

Nature, Culture, and Coastal Identity in the Film Neerparavai

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Abstract

This article examines Seenu Ramasamy's Tamil film Neerparavai through an ecocritical framework. The analysis focuses on the relationship between the sea, coastal culture, and the identity of the fishing community represented in the film. It is argued that the sea functions not merely as a setting but as an active presence that shapes livelihood, belief, memory, gender relations, and social belonging. The film also represents the economic hardship, political neglect, and environmental vulnerability experienced by fisherfolk. By connecting ecological dependence with cultural identity and social marginalization, the article demonstrates that Neerparavai can be read as an important work of regional ecocinema. The study concludes that the film challenges the separation between nature and culture and presents coastal identity as a form of ecological belonging.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Coastal Identity, Fisherfolk, Tamil Cinema, Environment, Cultural Ecology

1. Introduction

Ecocriticism has emerged as a significant approach in literary and cultural studies, focusing on the relationship between literature, culture, and the physical environment. The field examines how texts represent nature, how they construct environmental values, and how they engage with ecological crisis. In recent decades, ecocriticism has expanded to include film studies, postcolonial contexts, and questions of environmental justice.

Seenu Ramasamy's Neerparavai (2012) is a Tamil-language drama that portrays the life of a coastal fishing community in southern India. The film has been noted for its authentic representation of fisherfolk culture and its engagement with the social and political challenges faced by fishermen. However, the ecological dimensions of the film have not received sufficient critical attention.

It is observed that the sea in Neerparavai is not merely a backdrop but an active force that shapes the community's way of life, belief systems, and sense of identity. The film presents the coast as a lived ecological and cultural space in which human existence is inseparable from the marine environment. This article argues that Neerparavai constructs coastal identity as a form of ecological belonging, in which nature and culture are intertwined rather than separate.

The objectives of this study are as follows. First, to explain the relevance of ecocriticism for reading Neerparavai. Second, to analyze the sea as a material and symbolic presence in the film. Third, to examine how coastal culture emerges from ecological dependence. Fourth, to explore how struggle and marginality reveal the political dimensions of cultural ecology. Finally, to demonstrate that the film contributes to broader discussions of environmental justice, identity, and the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world.

2. Review of Literature

Ecocriticism originated in the 1990s as a response to growing environmental awareness and the need for literary studies to engage with ecological crisis. Glotfelty and Fromm defined ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, emphasizing an earth-centered approach to literary analysis. Buell further developed the field by examining how environmental imagination shapes literary representation and cultural consciousness.

In the 2000s, ecocriticism expanded to include second-wave approaches that addressed urban environments, environmental justice, and global ecological issues. Heise introduced the concept of eco-cosmopolitanism, which examines environmental imagination in a globalized world. Morton challenged the separation between nature and culture, arguing for an ecological thought that recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings.

Ecocriticism has also been applied to film studies, with scholars examining how cinema represents nature, ecology, and environmental crisis. Ivakhiv developed an ecoformal approach to film criticism, focusing on how cinematic form mediates ecological meaning. Rust, Monani, and Cubitt edited a collection on ecocinema theory and practice, demonstrating the potential of film to engage with ecological issues.

In the Indian context, ecocriticism has been applied to regional literatures and cinemas, although studies of Tamil cinema remain limited. The representation of fisherfolk in Indian cinema has received some attention, but ecological readings of such films are still emerging. Neerparavai offers a valuable case study for ecocritical analysis because it portrays the inseparable relationship between the fishing community and the sea.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on ecocriticism and cultural ecology. Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature, culture, and the physical environment, emphasizing an earth-centered approach to literary analysis. Cultural ecology, as developed by Zapf, examines the interaction and interdependence between culture and nature, treating literature and film as spaces where this interrelationship is imaginatively enacted.

It is observed that human cultures are not separate from nature but are constructed through and by their environments, in a continuous process of interaction and mutual dependence. This perspective is particularly useful for analyzing Neerparavai, because the film portrays a coastal community whose livelihood, belief, kinship, gender, labor, and memory are all shaped by the marine environment.

