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Beyond the Human: Multispecies Kinship and Cinematic Ethics in Debalina Majumder's Jilipibalar Bondhura

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Environmental thought has compelled scholars across disciplines to challenge anthropocentric assumptions by reconsidering the ecological, ethical and political impact of the relationship of human beings with the more-than-human world. Documentary cinema has special significance in this arena as its attention to meticulous details while filming everyday life can make ecological interdependence, multi species coexistence and shared vulnerability perceptible in ways that the other abstract environmental discourses sometimes fail to. The present paper Jilipibalar Bondhura, a documentary by Debalina Majumder, is an important milestone in contemporary eco-cinema. Filmed around a giant tamarind tree over twelve years, it records an interdependent ecosystem of children, trees, birds, animals and adult human residents. Jilipibala, the child, is the toddler who enters this multispecies world. She gradually learns the names of various life forms inhabiting the tree, forming friendships with them. Her all-embracing innocent world is contrasted against the disturbing sounds and sights of urban development. The sound of the cutting of branches and trunks of trees repeatedly strike as trauma inducing abuse to the child's inclusive world. Drawing primarily on Donna Haraway's concept of “making kin” and engaging with Rob Nixon's account of slow violence, Anna Tsing's

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concept of collaborative survival and and Stacy Alaimo's transcorporeality, the paper argues that Jilipibalar Bondhura portrays the tamarind tree not merely as a natural object but as a companion, a neighbour, an archive, a witness and a habitat. I propose the term arboreal kinship to describe the relationships forming in and around the tree. Situating human experience within a larger network of non-human lives the film constitutes a form of cinema beyond species. Juxtaposing two contrasting scenes of the child's affectionate inclusive world and the exclusionary remarks by a ruthless grown up rebuking the children for trespassing on private property, the documentary shows that ecological violence is an everyday process rather than a spectacular catastrophe. Instead of asking what happens to the people in the locality, the documentary encourages its viewers to enquire about what happens to the beings with whom people are expected to share their neighbourhood. The film reimagines the very concept of friendship and community in an otherwise every increasing anthropocentric world.

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has been increasingly defined by an ecological crisis of unprecedented magnitude. Loss of biodiversity, deforestation, destruction, pollution, climate change, species extinction, and rapid urbanisation have altered the environment in which we live. The term “Anthropocene”, understood whether as a formal geological epoch or as a means to describe the current environmental crisis highlights how profoundly human callousness have disrupted the rhythm of planetary systems. However, Anthropocene is not simply an environmental crisis. It can be further described as a crisis of imagination. How can we, the human beings, imagine a world in which we are not entitled the sole authority or agency over the rest of the species? How could we dream of narratives depicting animals, birds, insects, trees, landscapes, and rivers as active participants rather than as mere background to human experiences? And how can cinema depict relationships that are not necessarily human centric?

Amitav Ghosh, in *The great derangement* claims that contemporary cultural discourses have failed to represent climate change as they could not imagine discussions that are not revolved around human experiences. Ecological transformation, which is a gradual process, occurs across species boundaries and

across multiple temporalities. Therefore, Conventional narratives depicting dramatic human action fail to represent the issue in its true form.

Partly in response to this have emerged Environmental Humanities that examine the interconnection between human and non-human beings. Rather than imagining nature as something external to human society the scholars have started claiming the dependence of one species on the other. Donna Haraway's emphasis on multispecies relations, Timothy Morton's ecological philosophy, Anna Tsing's theory of collaborative survival –all challenge the anthropocentric world view.

Cinema particularly has the power to render relationships perceptible through intelligent usage of sounds, sights, and images. Hence it is suited to rethink relationality. Documentary cinema, more specifically, can easily visit the same place time and again, enabling its viewers perceive the ecological transformation that is slow and gradual and in doing so it can show ecological interdependence in ways that other art forms sometimes may not be able to.

1.1 Rooted specifically in a South Kolkata neighbourhood, Debalina Majumder's Documentary *Jilipibalar bondhura* portrays such an encounter. At the centre of the film is a giant tamarind tree. The director has documented the tree for more than twelve years. The tree here is not a background around which human drama unfolds, rather, it is the living presence around which an ecological world has been established inhabited by animals, birds, insects and so on. And into this preexisting multispecies community arrives Jilipibala, a toddler who forms a strong bond with the more than human world, thereby questioning the very idea of friendship which generally is imagined to be formed among human beings. She learns the names of the inhabitants of the tree, forms a deep bond with them, becomes familiar with their activities, and shares not only their joy but also their difficulties and transgressions. The film depicts friendship from the child's perspective and shows that it isn't necessarily limited among the exclusive boundaries of human beings.

