickshaw driver, a profession

dominated by men, where she continues to face hostility and discrimination. "I want to make a living too. I am struggling to run that school. They all want to have me" (35:21 – 35:29) is what she says to Shankaran.

Being a Pulaya woman becomes yet another reason for marginalisation in the film. "Gender relations are circuitous in a subaltern community with women double oppressed and occupying liminal spaces within the caste-entrenched patriarchal society." (Raj et al. 10) In the film *Manjusree* is subjected to the voyeuristic gaze of male auto drivers, not just because she is a woman but also because she belongs to a marginalised caste. Her body is considered as accessible within this social hierarchy. The brutal rape inflicted upon her and the denial of justice highlights how caste intensifies gendered oppression. Ethnicity functions a major role in intersectional Marginalisation within the film. Because the residents of Meppara are ethnically and culturally distinct from the dominant state apparatus, the land rights activism is frequently re-coded as terrorism and insurgency. This is evident in the dialogue by a politician: "The Dalits of Meppara has put the government in crisis" (1:25:26- 1:25:28). This reframing enables the state to impose a criminalizing gaze, where the simple act of inhabiting ancestral land is transformed into trespassing state-controlled forest spaces. Cherian argues that this erasure is deliberate, "In *Papilio Buddha*, we captured visually the horror of this ecocide in a region where Adivasis and the Dalit population were leading an environmentally-friendly life. These were people whose living depended on the forest" (Misrahi-Barak and Thiara 6). By portraying these lives as inherently disposable, the state ensures that "The state-sanctioned deforestation and ecocide go hand in hand with the genocide of the people who were displaced from their habitat" (Misrahi-Barak and Thiara 6). Thus, ethnicity is not a simple axis in intersectionality but as a specific site in which the state enacts its dual destruction of human life and environmental heritage.

The Postcolonial dimension adds yet another layer to the already existing intersectional framework. In a scene, Shankaran is seen attempting to capture a rare butterfly for a foreign researcher, which underlines the commodification of nature. The act of taking a butterfly which is endemic to Western Ghats points to the colonial practice of appropriating indigenous biodiversity and knowledge for the benefit of outside systems of power. For the foreign researcher the Meppara land is not valued for what it means to the people who live within it but for the resources that he can capture away from the place to benefit the foreign knowledge system. This is what Rob Nixon identifies as slow violence — harm that is "dispersed across space and time," where "casualties are deferred across generations and the agents of destruction remain difficult to name" (Nixon 14). The harmful effects of capturing an endemic species can only be understood later as time passes. The researcher's gaze over Meppara land replicates the colonial surveyor's gaze. This extractive behaviour has a historical root in Wayanad. Colonial forest policies systematically displaced the indigenous communities from their land, reclassifying their ancestral lands as state-controlled reserves. The state's present-day criminalisation of Dalit-rights movements is not a new one but a continuation of the old colonial one that frames demand for ancestral land as terrorism. This dimension deepens Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. Nixon notes that such violence haunts the lives of those "immiserated, abandoned, and humiliated by authoritarian rule and by a purportedly postcolonial new world order," where slow violence "coupled with direct repression, can ignite tensions, creating flashpoints of desperation" (Nixon 29). This is precisely what *Papilio Buddha* shows, the Dalit- Adivasi communities of Meppara are not just marginalised by one aspect but are entrapped in a loop of marginalising factors.

Consequently, an intersectional approach shows that the oppression in *Papilio Buddha* is not singular but a systemic one. The film shows how caste hierarchy, colonial extraction, gendered objectification, economic marginalisation, and ethnic othering work together to render the

Dalit-Adivasi subject expendable. By tracing how these forces converge upon the lives of the people of Meppara, Jayan Cherian challenges the idea of oppression as a singular or uniform experience. Instead, the film demonstrates that the state's criminalising gaze operates through the intersection of these multiple forms of marginality. Consequently, the resistance depicted in the film moves from mere land-rights activism to a radical ontological shift toward Ambedkarite-Buddhism. This is a profound recognition that one cannot dismantle the ecocide of the Western Ghats without simultaneously dismantling the intersectional power structures that facilitate it. The film suggests that the ecological destruction of the Western Ghats cannot be addressed without also confronting the social and political systems that sustain it.

In conclusion, *Papilio Buddha* serves as a powerful articulation of both ecofeminist and intersectional concerns. The final sequence acts as a striking realisation of how the system of power prioritises capital over the marginalised and the natural environment. Cherian choice of a silent tone as the residents of Meppara succumb to state power is a profound cinematic mourning. As the displaced trek through the lush jungle and emerge into the stark, degraded landscapes scarred by the dominant system, the film visually maps the transition from organic belonging to industrial alienation. From an ecofeminist perspective, this forced exodus signifies the breaking of the deep connection between body and land, where the suffering of the people parallels the degradation of the environment. At the same time, an intersectional reading reveals how the Dalit-Adivasi community is rendered expendable within structures of caste, class, and state power. The fragile *Papilio Buddha* butterfly, once a symbol of ecological richness, becomes a metaphor for the precarious existence of both nature and marginalised lives under such systems. The film ultimately suggests that the destruction of the Western Ghats is not merely an ecological crisis, but also a social one, involving the systematic displacement of those who have historically lived in harmony with the land. In its final moments, the film leaves the viewer with a stark realisation: without meaningful resistance to these intersecting structures of power, both the environment and the communities that depend on it face an uncertain and diminished future.

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