Environmental justice is also a key concept in this study. Environmental justice emphasizes that environmental experience is unevenly distributed, and that marginalized communities often bear the heaviest burden of ecological risk while receiving the least support from political and economic systems. This perspective is relevant for understanding the struggle and marginality represented in Neerparavai, because the film shows how the fisherfolk community is caught between the dangers of the sea and the indifference of the state.

4. Nature and the Sea in Neerparavai

The sea in Neerparavai functions as both a material and symbolic presence, shaping every aspect of coastal life while also serving as a repository of meaning, memory, and belief. It is observed that the sea is not a passive backdrop but an active force that determines the rhythm of work, the structure of community, and the emotional landscape of the characters.

The most immediate function of the sea in the film is as a source of livelihood for the fishing community. The characters depend on the ocean for their daily survival, and their labor is inseparable from the rhythms of tides, weather, and fish migration. The film shows men preparing boats, mending nets, and waiting for favorable conditions, all of which emphasize the material dependence of human life on the marine environment.

While the sea provides food and income, it also threatens life and creates constant anxiety. The film portrays the ocean as unpredictable and sometimes violent, capable of taking lives without warning. The women of the village live in a state of suspense whenever their men are at sea, and this suspense becomes a defining feature of coastal life. It is observed that the sea creates a culture of waiting and fear, where every departure might be a final one.

Beyond its material and dangerous aspects, the sea in *Neerparavai* functions as a powerful symbol. It represents freedom and limitation, hope and despair, life and death. The film uses the sea to express emotions that cannot be spoken directly, such as longing, grief, and resilience. In this sense, the ocean becomes a language through which the film communicates its deepest meanings.

The sea in the film is also closely connected to human emotion, especially love, loss, and longing. The film's romantic narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the coast, and the sea becomes a witness to the relationship between the main characters. Their love is not separate from the environment but is shaped by it, because their meetings, separations, and reunions all take place in relation to the rhythms of fishing life.

It is observed that the sea in *Neerparavai* structures time in the film. The daily cycle of departure and return, the seasonal changes in weather, and the generational patterns of fishing life all create a sense of time that is different from urban or industrial time. This temporal rhythm is ecological because it is tied to natural cycles rather than human schedules.

The sea in the film is also a repository of memory. The film shows how the ocean holds the history of the community, including past losses, past celebrations, and past ways of life. The sea becomes a living archive where the past is not forgotten but is constantly recalled through stories, rituals, and shared experiences. This memory function of the sea is important for coastal identity because it connects the present to the past.

The sea in *Neerparavai* is also connected to religious belief and spiritual practice. The film shows how the community performs rituals to seek protection from the sea, to give thanks for a good catch, and to mourn the dead. These rituals are not separate from daily life but are integrated into it, because they express the community's relationship with the marine environment and its dependence on forces beyond human control.

5. Coastal Culture and Community Identity

Coastal culture in *Neerparavai* emerges from the inseparable relationship between the fishing community and the sea, and this relationship constitutes the core of the film's cultural ecology. It is observed that the film portrays a coastal world where livelihood, belief, kinship, gender, labor, and memory are all shaped by the marine environment.

The fishing village in the film is portrayed as a multicultural space where Christians, Hindus, and Muslims live together in relative harmony, sharing the same shoreline, the same risks, and the same dependence on the sea. This religious diversity reflects the reality of many coastal settlements in Tamil Nadu, where different faiths have coexisted for generations despite their theological differences. The film does not

emphasize conflict between religions but instead shows how all communities share a common ecological condition: they are all fisherfolk whose lives are determined by the rhythms of the ocean.

The social organization of the fishing village in the film reflects the ecological structure of the coast and the practical demands of fishing life. The settlement is arranged along the shoreline, with houses clustered near the beach to facilitate easy access to boats, nets, and the daily routines of fishing. This spatial arrangement is not accidental but is shaped by the material needs of a community whose livelihood depends on immediate proximity to the sea.

Men are primarily responsible for fishing at sea, while women manage the shore, including tasks such as drying fish, selling catch, maintaining the household, and caring for children and elders. This division of labor creates distinct relationships with the environment, where men engage directly with the ocean while women maintain the land-based aspects of fishing culture, yet both are equally dependent on the sea for their survival. It is observed that this gendered division reveals how culture is shaped by environmental conditions, because the roles of men and women are not arbitrary but are responses to the ecological demands of coastal life.

