

# Nature's Daughters: Ecofeminist Readings of Cheluvi and Sherni: Women, Wilderness, and Resistance in Indian Films

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of ecofeminism and Indian cinema through a critical analysis of Girish Karnad's film *Cheluvi* (1992) and *Sherni* (2021) by Amit V. Masurkar. Drawing on the core ecofeminist themes of women's intimate connection with nature, the exploitation of both women and the environment, and acts of resistance against patriarchal and ecological domination, the study explores how these films take in a distinctly Indian interpretation of ecofeminist discourse.

In *Cheluvi*, the magical transformation of the female protagonist into a flowering tree symbolizes the profound unity between women and wilderness, while also highlighting the consequences of commodifying both. *Shreni* (a thematically aligned film) serves as a counterpoint, portraying communal harmony and resistance led by women against environmental degradation. Both narratives point female protagonists as agents of ecological consciousness, challenging the traditionally passive roles assigned to women in mainstream Indian cinema.

Through a blend of myth, folklore, and indigenous cultural motifs, these films resist dominant narratives of development and progress that marginalize both women and nature. This paper argues that such cinematic texts not only visualize ecofeminist resistance but also articulate a unique cinematic grammar rooted in Indian ethos. By engaging with the films through an ecofeminist lens, the paper contributes to a broader understanding of how gendered environmental politics are represented and resisted in Indian visual storytelling.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, commodification, environmental politics, interdependence, ethics of care, commodification, objectification.

## Introduction

Ecofeminism emerges at the intersection of ecological and feminist thought, offering a powerful critique of oppression that affects both women and the environment. Closely related to ecocriticism, which examines the relationship between literature and the natural world, ecofeminism broadens this scope by integrating a feminist perspective. It highlights how patriarchal structures not only marginalize women but also contribute to the exploitation and degradation of nature.

Rooted in the rise of ecological awareness during the 1990s, ecocriticism uses an interdisciplinary lens to explore how literature reflects and shapes human interactions with the environment. Ecofeminism builds upon this foundation, arguing that the subjugation of women and the mistreatment of the Earth are not isolated issues, but deeply entwined consequences of hierarchical thinking. Challenging traditional binaries

that place men above women and culture above nature, ecofeminism calls for a more inclusive, life-affirming worldview—one that recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings, promotes interconnectedness, and encourages collaborative, nonviolent approaches to both environmental sustainability and social justice.

Ecofeminism is grounded in the principle of interdependence, stressing that all forms of life—human and non-human—are deeply connected. It views environmental and social issues as inseparable, advocating for a unified response to ecological and gender-based challenges (Shiva, 1989).

A core belief of ecofeminist theory is that patriarchal ideologies, which uphold male superiority, play a significant role in both the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment. These systems, based on dominance and control, treat both women and nature as subordinate and disposable (d'Eaubonne, 1974; Author, Year).

The concept of ethics of care is central to ecofeminism. It emphasizes values such as empathy, responsibility, and collaboration as essential to fostering a just and sustainable world. Unlike dominant models that reward aggression and competition, this ethic promotes harmony and respect for all forms of life (Greta Gaard, 1993).

Ecofeminism also works to deconstruct binary thinking—divisions like man/woman or nature/culture—which have historically justified the subordination of both women and the natural world. By questioning these opposites, ecofeminists aim to break down hierarchies that sustain inequality and environmental harm (Plumwood, 1993).

Moreover, ecofeminism highlights the importance of empowering women by recognizing their firsthand experiences and ecological wisdom, especially those who face the dual impact of patriarchy and environmental harm. Women from marginalized communities, in particular, maintain close relationships with natural ecosystems and play a crucial role in promoting sustainable ways of living.

### **Development and Background of Ecofeminism**

The word “**ecofeminism**” was introduced in the 1970s by French theorist **Françoise d'Eaubonne**. Since then, it has grown into a diverse field that brings together feminist theory and environmental activism. As it developed, ecofeminism took on multiple forms—ranging from spiritual and cultural approaches to more materialist and political interpretations—all focused on the links between gender and ecology (d'Eaubonne, 1974; Mies & Shiva, 1993).

### **Illustrations of Ecofeminist Activism**

A notable example of ecofeminist activism is the Chipko Movement in India, which began in the 1970s. In this movement, village women physically embraced trees to prevent deforestation. Their protest drew attention to how environmental destruction directly impacts their lives, reflecting ecofeminism's key idea that environmental and gender justice are inseparable (Shiva, 1988).

