

A Study of Slow Violence, Corporate Eco-crime and Politics of Contamination in *Irada*

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Abstract: Aparnaa Singh's dark political thriller *Irada* (2017) deals with how industrial poisoning has led to an ecological disaster in Punjab, India. The film is set against a backdrop of corruption and greed. The film shows how reverse boring and toxic waste dumping is taking place illegally in the region and how it slowly but surely affects violence in the landscape. This article analyzes the film as an eco-thriller that unveils the cancerous relationship between the environment and the health of the people of the region. It also examines how the deaths of two young people, Riya and Aniruddh, are being used to uncover the ongoing conspiracy in the area. Through ecocriticism, environmental justice, and green criminology, the article will also explain how *Irada* makes environmental pollution a human rights issue. The article will conclude with an observation regarding how the film makes the spectator a witness to the corporate eco-crime going on in Punjab and the implications of such an act of violence at the local level and global level in the era of Anthropocene.

Keywords: Eco-crime, Slow violence, reverse boring, Anthropogenic disaster

Introduction

Aparnaa Singh's *Irada* (2017) is a noteworthy example of a contemporary Bollywood film that focuses on environmental activism rather than the conventional melodrama. The film connects environmental pollution to social issues in Bhatinda, Punjab, with a different understanding. *Irada* establishes the main premise of the plot on the presumption of environmental contamination, which is shown as the underlying threat to the water system, people's health, and the political establishment in the locality. In particular, the film sheds light on the irony of a public celebration for an entrepreneur who supposedly invests in the development of sustainable business practices in the region, the reality of which conceals the poisoning of the area from people. In general, the film raises a political question about the development being promoted when water, agriculture, and people's health are compromised.

The film opens with a shayari. This shayari/poem serves as a guiding principle for the movie and all those who wish to watch it. Those who would sit idly by, watching others being burnt alive, would one day burn themselves in the same fire. Indeed, *Irada* depicts a kind of slow chemical holocaust that has been happening around the people in the village. The water they drink, the food they eat, and the blood that runs through their veins are slowly turning to poison. This powerful message of environmental devastation is what makes it an eco-horror film in the first place because it makes people realize that it could happen anywhere - even if it is disguised as everyday life. In that way, I think it fits into the broader rubric of Indian 'eco-cinema' that seeks to reveal the cost of so-called progress using familiar genres and tropes. This paper aims to discuss the movie *Irada* through the lens of the theory of slow violence, first introduced by Rob Nixon. This theory describes ecological damage as a form of violence that occurs over a prolonged period and is, therefore, often ignored by society. In my opinion, the case of slow violence that appears in the film is strongly connected to the central conflict of the movie. *Irada*, as a film, thrives on the theme of pollution and the consequences of human inaction. During the film, the viewer sees how the factory gets rid of its waste in the earth and water, corrupting the environment and, eventually, the characters themselves. It shows the gradual poisoning that makes one think about what other slow and persistent violence may do to living creatures and the surrounding environment. It also makes the viewer realize that slow violence is as vicious and cruel as any other form of violence.

At the same time, *Irada* also demonstrates corporate eco-crime. Green criminology is a concept that implies that the environment is not protected enough from corporations and their actions since it is hard to prove that they hurt it. Therefore, when it comes to PPFPL, reverse boring, and the state, it is evident that they are all sources of eco-crime. What the company owned by Paddy Sharma does is not a crime that makes the land and water polluted but rather a deliberate action to dump it, and the state protects it. The movie reveals the reality in which ecological damage is caused by corporations and their disregard for the consequences of their actions. At that, the dialogues suggest that the poisoning of people is done deliberately and defended by the system as normal.

The relevance of this world to the real one is what makes *Irada* so fascinating. The film dwells on the environmental pollution of Punjab, which was recently reported by the press. It is a reality for many residents of the region: uranium and other harmful substances get into the groundwater of the Malwa belt, cancer rates are high, and the “cancer train” from Bathinda to the capital is still running. *Irada* does not depict an unreal universe but rather an extension of the world we live in - one in which people are already familiar with the dangers of poisoned wells and rotten crops. This explains the film’s melodramatic tone - it amplifies and distorts details that are all too real for people living in such an environment.