This relationship gains more significance as the documentary progresses, and as we notice the gradual change in the neighbourhood –the familiar sights and sounds of everyday life around the tree i.e., public announcements, festivities, conversations gradually get disrupted by the harsher sounds of unloading of construction materials, indicating developmental aspirations towards rapid urbanisation. Casual exchange of abusive language also enters this space. The repeated sound of axes cutting the branches of trees is the most disturbing sound here which almost recurs like a refrain and in itself seems an abuse to the auditory space of this ecological world. Jilipibala does not have any idea of ecological justice or biodiversity. She

does not articulate an environmental philosophy. But her simple gestures of frustration over the destruction of the familiar ecospace are important as they are spontaneous and untheorised. Another example of exchange between the human and non-human world that can be seen in the documentary is a neighbour feeding cats. This simple act of care has been juxtaposed against a voice scolding children for trespassing a private property. This brings to the fore a much important question –care and coexistence or authority and boundaries– which ones should gain importance to define our neighbourhood? Does a neighbourhood consist only of human beings? Or does it have equal space for more than humans? The documentary *Jilipibalar Bondhura* proposes that a neighbourhood does not only mean a collection of houses inhabited by human beings, rather it is a collection of humans, birds, trees, insects, cats etc. Memories also form part of them. Drawing primarily on Donna Haraway's concept of "Making Kin" my paper argues that the documentary portrays a world of multispecies friendship. The Tamarind tree here is in the centre of what can be called arboreal kinship - a kinship in which the tree becomes a part and parcel of a community's historical, emotional, ecological and cultural life. The paper also proposes the concept of "cinema beyond species" as the film in discussion here challenges anthropocentric depiction of the world in movies. Instead of looking at nature as a spectacle, the film encourages its viewers to recognise themselves as equal participants in a shared multispecies ecosystem.

1.1.1 Theoretical framework: from anthropocentric worldview to Multispecies Ethics

The traditional environmental discourses had, till a time, encouraged the role of human beings as protector of the natural world. Multispecies ethical discourse challenges this very idea of placing humans at the centre and treats them as ecological beings who have equal share to the universe as the rest of the species. Donna Haraway in Staying with *The trouble: Making kin in the chthulucene* (2016) defines kinship as something that is not tied to ancestry, marriage or genealogy. She redefines it as a practice of "becoming-with" not only other humans but also with the rest of the non-human beings. Her phrase "Make Kin Not Babies" doesn't only challenge the concept that biological descendants are the only meaningful contribution to the already overpopulated earth, but also stresses on the importance of care, responsibility towards every single life form with which we share our earth and the sense of belongingness with them. According to her, to survive ecological crises we need to form "unexpected collaborations and combinations" with each other and the term she forms to describe such coexistence is "making oddkin". In her idea of Multispecies cohabitation, either "We become with each other or not at all" (Introduction, p.4). This idea is particularly helpful to interpret Jilipibalar Bondhura as a multispecies cinema. Jilipibala does not distinguish between human life and the rest of life forms. All of them are her friends. Her relationship with every creature she

encounters in her neighbourhood is an apt example of what Haraway theorises in her work: Kinship is something to be created through mutual care and shared responsibility. Anna Tsing in her work Mushroom at the End of the World similarly discusses the audacious absurdity of human autonomy. In her view, life in the "capitalistic ruin" can only be survived if we seriously consider collaboration among multiple species. No life can ever sustain itself on its own.

In the present documentary, the existence of the tamarind tree is connected to the soil, water, sunlight, birds, insects, animals and humans. It can be seen as an ecological assemblage. This sense of interconnectedness can further be understood through Timothy Morton's concept of mesh in *The ecological thought* (2010). Here Morton defines the Mesh as "the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things" that include objects, organisms, micro-organisms, technologies, cosmic forces and even pollution. For Morton, ecological awareness means recognising that all beings exist within an intricate network from which there is no completely independent outside. Stacy Alaimo's concept of Trans-corporeality can add another dimension to the reading of Jilipibalar Bondhura. According to it the human body is not a self-contained sealed identity, rather it is materially open to the more-than-human world. Food, water, air microbes, toxins, technologies, climate, socio-political systems move across bodily boundaries; thereby making nature and humans mutually dependent. In the documentary, the sound of the axe repeatedly cutting the branches of the trees can be read parallelly with Rob Nixon's definition of slow violence which is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p.2). The problem is that of representation. Both the attention of public and media gets drawn to visually dramatic violence and to catastrophic disasters. However, slow but steady harm is often difficult to bring to notice and easy to ignore. The gradual disappearance of a habitat, loss of a tree or change of a neighbourhood does not offer any spectacular catastrophe and therefore easy to erase from public conscience. Herein lies the importance of documentary film makers who are capable of creating narratives, using symbols, images and sounds capable of making delayed destructions perceptible. Jilipibalar Bondhura, therefore, is much more than a documentation of ecological loss. The film asks us some unsettling questions: What happens to the inhabitants of an eco-system when the place they know to be their home is gradually dismantled? Where do they go? Do they at all survive? And above all who are these "they"?