Beyond this, ecofeminist values have influenced numerous environmental campaigns across the globe. From anti-pollution initiatives to grassroots food sovereignty projects, women have led efforts that demonstrate how feminist principles can guide environmental resistance and reform.

### **Critiques of Ecofeminism**

Despite its significant contributions, ecofeminism has been met with some criticism. One major concern is that it may reinforce stereotypes, by portraying women as naturally closer to nature, thus potentially

essentializing their role. Others argue that ecofeminism's strong focus on gender and patriarchy sometimes overlooks other crucial factors like class, race, and colonial histories, which also shape environmental injustice (Gaard, 1997; Warren, 2000).

Moreover, some scholars believe that ecofeminism as a term may be too broad, including a wide range of perspectives that can at times conflict with each other. This diversity, while inclusive, can lead to confusion about what ecofeminism precisely stands for as a theory or movement.

The films *Sherni* (2021) and *Cheluvi* (1992) offer portrayals of ecofeminist thought through distinct cinematic experiences. Directed by Amit V. Masurkar, *Sherni* is a Hindi-language thriller that features Vidya Balan as a dedicated Indian Forest Service officer navigating the bureaucratic and political complexities of wildlife conservation. The narrative focuses on the increasing tension between human development and animal habitats, especially through the lens of a tigress's fate. While the term *sherni* traditionally denotes a lioness in Hindi, it is frequently used in colloquial speech to refer to a tigress as well. The film was critically acclaimed for addressing urgent ecological concerns and for Balan's powerful performance, which embodies resistance within a patriarchal institutional structure (Masurkar, 2021). In contrast, *Cheluvi* (1992), directed by Girish Karnad and based on a Kannada folktale, weaves folklore with magical realism to explore the intimate connection between women and nature. The protagonist, Cheluvi, possesses the magical ability to transform into a flowering tree, a metaphor that highlights the nurturing but vulnerable position of both women and the environment. This transformation becomes a symbolic critique of environmental exploitation and gendered marginalization, aligning closely with ecofeminist frameworks that question patriarchal domination and promote holistic coexistence. Together, these films underscore how ecofeminism can be both a narrative device and a critical lens for examining the interconnectedness of ecological and social injustices.

In *Cheluvi* (1992), Girish Karnad explores ecofeminist themes through the symbolic transformation of the protagonist, Cheluvi, into a flowering tree. This metamorphosis is not merely fantastical, but rich in metaphorical significance. It represents the deep-rooted ecofeminist notion of the woman–nature connection, where both are seen as life-giving, nurturing, and essential for ecological balance. Cheluvi's transformation into a tree illustrates how feminine traits such as compassion, fertility, and growth are inherently aligned with the natural world. This portrayal echoes ecofeminist perspectives which argue that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature are from the same patriarchal values.

However, the narrative quickly shifts to expose the consequences of this sacred bond being manipulated. When Cheluvi's secret is revealed, her abilities are no longer treated with respect but become a source of economic benefit for those around her. Her family and community begin to exploit her gift, valuing her only for the material gain she provides. This shift in perception mirrors the objectification and commodification of both women and the environment, critiqued by ecofeminist scholars as a hallmark of patriarchal societies that prioritize profit and control over relational and sustainable coexistence.

The film's engagement with Indian folklore and spiritual traditions further reinforces ecofeminist ideals. Initially, Cheluvi's arboreal form is met with awe and respect, reflecting cultural attitudes that regard nature as sacred and worthy of protection. This reverence aligns with ecofeminism's call to reestablish a spiritual and holistic relationship with the Earth, drawing particularly from indigenous and non-Western ecological worldviews that emphasize harmony and interconnectedness (Mies & Shiva, 1993).

Yet, this harmony is fragile. As Cheluvi's gift is overexploited, the ecological balance begins to deteriorate, symbolizing the real-world consequences of environmental degradation driven by patriarchal greed. The film subtly critiques these unsustainable practices by portraying how the misuse of Cheluvi's

abilities leads to emotional and environmental loss. In doing so, it illustrates ecofeminism's warning about the destructive impact of patriarchal domination on both women and the natural world.

Ultimately, Cheluvi's retreat from the human world represents a quiet but powerful form of resistance. Although exploited, she retains control over her transformations, and her decision to disappear can be interpreted as reclaiming her agency. This assertion of autonomy serves as a counter-narrative to her objectification and reflects ecofeminism's advocacy for women's empowerment and ecological restoration. By choosing to remove herself from a world that seeks only to use her, Cheluvi reasserts her identity and the sanctity of nature (Karnad, 1992).