Literature Review

Irada is interpreted within the frame of reference of the tendency in contemporary Hindi cinema to address environmental and socio-political issues rather than focus on commercial genres. Bhattacharya reads *Irada* as a film that portrays groundwater pollution and water scarcity resulting in ecocidal consequences, whereas Mondal focuses on the film’s depiction of the fatal disease caused by chemical poisoning of groundwater (Bhattacharya; Mondal). Both these readings enable an understanding of *Irada* beyond its status as a mere commercial cinema and engage with the film as a medium to portray environmental issues for the consumption of popular audiences. The tendency of contemporary Indian cinema to depict environmental issues is significant in the context of the overall neglect of such issues within the framework of Indian mainstream visual media (Bhattacharya). In this sense, *Irada* becomes significant as an example of “green movies” to analyze the way Hindi cinema addresses environmental concerns and contaminates narratives with the discourse of ecology (Bhattacharya; Mondal).

The scholarship and commentary on *Irada* mostly concern a recent generic shift in Indian cinema in which ecological catastrophe figures as a social concern, not merely as a backdrop. Scholars argue that the film represents a departure from the norm in Bollywood cinema in that it explicitly thematizes groundwater pollution, reverse boring, and cancer as the result of corporate and state malfeasance. As such, several scholars have linked *Irada* to the ecological horror or eco-horror film, a subgeneric category that thematizes a conflict between eco-modernists and capitalistic forces. *Irada* is certainly an ecothriller, but beyond a few superficial observations about its resonance with contemporary events in India, most scholarship fails to grapple with *Irada* as an ecothriller. The problematics of contamination as a structure of domination and violence in this film require further scrutiny.

Indian cinema offers several representatives of the film genre to which *Irada* might also be related from a theoretical perspective. For example, *Kadvi Hawa* (2017) could be considered similar to *Irada* in terms of reflecting climate concerns, desertification, and vulnerability of the Indian countryside. Compared to *Irada*, which thematizes the effects of pollution and the associated collusion of the government and capital, *Kadvi Hawa* draws more attention to ecological catastrophe, debts, and bad harvests. However, both films intersect in portraying various forms of ecological damage that affect the majority of the country’s population most severely. Similarly,

Indian cinema provides other representatives of the genre, such as *Paani* (2024), which also focuses on water and its distribution to demonstrate the theme of catastrophe and the need for reform in contemporary India.

However, Hollywood cinema could be considered more relevant to the film under consideration in terms of providing analogous films. In this regard, *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *A Civil Action* (1998), and *Dark Waters* (2019) are the most prominent examples of films exploring different forms of intentional corporate pollution and the government's incompetence in proving the guilt of the perpetrators. *Erin Brockovich* depicts a female protagonist investigating the case of water contamination and filing a lawsuit against the company responsible for it. Similarly, *Dark Waters* thematizes water poisoning and the ensuing litigation in an attempt to hold corporations accountable for their actions. Therefore, it could be concluded that the film *Irada* is similar to these pictures in almost all aspects except for the difference in locations (Punjab versus the United States) and the exact nature of the environmental emergency (water and cancer).

At the level of criticism, the analyses of the movie *Irada* and other ecological movies are dominated by the themes of popularization of awareness, informational messages, or even ridiculous plots that appeal to a particular issue. Although these ideas and approaches are partially effective and relevant to some extent, they remain at a very superficial level, as they do not consider how ecological catastrophe is imposed through the movie's aesthetics and politics. Therefore, this paper will not reiterate the already existing criticism of the movie, which positions *Irada* as a film about pollution or other negative effects related to environmental destruction. Instead, the present study will attempt to conceptualize the film as one that effectively integrates corporate eco-crime, state violence, and slow violence via narrative, dialogue, irony, and body aesthetics.

Corporate Crime and State Silence

The corporate and political world in *Irada* is based on suppression, denial, and managed pollution. Deb's analysis of Bhopal's tragedy reveals that the slow violence of neoliberal governance has been intrinsic to the very survival of corporate power in India, which has sought to extend and defend its reach by perpetuating political and economic structures long after the initial disasters (Deb). In this regard, the film suggests that the environment and the communities living around corporations are sacrificed for the sake of capital, facilitated by money, power, and control. The opening shayari of the film already prepares the viewers for this logic of shared catastrophe: "Those who watch while others burn, your straw houses will soon be graves; when winds stroke the flames of death, how long will you be saved?" (*Irada* 00:03:42-46). Spoken by Lt. Col. Parabeet Walia, this verse serves as a cautionary tale against passive observation, but it also introduces the film's central idea that the consequences of ecological damage will affect not only those who suffer from it but also those who cause it. The film's verses function as a moral compass, indicating where the narrative's trajectory will lead: industrial waste, environmental poisoning, and public apathy will ultimately catch up with everyone.