1.1.2 Jilipibalar Bondhura: Rethinking urban ecospace from a child's perspective:

The title of the film Jilipibalar Bondhura which literally means Jilipibala's friends in itself establishes the central question posed by the director: Who are the child's friends? And the answer is not limited to only

human beings. Again, the child who is the only important human being in the film is not the central character. She enters the already existing ecospace formed around the giant tamarind tree. The tree already has its own rhythm and relationships before Jilipibala enters the space. The world already created in and around the tree is discovered by her. The distinction here is important. The child pays attention to every single inhabitant in this world, pays attention to their habits, learns their names and forms a deep sense of attachment and friendship which is otherwise beyond the expected norms of egotistic human society. Her emotional involvement with the activities of the inhabitants of the tree cites an exemplary form of companionship which is very rare in a society where almost every object is valued in terms of its utility. The film juxtaposes two alternative ways of looking at the same environment. One is that of utilitarian gaze: How can the different parts of the tree be consumed? How can the space occupied by the tree be used? The other is that of the child's perspective which is an all inclusive one: where will the child's friends go if the tree is violated? The tension between these two perspectives is the fulcrum around which the film progresses.

2. The Tamarind Tree: the Multispecies commons

In any urban setting trees remain generally invisible. Almost every day we pass a few of them. They are familiar but they remain in the background. This habit of invisibilisation is reversed in the process of making of this movie when the director is engaged with the tamarind tree for a span of twelve years. The camera repeatedly gets back to it. This duration of documenting the tree is very significant. It presents an alternative temporal scale. In the otherwise changing neighbourhood the tree offers a sense of continuity. The tree is both a habitat and an archive. It acts as an ecological commons. A commons can be described as a place built by coexistence and interdependence. The significance of the tree cannot be measured by the shade it yields or the number of branches it offers. Anna Tsing's concept of collaborative survival can be cited to describe the tree as a living Network. The lives that depend on the tree for their sustenance are inseparable from it. Hence destruction of a tree cannot be treated as violation of an isolated object; rather it is the destruction of a whole ecological network.

2.1 Cinema beyond species

Cinema in this anthropocentric world has generally treated human beings as the centre of its spectatorship. Landscapes, trees, and animals have served as background or symbols. The present documentary's most significant contribution can be discovered in its deliberate shift in focus from the human to the more than human world. This is what has been proposed by the term cinema beyond species.

In this form of cinema, human beings are not absent, but they are not the only meaningful subjects around whom the rest of the species act as props. Other forms of life are equal participants in the story. This act of decentralisation is already clear in the title of the documentary. The central relationship depicted here is between the Multispecies world and the child. The artificial division between the human and non human beings imposed by calculative adults have yet not been internalised by the child. For her the bird is a friend, a tree can be a home, an animal can be a part of her family. Her honest articulations can have a profoundly alternate ecological epistemology.

2.1.1 Towards Arboreal Kinship

To understand the relationship between the tree, its inhabitants and the child , Haraway's concept of "making kin" offers the most effective framework, and based on that I propose the term arboreal kinship to define the relationship in which the tree is an inseparable part of the ecological and cultural life of a community. Such kinship has various dimensions. It is ecological, accommodating other life forms. It is temporal, connecting different generations and preserving memories. It is affective, people get emotionally attached to it. Above all, it is ethical. Once the tree becomes part of the community, its preservation becomes a matter of responsibility. The cat feeding scene by a neighbour and the child's attachment with the animals and birds can be read parallel as forms of everyday care. Instead of portraying ecological justice through any organised environmental activism, the film resorts to depicting such acts which are ordinary but important. Just in contrast to such acts is depicted another scene in which children are getting scolded for trespassing. The director deliberately juxtaposes two diabolically opposite attitudes: one is of sense of ownership and exclusion, the other is of the attitude of discovering oneness in all. The contrast is striking. Meanwhile, the branches of the tree and its inhabitants do not abide by any strict property line.

2.1.2 The soundscape

The soundscape of the film is very important to its central argument. Instead of acting as a tool for background music, the sound here plays the role of an active narrative agent. The initial familiar conversation of the neighbourhood representing acoustic life i.e. public announcements, everyday human activity, festivities etc gradually gets disrupted and replaced by the sound of unloading of construction materials, abusive languages, and the repeated cutting of the branches of the tree. The recurrent sound of the axe cutting the branches point to the fact that environmental damage is not always something to be seen; it is to be heard also. The violation of the neighbourhood is not spectacular here. It takes place incrementally. First one brunch is lost, then another. Gradually a whole tree gets destroyed. Consequently, the life built

around it gets threatened. Jilipibala's frustrated gestures are small but important. But her language of inclusion is ignored by the propagators of development.