Labor in the film is not only an economic activity but also a cultural practice that defines community identity and shapes the way people understand themselves and their place in the world. Fishing is portrayed as a skilled profession that requires knowledge of weather, tides, fish behavior, navigation, and the subtle signs of the sea. This knowledge is passed down through generations, creating a form of ecological wisdom that is specific to the coastal community and distinguishes it from inland populations.

Family and kinship in the film are deeply connected to the coastal environment and the rhythms of fishing life. The film shows how families are organized around fishing, with multiple generations involved in the same occupation, creating a sense of continuity that links the past, present, and future of the community. This intergenerational involvement in fishing creates a form of occupational identity that is inseparable from family identity, because fishing is not only a job but a heritage that is passed from father to son, from mother to daughter, through stories, skills, and shared experiences.

Ritual and belief in the film are closely tied to the coastal environment and the uncertainties of fishing life. The film shows how the community performs rituals to seek protection from the sea, to give thanks for a good catch, and to mourn the dead. These rituals are not separate from daily life but are integrated into it, because they express the community's relationship with the marine environment and its dependence on forces beyond human control.

Language and expression in the film are also shaped by the coastal environment and the specific vocabulary of fishing life. The film shows how the community uses a distinct vocabulary related to fishing, weather, and the sea, a vocabulary that is not only practical but also cultural, because it reflects the community's relationship with the marine environment. This vocabulary includes terms for different types of fish, different kinds of nets, different weather conditions, and different states of the sea, all of which are essential for survival and are passed down through generations.

The collective sense of belonging in the film is ultimately shaped by the coastal environment and the shared experience of living with the sea. The film shows how the community defines itself through its relationship with the sea, and how this relationship creates a distinct identity that is both geographical and cultural, economic and emotional. This identity is not only a matter of location but also a matter of practice, because it is shaped by the daily routines of fishing, the rituals of belief, the patterns of kinship, and the language of the shore.

6. Struggle, Marginality, and Environmental Justice

The fishing community in Neerparavai is portrayed not only as a cohesive cultural group but also as a marginalized population facing constant struggle, economic precarity, and systemic neglect. It is observed that the fisherfolk community is caught between the dangers of the sea and the indifference of the state, creating a condition of double vulnerability that defines their existence.

The economic hardship faced by the fishing community in the film is a central theme, because it shows how the fisherfolk are trapped in a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape. Studies of fishing communities in Tamil Nadu reveal that traditional fishermen often live in a low-income trap, with limited access to credit, inadequate infrastructure, and low levels of education that prevent them from improving their socio-economic status. The film reflects this reality by showing how Arul and his family struggle to make ends meet, even after he transforms from a wastrel into a hardworking fisherman.

The social oppression faced by the fishing community in the film is another key theme, because it shows how the fisherfolk are treated as a lower class by the broader society. Studies of fishermen in Tamil Nadu reveal that they are often considered one of the most depressed classes in the state, with low literacy rates, poor housing conditions, and limited access to basic services such as electricity, sanitation, and healthcare. The film reflects this reality by showing how the fishing village is physically and socially separated from the rest of society, with the coastline serving as both a boundary and a barrier.

The political abandonment faced by the fishing community in the film is perhaps the most significant theme, because it shows how the state fails to protect and support the fisherfolk, leaving them to fend for themselves in a dangerous and unpredictable environment. The film alludes to the real-world problem of fishermen being arrested, beaten, or killed by the Sri Lankan Navy when they cross the maritime border in search of fish, a problem that has affected thousands of Tamil Nadu fishermen over the years. This issue is not explicitly addressed in the film, but it is hinted at through the community's anxiety about the sea and the constant fear of loss.

The environmental degradation faced by the fishing community in the film is another key theme, because it shows how the marine ecosystem is under threat from overfishing, pollution, and climate change. Studies of fishing communities in Tamil Nadu reveal that declining fish stocks, environmental degradation, and the impacts of climate change are major challenges for fisherfolk, who are increasingly unable to secure a stable catch due to ecological changes. The film reflects this reality by showing how the sea is unpredictable and sometimes hostile, with bad weather, poor catches, and dangerous conditions that threaten the community's survival.