That reckoning begins to take shape when Paddy Sharma, the factory owner, confronts Aniruddh after catching him exposing the contamination. His words reveal the rhetoric of corporate impunity:

What are you trying to prove...that the blood reports show traces of uranium? No one knows anything about reverse boring in the town. Ammonium nitrate and chromium are toxic, but no one cares about all this (*Irada* 00:16:28-32).

The strength of this line lies in its informality. Paddy does not argue that the toxic substance is not poisonous; instead, he claims that society would accept it as such and therefore it is not a crime. In this scene, the process of normalization of corruption is a critical factor. By making people realize that they can live with poison, Paddy makes them accept that poison is not a crime. His next statement adds to the idea of normalization: "The truth is people here are now used to drinking this poison and that is good for my business" (*Irada* 00:17:05-07). Now he exposes that normalizing toxins in water is a way of generating profit from it. The whole sentence is an accusation of a crime of slowly poisoning people and making them accustomed to it.

The film exposes the hidden system via surveillance and investigation. Indeed, when Maya finds out about the factory's illegality using the drone at night, the image recorded by the drone comments on the entire waste regime: "The waste line is on. Pump the chemical waste into the ground. Dispose of the waste into the canal and dump the remaining chemical waste into the fields" (*Irada* 00:27:13-17). This is significant because it transforms the film's narrative from one about suspicion to one about facts. The camera spies on the crime and thus exposes reverse boring as something not left to chance, but rather as a well-established route and plan. Clearly, not only is the crime systematic, but it also branches out in various directions, utilizing different channels to get rid of chemical waste. Thus, from the perspective of the film, the very environment and sources of life are threatened by industrialization and its waste. In this sense, it is interesting how the drone shot makes the crime accessible to Maya, as well as to the viewer, commenting on it as an object of surveillance.

Corporate life in *Irada* is deeply intertwined with political power; hence, when Paddy threatens to bring the chief minister, Ramandeep Braitch, into the fray, the message is clear that the government is nothing without corporate donations: "...but if it isn't, the next election poster will show a different face, and the money will go into someone else's account" (*Irada* 00:36:03-09). The remark highlights the sheer venality of the system and exposes the corrupt nature of corporate-political dealings. It suggests that the state is little more than an instrument of capital, and the film exposes this dynamic as inherently exploitative of nature and the environment. Notably, another character, Maya, says to Arjun Mishra, "...all the high rises of this city have their foundation deep below" (*Irada* 00:40:55-57). At one level, the remark refers to pollution dumped miles below ground and used as a filler to construct cities. At another level, it refers to the fact that the prosperity of the city comes at the expense of the environment. Indeed, the very image of the city is one of buildings whose beauty masks the rot underneath.

The news report watched by Arjun Mishra further explains this mechanism of environmental crime:

...reverse boring is a dangerous way to dispose of chemical waste. Factories like PPFPL don't have waste treatment plants. So, they use this illegal but convenient method of reverse boring. Thousands of gallons of poison are injected deep underground through a pipeline. Imagine the soil, even the crops, everything gets infested with toxins, and that is chemical contamination (*Irada* 00:47:02-15).

This report is presented as evidence that demonstrates the scandal and makes it public. Moreover, the phrase "illegal but convenient" reveals the essence of the entire affair. What seems convenient for the factory is fatal for the region. In other words, the film shows and exposes political corruption. Nature will always be exploited for profit, and this is normal for any region with enterprises. However, this is made possible by officials' incompetence and the willingness of townspeople and residents to live on their own.

Visualizing Slow Violence and the Human Cost of Waste

The most insidious feature of *Irada* is that the violence is not spectacular; it sneaks up inside a person and becomes part of their body, their soul. It turns into the water that one drinks, the food that one eats, and the air that one breathes until the victim becomes accustomed to the feeling of violence. This is what slow violence is, according to Rob Nixon; he describes it as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon, 2). Slow violence is also "a gradual attrition, embedded within tissues and technologies, landscapes and lifeworlds" (Davies, 410). *Irada* manages to personify these abstract concepts and make them tangible by demonstrating the slow and almost imperceptible poisoning of the region of Bhatinda. Thus, the film puts the violence in the center of the narrative, drawing attention to the fact that it is not a one-time act but rather a constant presence that needs to be addressed.