2.1.3 Childhood, vulnerability and ecological grief

The incorporation of the child's perspective is one of the most unique interventions here. Children often perceive the world around them in a way guided by attentiveness, curiosity and openness towards non-human world. They encounter birds, insects, and trees neither as sources of obstacle nor as consumables. To them they are companions. Jilipibala here is the prime witness to ecological damage. Her gaze is totally different from that of any environment activist. She doesn't have the least idea of the economic forces behind the change in her neighbourhood. But she faces the consequences of the transformation. Through her simple gestures she asks ones their home is violated, what will happen to her friends.

2.1.4 The Anthropocene in Kolkata Neighbourhood

The Anthropocene is most often represented through catastrophic spectacles: raging wildfires, rising sea levels, melting glaciers. Such manifestations undoubtedly show the severity of the ecological crisis, but most often they obscure the quieter, gradual insidious forms of ecological violence often unfolding in and around us. A valuable framework to understand such less perceptible everyday violation has been provided by Rob Nixon through the term "slow violence" which highlights the long term consequences of these gradual ecological loss. This kind of violence has been documented in the film. Here, the possibility of removal of a single tamarind tree is leading to the consequential destruction of the whole ecosystem of a South Kolkata neighbourhood.

2.1.5 Local Root, Global Ecological Concern

In Jilipibalar Bondhura ecological violence takes place in terms of loss of tree branches, noise of unloading of construction materials, dislocation of life forms due to loss of habitat. But this makes the work no less important than any enormous ecological devastation. Though the documentary is set in a particularly South Kolkata neighbourhood, the environmental concerns it focuses on is of global nature. The intention of the film is not to portray human beings as a force against the rest of the species. Rather, it asks us to reconsider our definition of development: what does it mean to progess and develop? In order to construct buildings, to what extents can we sacrifice the relationships that make the places liveable? Again, are such constructions sustainable in themselves? Who decides that ecological relationships can be treated as secondary to economic priorities? The concept of Arboreal Kinship may suggest a possible solution. The

value of a tree should not be measured in terms of its material worth. Attention should be given to the numerous species it accommodates, to the relationships it sustains. The violation of one element of a neighbourhood is sure to affect the others. Anna Tsing's concept of "mesh" is particularly relatable here. A house can be boundaried. But an ecosystem can never be. The tree can simply not be claimed to be of anyone's exclusive private property. No one knows where its roots can spread through the soil. It serves a much greater ethical purpose in nature's scheme of things. This is where the documentary enters the realm of eco-cinema that champions environmental justice. Ecological ethics asks us not only to consider the amount of harm environmental destruction causes to us; rather it asks us to consider every life valuable.

3. Conclusion

The anthropocene asks us to re-evaluate not only our future on this planet but also to redesign the narratives through which we must assess our place within it. Scientific researches or technological innovations alone can never be able to address the environmental crisis. It asks us to rewire our way of looking at things, to reconsider ourselves as equal participants in this all inclusive multispecies world, rather than as the master of the non-human world. This paper has argued that Debalina Majumder's Jilipibalar Bondhura has contributed significantly to the contemporary eco-cinema by filming a South Kolkata neighbourhood as a site of the anthropocene. Relying upon Donna Haraway's concept of "Making kin" along with Stacy Alaimo's transcorporeality, Rob Nixon's slow violence, Anna Tsing's Mesh for its theoretical framework the paper has shown how the work champions the concept of multispecies cohabitation and reimagines the relationship between human and more-than-human world. The tamarind tree surfaces as more than a separate living object. It becomes a habitat, a neighbour, an archive, a witness and a companion. A complex web of relationships builds around it linking insects, birds, children, adults, memory, places, and time. It envisions a world built on the ethics of all embracing inclusivity grounded in attentiveness, reciprocity and shared vulnerability. The phrase "Arboreal Kinship" proposed in this paper wishes to portray such an ecological space of shared vulnerability formed around the living trees. Through this concept, Jilipibalar Bondhura shows that ecological justice doesn't always begin with environmental activism, rather it starts with everyday practice of noticing and nurturing. The film's redefinition of the concept of neighbourhood is, perhaps, the most striking contribution to multispecies cinema. A neighbourhood here has been imagined as a collage of birds, insects, trees, soil, weather, memory, children and innumerable visible as well as invisible life forms. To care is therefore to care for all or none. Through its profoundly philosophical lens, the cinema reminds us that sustenance in this otherwise egotistical and overambitious world depends on our ability to recognise that every life matters.

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