

Portrayal of environment in cinema: A comparative study of 'Pather panchali' & 'Dreams'

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Abstract

Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) and Akira Kurosawa (1910-198) are the world-famous filmmakers. Coincidentally, they were contemporary and friends. They were also sources of inspiration for each other. Their films are a landmark example of creative cine-language. In most of their movies, nature and the environment are as important as the human characters. Rather, the human being is guided by the nature to act upon. Their movies incorporate nature as an essential component for human activities. Portrayal of nature, in Ray's movies, is different from that of Kurosawa. To Ray's films environment and nature comes as part of daily life or seasonal change, whereas Kurosawa represents nature as phenomena like rain, volcanic eruptions, tsunami and earthquakes. This difference is the result of separate geographical conditions of India and Japan. Japan is environmentally very sensitive country, whereas India, due to its larger landmass, does not feel such sensitivity. *Pather Panchali* (1955) is considered as a masterpiece of parallel cinema and reflects reality. The film was made with on location shooting technique. This film, therefore, depicts the nature and environment of Bengal. In *Dreams* (1990) imagination is more important than reality. Natural phenomena are all constructed according to the theme. The nature and environment, shown in *Pather Panchali*, are integral part Bengali/Indian life and culture, but the same is not true for *Dreams*. The nature, depicted in this film, has global appeal and situations created in it are more close to universal human life, breaking the boundaries of any particular geographic location. Environment in cinema is, essentially, a cultural reflection. But, at the same time, it can surpass the limits of time and space. Hence, environmental issues taken up by Ray and Kurosawa in their respective films share a common message and theme and sensitize all kind of viewers.

Keywords: satyajit ray, akira kurosawa, nature & environment, film studies, Japan-India

1. Introduction

The term 'green screen' has become very popular, now a day, in film studies. Another phrase, 'eco-cinema' also has become common in academia. These terms reflect the concerns of environment portrayed in movies. Wild life movies, documentaries of travel and tourism are mainly raising the issues of ecology and environment and have a sumptuous size of viewers. Though, with the very beginning of the cinema, in the last decade of the 20th century, depiction of nature and environment were very common. Even, in the first feature of India, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) forests and river were part of it. Location and landscape are an integral part of feature film production. It may be real, fictitious, artificial or imaginary. Portrayal of nature and environment in cinema come as a part of shooting of location. Though the environmental concerns can be seen in various ways and in different kind of genre of films. Primarily, agenda based films are made in a format of documentary. It gives the filmmaker and the viewer a categorical idea of the problem. In feature films, it is difficult to raise the social issues directly, as narration and story are main the focus. Feature films, firstly, must entertain and then do the rest of the things. Satyajit Ray's cinema is highly coded with Bengali culture as well as local nature. Portrayal of a culture is almost impossible without depicting the nature of the locale. In, Akira Kurosawa's films too nature and culture come simultaneously. Be it, *Rashomon* or *Seven Samurai* or any other film, Kurosawa seems very alert to depict the locale and minute details can be traced in his movies. Cultural activities, generally, are connected with the natural phenomenon. There are number of Gods, rituals related to worship of trees,

mountains and rivers which reflect the connectedness of culture and the nature. Similarly, both in India and Japan, there are many festivals related with the seasons, crop cultivation and other natural happenings. Thus, environment comes in Ray and Kurosawa's movies as a vital element and creates the very base for the theme.

2. Environment and Film Studies

Film studies, generally, are confined to the analysis and evaluation of movies. This evaluation is may be done on the basis of socio-political and economic criteria or sometimes, the production techniques, the storyline, the theme and the roles played by the actresses and actors also play a major role to weight the film. There are theories to analyze movies and they provide various parameters for the judgment of movies. Scholars and cine-critics have substantiated these theories with their opinions and empirical studies. Cinematic studies also focus on these theoretical aspects while evaluating the films. The issue of environment in cinema started gaining momentum in recent years only. It is an issue related to industrialization, urbanization and many other things. Though, in films, portrayal of the nature, landscapes and wildlife are mainly analyzed to relate it to the environment. However, many studies show that the 'the process of film production and exhibition' is creating a lot of concerns to environmental issues in itself. And this fact is completely ignored when scholars debate and deliberate on the topic of 'environment and cinema.'

A research ^[1] shows that film producing and exhibition companies have destroyed many ecologically viable places across the globe to achieve their desired result on the screen.

