

# Eco-Fantasy and the Semiotics of Nature's Language: A Comparative Analysis of Indian and Canadian Cinema

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**Abstract**—Films produce in us the conscientization required to change our beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about specific ideas. The power of cinema touted as the “cinematic” process by film scholars such as Metz, Bozak, and Benjamin captures the potential of film technology as a process and experience to create changes in our attitudes and perceptions. Both mainstream and alternative cinema provide visual stimuli enough to alter our thought processes. Film, then, as a medium of communication, creates awareness and can be used to depict the future, be it in a utopian or dystopian landscape. Therefore, the need to study the environmental tropes in popular cinema and documentaries arises since they can widely influence the public. However, there is a dearth of knowledge existing in Indo-Canadian studies of films that explore the framing of environmental issues. The research gap identified in the existing literature is that the impact of culture and nature on one another is not explored through the eco-fantasy genre, much less depicted in a comparative analysis.

This study curates six films from the eco-fantasy genre to showcase how environment and ecology are negotiated through narratives that reflect the social, political, and cultural factors. The differences in the framing of films within the context of constructing relationships between man and nature directly or indirectly (metaphorically) are highlighted through the comparative analysis of the following films. Selected Indian films include *Swades* (2004), *Water* (2005), *Padman* (2018). Canadian docudramas analysed are *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006), *Antiviral* (2012) and *Crimes of the Future* (2022). Due to the rarity of this film genre, movies are selected through purposive sampling and a qualitative analysis using visual semiotics is presented. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of narration and motifs (underlying themes) on environmental concerns and present observations in a contrasting manner between Canadian and Indian representations of the landscape. The 2021 Census data suggests that one in five immigrants in Canada are from India (Banerjee, 2024, 32). With Indian migrations still rising in 2024, it becomes necessary to study the cultural differences propagated by the media, in this case, films. This paper

identifies such frameworks that shape environmental consciousness in films. The research objective is limited to how eco-fantasy in films is portrayed and a distinction is created between the two countries based on their portrayals of the environment through selected films. This is also examined through Goffman's framing analysis to identify what “frames” are associated with culture and nature (Goffman, 1975, 603).

This study infers that Indian films embellish a fusion of myths, folk tales, and an infatuation with British customs and rules, while also highlighting a spiritual relationship with nature whereas Canadian representations are more introspective, and interactive, and promulgate an environmental sensitivity leading to education and empowerment. This paper effectively highlights the cultural and environmental differences between films from both countries, employing both film semiotics and framing analysis and contributing to the coinage of two new terms to existing literature, - hard eco-fantasy and soft eco-fantasy.

**Index Terms**—framing analysis, genre, hard eco-fantasy, soft eco-fantasy

## I. INTRODUCTION

Films are a potent way to create social and political changes as seen through their potential to acquire international support, influence public and government approvals, and create changes in society through awareness and sensitization. Instances can be provided from world history that resonate with film being a powerful medium of effective communication. So much so that governments all over the world had to start regulating this audio-visual mode of communication to ensure that it lined up with that country's national interests and ideology. Hitler's propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels used films to spread Nazi ideology and so did Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party. Danis Tanović's film "No Man's Land" (2001) was responsible for sparking the Tunisian Revolution in 2010 and Dariush Mehrjui's

"The Cow" (1969) was a catalyst for the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

Films, throughout history, have constantly proved that they can be a powerful source to transform one's perspective, create changes, and promote awareness, critical thinking and action from viewers who are not bound by culture or geography. Hence, this paper addresses how environmental themes are framed both in Indian and Canadian films through the genre of "eco-fantasy".

Buell (2005) states that eco-fantasy is created from narratives that explore relationships between "human and non-human nature", bordering on themes of magical realism, featuring utopian or dystopian settings in the future, and other speculative science fiction elements. He highlights how imagination plays a major part in the success of such a genre. Morton (2010) notes that "critical eco-imaginary" in such genre challenges notions of human-nature interaction, and explores themes bordering on social justice, environmentalism, and imaginary alternatives and futures. While sampling the films needed for this study through convenience sampling, it is observed that although several sci-fi new-age movies exist, themes of environment and nature fused with imaginative and speculative storytelling are rare.

It is noted that selected Indian films for analysis are mostly set in realistic settings. This leads to the coinage of two distinct sub-genres to separate hard eco-fantasy and soft eco-fantasy. Hard eco-fantasy occurs when magic, mythic storytelling, utopian and dystopian visions of the future with symbolic natural forces are combined with harmony, sustainability, and restoration of balance in societies. Soft eco-fantasy occurs when there are subtle and minimal fantasy elements combined with ecological themes. For instance, *Swades*, *Padman* and *Water* all can be justified to belong to the sub-genre of "soft eco-fantasy" since the environmental themes are more persistent than fantasy or magical elements in their narratives. This is noted to be yet another distinction between Indian and Canadian eco-fantasy films, i.e., Indian films mainly accomplish more in the soft eco-fantasy genre and Canadian eco-fantasy films feature more hardcore elements combining environmental themes in magical settings.