### **Ecofeminism in *Cheluvi* (1992): A Cinematic Reflection**

Girish Karnad's *Cheluvi* (1992) offers a profound cinematic portrayal of ecofeminist philosophy through the symbolic transformation of its protagonist. Cheluvi, a young woman capable of turning into a flowering tree, embodies more than magical realism—her transformation serves as a metaphor for the intrinsic connection between women and nature. This metamorphosis reflects the ecofeminist assertion that both women and the natural world are life-sustaining forces, often linked through qualities such as fertility, nurturing, and growth. By aligning femininity with ecological vitality, the film underlines a central tenet of ecofeminist thought: that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment are inextricably linked and both stem from patriarchal ideologies.

As the narrative unfolds, the initial reverence surrounding Cheluvi's gift transforms into exploitation. Once her secret becomes known, her value is measured solely by the material benefits her magical ability can offer. Her family and community, rather than cherishing her as a person, reduce her worth to an economic resource. This exploitation parallels how both women and nature are commodified under patriarchal systems—used, controlled, and stripped of agency. Ecofeminist theorists argue that such commodification is a core feature of patriarchal dominance, which prioritizes control and profit over symbiosis and sustainability.

*Cheluvi* also draws deeply from Indian folklore and spiritual traditions that view nature as sacred, presenting an initial worldview that resonates with indigenous and non-Western ecofeminist principles. Cheluvi's transformation is met with spiritual awe, emphasizing a cultural reverence for the natural world. This portrayal supports ecofeminism's call for the revival of holistic, respectful, and reciprocal relationships with the Earth. The film suggests that such cultural frameworks are essential to restoring ecological balance and resisting environmental exploitation.

However, the film also warns of the fragility of this harmony. As Cheluvi's gift is exploited, the ecological and emotional equilibrium is disrupted, symbolizing the consequences of unsustainable, patriarchal intrusions into nature. The gradual deterioration of balance in the film illustrates the destructive results of treating nature—and by extension, women—as mere resources. In this way, *Cheluvi* becomes a cinematic critique of environmentally harmful practices rooted in patriarchal values.

Finally, Cheluvi's decision to retreat from society marks a powerful act of resistance. Despite being objectified, she maintains control over her ability to transform, ultimately choosing to distance herself from a world that seeks to exploit her. This withdrawal signifies a reclaiming of agency and identity, aligning with ecofeminist advocacy for empowerment and ecological justice. Through this act, Cheluvi reasserts not only her autonomy but also the sacredness of the natural world, challenging systems of domination and exploitation.

Ecofeminism, as an interdisciplinary and transformative framework, highlights the deep interconnections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. By critiquing patriarchal structures that marginalize both, ecofeminism offers a powerful lens through which environmental and social justice issues can be jointly addressed. This perspective not only challenges dominant dualisms—such as man versus nature or culture versus nature—but also emphasizes values of care, interconnectedness, and sustainability.

## Conclusion

In summary, ecofeminism presents a vital framework for understanding and addressing the overlapping systems of environmental destruction and gender oppression. Though it continues to evolve and face debate, its emphasis on equity, care, and interconnectedness remains central to any holistic approach to solving today's ecological and social crises.

The films *Cheluvi* (1992) and *Sherni* (2021) compellingly illustrate the core principles of ecofeminism through their narratives, symbolism, and character arcs. *Cheluvi*, through the magical transformation of its protagonist into a flowering tree, symbolically reinforces the woman–nature bond and critiques the commodification of both. Drawing on Indian folklore, the film also advocates for a spiritual and respectful relationship with the environment. In contrast, *Sherni* grounds its ecofeminist critique in a more realistic and contemporary setting, exploring the bureaucratic, patriarchal, and political challenges faced by a female forest officer striving to protect wildlife. Vidya Balan's character in *Sherni* embodies resistance, integrity, and agency within a system that often devalues both women and ecological concerns.

Together, these films underscore ecofeminism's insistence on recognizing the voices of women—especially those closest to nature—as vital to resolving the ecological crisis. By showcasing both mythical and real-world scenarios, *Cheluvi* and *Sherni* remind audiences that the path to environmental justice must also be one of gender equity and systemic transformation. These cinematic works not only reflect ecofeminist ideas but also inspire critical engagement with the ways in which culture, policy, and community intersect with the health of both women and the Earth.

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