In the name environmental cinema, big corporations disturb the landscapes to create their own sets and scenes. One example from the above research will be sufficed to understand this facet of the problem. It says, ‘*Thai environmental and pro-democracy activists publicized the arrogant despoliation they experienced when Fox was making The Beach (Danny Boyle, 2000) in Maya Bay, part of Phi Phi Islands National Park. Natural scenery was bulldozed because it did not fit the company’s fantasy of a tropical idyll: sand dunes were relocated, flora rearranged, and a “new” strip of coconut palms planted. The producers paid off the government with a donation to the Royal Forestry Department, and campaigned with the Tourism Authority of Thailand to twin the film as a promotion for the country. Meanwhile, the next monsoon saw the damaged sand dunes of the region collapse, its natural defenses against erosion destroyed by Hollywood bulldozers*’ [2]. There are many more examples, which can be cited to prove that film industry is really a major cause of pollution and a threat to environment protection. Though many films take up the issue on the screen, but at the same time, they are actually causing concerns to ecology. Titanic (James Cameron, 1997) is another such example. During the shooting of this film a large bed of seaweeds at the Popotala village (Baja California, Mexico) was damaged and despite protest of local fishermen no lessons were learned. Satyajit Ray and Kurosawa were far more aware and there is hardly any such allegation against them. Both of them, never relied on huge capital investments and their movies are categorized as ‘parallel cinema.’

3. Ray and Portrayal of Environment

Satyajit Ray made a number of full-length movies [Table-1]. *Pather Panchali* was his first film in this row and it established him as a renowned filmmaker of the world. It was also able to seek attention of film critiques towards Indian film industry.

Table 1: Important filmography of satyajit ray

1955	Pather Panchali
1956	Aparajito
1958	Parash Pathar
1958	Jalsaghar
1959	Apur Sansar
1960	Devi
1964	Charulata
1968	Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne
1969	Aranyer Din Ratri
1970	Pratidwandi
1971	Seemabaddha
1974	Sonar Kella
1975	Jana Aranya
1977	Shatranj Ke Khilari
1981	Sadgati
1984	Ghare Baire
1992	Agantuk

Human being and nature are in close proximity in *Pather Panchali*. This film depicts the real landscapes of Bengal. The main locale is the small town of Bengal with full flora and fauna. Abundance of ponds and lotus leaves and buds in it, just create a romantic imagery. Poverty and romance dwell together in this film. Ray broke notions of ‘romantic nature’.

In a rain scene, young children are enjoying it and camera not only shows the raindrops, lotus petals, buds but also its focus on activities of insects. Insects, seem dancing and enjoying the rain. Alternatively, it expresses the feeling of human beings present in the scene. Dance of insects, rain and human feelings are beautifully interwoven in this scene and provides a very sincere message that big entities (humans) and tiny entities (insects) are equally important for the eco-system. They, together, ensure coexistence of each other.

In yet another scene, the rain comes again. It is not only the rain but a letter too. Letter from Harihar Roy, the father of two kids, Durga and Apu. Apu is coming with the letter and his mother is anxious to know the contents. It is monsoon season. Sarbojaya, mother of Apu and Durga, was alone after Harihar left her behind long back. The rain and the letter, both, bring some relief to her. Rain depicts the joy and tears simultaneously.

Pather Panchali is a film, which was shot at a real location. Boral, a village on the outskirts of Kolkata is the principal location of the film. The film is also based on renowned writer Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s novel of the same name. In the novel Bandopadhyay portrayed Apu as a protagonist. In Ray’s film Apu becomes part of nature surrounding him. One critic has rightly said, ‘*Though Bandyopadhyay’s novel portrayed Apu aka Apurba Roy as the protagonist, nature in all its intense variety shared equal space with Apu in Ray’s film.*

Ray faithfully followed Bandyopadhyay’s lead when he made animals and insects -- cows, dogs, cats, birds, frogs, spiders and slithering snakes -- co-exist with human beings here [3].’

In the village the only sign of modernization can be seen in the presence of train arrivals. The train appears in a large white-flowered grass and Durga and Apu want to have a glimpse of it. The train connects the rural village and the city, the poor and the rich, the underdeveloped and the developed, the nature and the industry. The filming technique of Ray is unique. He prefers to go into the minute happenings of the nature. The camera stays over there for quite a long time to communicate the intent of the shot. Ray’s portrayal of the environment is to put it with human framework. Human activity and natural happenings go side by side and ensure the existence and survival of each other. Kurosawa emphasizes on the disastrous character of the nature and portrays the vitality and struggle of humans within it.

4. Environment in Kurosawa’s Dreams

Japan is a country of rich tradition and culture. The presence of nature in daily life is very common. In old houses one can easily see some sort of garden. Despite continuous urbanization the nature is protected and the environment is clear. It is a country with the best garbage management system and municipalities and as well as individuals are cautious about it. At the same time, it is the worst hit country by natural disasters. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, avalanches and typhoons are very common throughout the Japanese archipelago. Kurosawa depicts these events of nature in depth. It is different from Ray’s movies in treatment as well as in content. The similarities, too, are very obvious. This resemblance can be found in the last episode of *Dreams*.

Kurosawa has many movies to his credit [Table 2].