Environmental themes require mostly serious framing of issues. According to Goffman's framing methodology, serious frames within the context of the

eco-fantasy genre propagate a call to action through ethical, moral, or legal responsibilities and portray possible solutions and alternatives. Playful frames are accompanied by humour and witty remarks and are also fused with creativity and imagination to break down complex or taboo topics to make them emotionally engaging to viewers. It is to be noted that Goffman (1975) introduced the framing analysis for narratives on print media. However, with the rapid convergence of media platforms, it is clear that any communication platform can be assessed through this methodology to gain an idea of what "frames" as "created conceptual and mental frameworks" are communicated to the audience. The forte of this paper is to introduce how films are analysed through these "frames" and encourage future research to use an interdisciplinary approach in accommodating framing analysis in other fields.

The research questions addressed in this study include, - how do Indian and Canadian filmmakers use eco-fantasy as a genre in films to depict environmental themes? Can environmental frames be classified into serious or playful frames? Does culture and nature influence such framing? How is the relationship between man and nature portrayed?

Palmer's dissertation (2017) on three US novels explores how "re-enchantment" is used in addressing environmental issues and proves that such narratives can introduce changes and new perspectives. His study lacks an exploration of the "ecological dynamics" which is addressed by this study using semiotics and framing methodologies. McGreavey and Liendfield (2014) discuss climate change films and highlight how they fail to address the moral values of equity and shared responsibility. Melnyk (2014) identifies "cultural grammars" that refer to existing cultural and social frameworks as an influence on Canadian filmmaking. In contrast, this research paper presents another perspective to add to the present literature through a comparative analysis of Indo-Canadian films and concludes that films influence discourses and promote sustainable values in saving the environment.

## II. DISCUSSION

The discussion begins with Ashutosh Gowariker's film *Swades* (2004), Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005), and R. Balki's *Padman* (2018). Frames discovered in

Swades are on electricity and water problems in rural India. A semiotic analysis would reveal that “Nature” is used to symbolize both the internal (mental state) and external environment (surroundings). The film concludes with change being introduced to the village of Charanpur. A change that benefits both man and nature, that represents a sustainable way of living as seen in Mohan’s display of his scientific knowledge within the context of the social and cultural background of the village. Playful frames represented through song and dance are used to counter the serious frames of problems existing in rural India. In this film, man is seen to augment nature, and culture and nature are synergized to create solutions for the issues presented in this film.

Swades represents the village as an idealized eco-community that may be said to form a self-sufficient ecological society that is utopian in value and the hydroelectric project is akin to a symbolic and magical solution being presented through the movie. The actions of Mohan, played by Shah Rukh Khan to present solutions to the rural community also support the idea that human actions restore the balance between society and the environment. Therefore, the genre of soft eco-fantasy is created by the film when such environmental themes are mixed with minimal visual depictions of the supernatural or mythic elements.

Mehta’s film explores the subjugation of widows in British-ruled India. Water is symbolized as both a purification agent and a canvas for suffering through rainfall. Life through an 8-year-old widow, Chuyia, explores both playful and serious framing of social issues. Personal desires and societal expectations are contrasted. The societal reality of widows depicts Hindu culture as a “signifier” of oppression and suppression of personal desires whereas the nature of the love story presented in playful frames is seen as a respite from the serious framing of grief, loss, and suffering. Culture is seen to conflict with nature and this induces in man a distant relationship from the environment although closely living in it.

This film justifies the coinage of the term “soft eco-fantasy” and can be successfully categorized under such a genre since realism is more prevalent in the narrative than magical elements. While Swades can be considered a utopian development of events, Water can be said to follow a dystopian narrative that correlates environment and society with no such

fantasy elements. Even Padman can be considered to fall under the sub-genre of soft eco-fantasy since there are more societal and environmental themes than magical and imaginary elements in the plot structure. Based on a true story, Padman uses eco-fantasy to depict an eco-friendly sustainable solution to women’s hygiene needs. Indian cultural beliefs are seen again as an obstacle to development and empowerment. Lakshmikant Chauhan’s journey to make successful sanitary pads shows his innovative and problem-solving attitude towards rural India and its age-old customs. It is noted that playful framing is used to depict socio-cultural norms to the point of ridicule as seen in how the protagonist presents the “pads” to the rural women, who are disgusted and run away from him, demonizing him. The conflict between man and nature is seen in the same way that aligns with the conflict between culture and nature as seen in Mehta’s film Water.

To begin the discussion on Canadian films, Alison Griffiths has intensively studied how visual stimuli in cinema can be used to engage audiences in her book “Shivers Down Your Spine”. She explains that most films from the eco-fantasy genre link emotions and sensory connections to the environment and thereby engage the audience in such a manner that augments the portrayal of environmental motifs as well as cultural portrayals of landscapes (Griffiths, 2008). This idea is further explored with the investigation of how framing of environmental issues occurs in selected Canadian films.