The psychological toll of living in a precarious environment is another key theme of the film, because it shows how the constant uncertainty and risk of fishing life affect the mental and emotional wellbeing of the community. The film portrays the women of the village as living in a state of constant anxiety, waiting for the return of boats and praying for the safety of their men. This anxiety is not only a personal matter but also a collective one, because it is shared by all members of the community and is reinforced through shared labor, shared ritual, and shared memory.

The film's representation of struggle, marginality, and neglect is particularly evident in the character of Arul, whose transformation from a wastrel to a hardworking fisherman is not only a matter of personal growth but also a matter of social recognition. His determination to buy a boat and establish himself in the fishing community is driven by his love for Esther, but it is also driven by his desire to escape the stigma of being a wastrel and to earn the respect of his adopted family and the broader community.

The film's ending, in which Esther confesses to murdering Arul, adds another layer of complexity to this representation of struggle and marginality, because it shows how the pressures of territorial waters, economic competition, and social conflict can lead to violence and tragedy. The narrative reveals how a once-loving family was destroyed by the complexities and conflicts surrounding territorial waters, leading to a devastating loss and a desperate act.

7. Discussion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that *Neerparavai* is not merely a love story or a social drama but a complex ecological and cultural text in which nature, culture, and identity are inextricably linked. It is observed that the sea functions as both a material and symbolic presence, shaping every aspect of coastal life while also serving as a repository of meaning, memory, and belief.

Coastal culture in the film emerges from the inseparable relationship between the fishing community and the sea, and this relationship constitutes the core of the film's cultural ecology. The film portrays a coastal world where livelihood, belief, kinship, gender, labor, and memory are all shaped by the marine environment. This aligns with ecocritical understandings of cultural ecology, which emphasize that culture is not separate from nature but is embedded in it, and that the struggle for cultural survival is also a struggle for ecological survival.

Struggle, marginality, and neglect in the fishing community reveal the political dimensions of cultural ecology, because the film shows how the fisherfolk are subjected to both ecological and social oppression, with little support or relief from either. The film shows how the community is subjected to economic hardship, social oppression, political abandonment, environmental degradation, and the psychological toll of living in a precarious environment. This aligns with ecocritical understandings of environmental justice, which emphasize that marginalized communities are often subjected to environmental exploitation that is driven by larger economic interests and political neglect.

The film's contribution to broader discussions of environmental justice, identity, and the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world is particularly significant, because it shows how cinema can illuminate the ecological and cultural dimensions of human experience. As ecocritical scholars have noted, contemporary cinema has the potential to become a mediating interface that allows comprehension of what has been done to the world and ourselves, but also how and where that relation might begin to be remade. *Neerparavai* reflects this potential by showing how Tamil cinema can engage 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.

8. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that *Neerparavai* is a significant text for ecocritical analysis, and that it offers valuable insights into the relationship between nature, culture, and identity in the context of the Tamil Nadu fishing community. The film suggests that identity is not only a human construct but also an ecological one, because it is shaped by the shared experience of living with the sea and the risks and rewards that come with it. This aligns with ecocritical understandings of cultural ecology, which emphasize that culture is not separate from nature but is embedded in it, and that the struggle for cultural survival is also a struggle for ecological survival.

The film's contribution to broader discussions of environmental justice, identity, and the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world is particularly significant, because it shows how cinema can

illuminate the ecological and cultural dimensions of human experience in ways that are specific to the medium and its possibilities. The film suggests that the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world is not one of separation but of interdependence, and that the struggle for ecological survival is also a struggle for cultural survival.

It is concluded that Neerparavai constructs the coast as a lived ecological and cultural space in which human identity emerges through dependence on the sea, and that this construction challenges the nature/culture binary that has long dominated Western thought. The film suggests that identity is not only a human construct but also an ecological one, because it is shaped by the shared experience of living with the sea and the risks and rewards that come with it. This understanding of coastal identity has implications for broader discussions of environmental justice, cultural ecology, and the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world.

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