Table 2: Important filmography of akira kurosawa

1943	Sanshiro Sugata (Judo Saga1)
1944	The Most Beautiful
1946	No Regrets for Our Youth
1947	One Wonderful Sunday
1949	Stray Dog
1950	Rashomon
1951	The Idiot
1952	Ikiru (To Live)
1954	Seven Samurai
1958	The Hidden Fortress
1960	The Bad Sleep Well
1961	Yojimbo (The Bodyguard)
1963	High and Low (Heaven and Hell)
1965	Red Beard
1985	Ran
1990	Dreams (Akira Kurosawa's Dreams)

'Dreams' is his almost last one. The critics did not appreciate it very well. There is no action drama like *The Seven Samurai* and *Rashomon*. Rather, it is a philosophical and autobiographical in nature and presentation. 'Dreams' is not a single movie. It is episodic in character and Kurosawa's symbolic presence can be seen in all the episodes. Though all episodes have some sort of dream too. These episodes are 1. *Sunshine Through The Rain* 2. *The Peach Orchard* 3. *The Blizzard* 4. *The Tunnel* 5. *Crows* 6. *Mount Fuji in Red* 7. *The Weeping Demon* 8. *Village of the Watermills*. As the titles suggest all these stories rotate around environmental issues. 'Kurosawa's Dreams is a unique and very Japanese film. The film consists of eight episodes, embodying various dreams Kurosawa has had since his childhood. In each episode the 'I', who is Kurosawa, encounters a character or phenomenon' [4]. Considering the limit of this paper the discussion on the last piece of this film would be done here. 'Village of the Watermill' creates a discourse on technology and culture. Industrialization and civilization are the key themes in this movie. As it is noticed by Mike Plugh, 'the final scene of *Dreams* is called *Village of the Watermills*, a remarkable and stunning piece of film making on its own. Like the other scenes in the film, *Village of the Watermills* is based on Kurosawa's actual dreams and constitutes one of his most extraordinary comments on culture and technology. The scene seems like a Japanese screen adaptation of Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* at times, with the village as a metaphor for the civility and balance of the early *ecotechnic* era' [5]. Ecotechnics were also appreciated and advocated by Mahatma Gandhi. Charkha, a weaving wheel, became a powerful symbol of Indian freedom struggle against the capitalistic British Empire. The village depicted in Kurosawa's movie is full of natural activities and most of them are not disastrous. It is the astonishing similarity with Ray's cinema.

Village of the Watermills is a movie with a musical presentation. Jungles, watermills and other vegetation create a dreamy world. Musical instruments are made-up of metals and only in one place a glass can be seen. This represents the pre-electricity era. There is an old man, who has experience and wisdom. In a reply to outside traveler, he says, 'we try to live the way man used to. That is the natural way of life. People today have forgotten they're really just a part of

nature. Yet, they destroy the nature on which our lives depend. They always think they can make something better' [6]. Further, he criticizes, the scientific inventions and scientists. He also blames people for 'too-much' believing in scientists and paying them respects. In his words, 'they may be smart, but most don't understand the heart of nature. They only invent things that in the end make people unhappy. Yet they are so proud of their inventions. What's worse, most people are too. They view them as if they were miracles. They worship them. They don't know it but they're losing nature. They don't see that they're going to perish. The most important things for human beings are clean air and clean water and the trees and grass that produce them. Everything is being dirtied, polluted forever. Dirty air, dirty water, dirtying the hearts of men' [7]. We can hear the echo of Gandhi in these sentences. There is a bridge in this film, which symbolizes the connection between nature and human being, old civilization and the new mechanic, age etc. There is dream to find an ideal situation to for development and protection of the environment. Water is an essential element of our environment. All over the world, there is discussion, deliberation and a struggle for the usage of water. In India too water becomes an important issue for development. 'Following independence, the mobilization of water resources was seen as the key to stepping up agricultural productivity as well as the supply of electrical power. Water was also needed to service the rapidly growing urban centres. As urban centres grew and industries developed, water also had to serve to disperse the waste products' write Gadgil and Guha [8]. Ray and Kurosawa, cautiously, depict the importance and role of water in the society. There are many ponds in Ray's cinema and *Village of watermills* is an epic of water.

5. Conclusion

Arrival of a train in Ray's *Pather Panchali* is an indication of connectedness of the old and the new, the feudal and the capital, the rural and the urban, the nature and the industrial. Similarly, in Kurosawa's *Dreams* too, the concerns of environment are very prominent. In the last episode of it, the presence of a bridge reflects a great similarity between the two filmmakers. Feature films do not raise the issues and environmental problems directly, but, as this discussion suggests, they create more powerful impact in the minds of viewers. Though, the making of films, simultaneously, raising much concern for the environment and nature. The film industry, while creating a message for environmental protection, should be cautious for the same.

6. References

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