Directed by Canadian filmmaker, Jennifer Baichwal’s “Manufactured Landscapes” (2006) falls under the eco-fantasy genre and shows how man progresses at the cost of the environment. Being a documentary film it is reflective of real life. However, the way the cameras are used to shift our perspectives on modern means of change and progress as structures that affect man and nature negatively is surreal and evokes dream-like feelings. The commentary is kept in avoidance of judging culture and nature or man and nature, creating serious frames by depicting Chinese industrial sites, mining, and hydroelectric zones. It is a mere depiction of what is. It can be concluded from the aesthetic and metaphorical imagery created by visual artist Edward Burtynsky through the portrayal of repeated mechanical actions of workers in factories that industrialization leads to degradation in both humans and the environment. A conflict is noticed

again between culture and nature, and also man and nature.

Brandon Cronenberg's film "Antiviral" (2012) uses serious framing that borders on obsession and fetishism featuring bizarre and unsettling visuals. The film frames harvesting nature, as seen through the harvesting of pathogens from celebrities in clinics for sale to fans who want to feel physically close to these stars by injecting such viruses inside their healthy bodies. A futuristic setting is seen to propagate a culture of consumerism and capitalism that promotes a capitalistic man and his culture as supreme beings that engulf and dominate nature.

A similar film that features a dystopian future accelerated by human technology, David Cronenberg's film "Crimes of the Future" (2022) showcases the harvesting of human organs from an individual who can regenerate all of his organs. The film features a bold statement, "Surgery is the new sex". Humans are seen to evolve in this movie to the point that they are being used to perform surgeries as a display of performance arts. Again, technology is seen to develop a culture of commodification, thereby progressing a culture that harms man as well as nature. It is noted that all three Canadian films can be classified as hard eco-fantasy that feature a synergy of magical and imaginative storytelling with environmental themes.

### III. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Within the context of the eco-fantasy genre, in Indian films, relationships between man and nature, and culture and nature are always represented as two ends of a spectrum and opposite to each other. Indian films require an addressal or a return to the past to present solutions for the future by requiring problem-solving in the present situation. Canadian filmmakers focus on the present as well as the future. This paper finds an intersection between literature and society, in this case, between film and society. Western scholars and litterateurs such as Hemingway, Dewey, Thoreau, and Emerson, among others, have always propagated "living in the moment" (a *carpe diem* philosophy) and this is seen to advance the eco-fantasy genre in Canadian films. Another distinct point of difference seen through this comparative analysis is that technology is used either as a deterrent or facilitator of

human culture in Canadian films and that at one point, clashes with natural word order.

This study also infers that Canadian films in the eco-fantasy genre through their framing of technology in their films put more emphasis on introspection, progress, problem-solving and critical thinking which can leave an Indian viewer much in awe of such films. Indian films prefer framing innovations as a cultural attachment to their past where legacy, historical identity, and advancement occur without harm to nature. In most cases, it is observed that culture and nature are seen to dominate man. Such dynamics are again reversed in Canadian filmmaking.

Indian films feature an amalgamation of vintage cultural practices with modern solutions that are used to usher in change and progress that sustainably support nature. Man and culture are not seen to progress at the cost of the environment or nature. With all the environmental degradation occurring in the present epoch, this inference propagates the argument that perhaps Canadian filmmakers could benefit from incorporating such framing of environmental issues in the Indian manner to encourage positive relationships between man and nature, as well as culture and nature. The presence of more serious frames in Canadian films also caters to the fact that Canadian filmmakers do not use films as a means of communication with the masses. They use enchanting visuals, imagery, symbolism, and aesthetic filmmaking that focus on filmmaking as an art. These films are not made to garner commercial success, whereas, on the other hand, Indian filmmakers know that they are catering to a diverse audience and incorporating affective, playful, and comic frames making the film entertaining and appealing.

Also, where Canadian films use the environment as a symbol and catalyst for social change, they emphasize awareness of existing issues in society that sensitize audience to future problems and their solutions. Meanwhile, due to the gruesome past that Indians harbour through their culture being subjugated at every turn in history, colonial legacies, folk culture and myths create a special bond between culture and nature, or between, man and nature. This ensures that films deprioritize and reprioritise ecological issues.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study is highly relevant in adding to the existing literature in comparative studies since it creates the pathway for future research to be conducted on a wide variety of films that can be categorized under the umbrella term of eco-fantasy. The sub-genres presented in this study, hard and soft eco-fantasy can lead future researchers to explore a wider variety of films that amalgamate realistic and magical elements as well as those that portray only the realistic counterparts. The basic ontological and epistemological evidence between the two is provided and framed throughout the study.

This paper also features the first study ever to engage both film semiotics and Goffman's framing methodology to understand the underlying framing of environmental issues of films and how they intersect with traditions and society through discourse analysis. This opens up future research to be conducted using such interdisciplinary approaches. However, it is suggested that future research include a wider sample of films from the respective genre to be studied to inhibit bias and quantitative limitations of generalizability.

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