This violence is revealed first of all through the suffering of Parabeet Walia (the father of Riya) and not through her suffering - she is not dying of an illness, but of poisoned water and a poisoned environment. When Parabeet Walia asks Arjun Mishra,

Do deathly voices ring in his ears? Have you got his blood tested? Have you checked your son's nails if they're turning yellow? ...Are his lips turning blue? ...Does he wake up at night screaming and panting? ...Does he see dead bodies getting sucked into a poisonous swamp? ...This toxic swamp filled with toxic water (*Irada* 00:55:12-58),

the dialogue does more than convey paternal concern; it transforms it into a discourse of manifestations, sleeplessness, corporeal putrefaction, and the like. The questions are troubling because they thematize pollution's extension into the domain of the unconscious psyche. By linking poison with sickness and death, the exchange produces a textual effect that reproduces the very experience of slow violence, its gradual insinuation into one's inner being.

Parabjeet's next observation adds to the film's political message: "Terrorists only kill a few people. But these people are destroying the lives of the entire generation with their poison. The problem is chemical contamination. That is the potential cause of cancer" (*Irada* 00:70:35-45). This statement is significant to the film's message since it problematizes the meaning of terror. Typically, in public discourse, terror is understood as an explosive act that causes mass casualties but not systematic and long-term damage to the environment. Walia's statement inverts the hierarchy: he states that terror as chemical contamination is worse than the terrorist attacks because it kills silently and causes damage to entire generations. This way, his message problematizes the public's perception of terror and highlights environmental destruction as an essential source of violence in contemporary society.

The same thought is expanded upon by Parabjeet Walia, who bitterly remarks that "In all this, even today Bhagat Singh was the one who got martyred" (*Irada* 00:70:23-25). In this context, Bhagat Singh in the movie is seen as a national hero who is part of the country's psyche. By saying that even today he was the one who got martyred, Walia means that revealing the facts about pollution and corruption is a thankless task that only brings the truth-tellers under the same fire as those who order the cover-ups and killings. It is implied that the struggle for the environment is the same as any other patriotic act, even though it made Bhagat Singh a martyr. It can be said that by calling for action against the perpetrators, Walia is asking the viewers to become patriotic as well, even though it may cost them their lives. It connects the nationalistic ideas with environmental concerns and highlights their common aspect - suppression.

The film's imagery, which best represents slow violence, is Maya's statement that "all the high rises of this city have their foundation deep below" (*Irada* 00:40:55-57). Firstly, the chosen imagery is remarkable because Maya refers to waste as the basis for the capitalistic high-rises. In addition, stating this hypothesis proves that success and prosperity are built on a polluted and ruined environment. Secondly, Maya compares the city to the skyscraper, whose foundation consists of the waste in the slums. Moreover, the comparison suggests that the image of the capitalistic city is pure, but the purity is artificial since there is polluted air and land beneath the buildings. Hence, this metaphor serves perfectly to represent the central message of the film to the audience. The visual metaphor explicitly shows that the beauty of the capitalistic world is spoiled from within.

The drone camera, which Maya finds in the factory at night, unveils the truth that the visual metaphor suggests. The workers inform Maya that "the waste line is on. Pump the chemical waste into the ground. Dispose of the waste into the canal, and dump the remaining chemical waste into the fields" (*Irada* 00:27:13-17). What makes this particular quote remarkable is the fact that the workers do not see any potential threat to the environment. Hence, they treat waste as something normal and acceptable to dispose of since the process has become habitual for them. The fact that they dump the polluted water and chemicals into the earth, water, and fields reveals the workers' attitude towards the environment. In fact, the entire process serves as an informative resource for the audience to understand what kind of impact eco-violence has on the

environment. Therefore, Maya's surveillance investigation unmasks the factory's actual work and educates the viewers on the essential facts concerning the matter.

The public explanation of reverse boring, which appears in the TV report, makes the film's eco-message even clearer. Indeed, that scene uncovers the primary issue that the documentary aims to resolve. In this scene, the report explicitly states that the environment is used to benefit corporations conveniently. Moreover, as the report reveals the details of reverse boring, it becomes clear that the pollution spreads to soil, water, and air, which makes the impact of eco-violence even more devastating. Hence, the report makes the audience realize that slow violence is not only dangerous but also difficult to measure.

Conclusion

Irada turns out to be a condemnation of crimes of the corporate world and its collusion with the state in the cover-up of the illegal reverse boring of the groundwater, poisoning of the environment, and burial of waste. The film manages to show that the deaths of Riya and Aniruddh are just the tip of the iceberg regarding the damage done to people's lives and prospects by the poisoned environment. The film exposes the truth about the corruption and anti-environmental policies undertaken by the companies and the government, and it does so in a uniquely Indian way by using shayari and dialogues to unveil the facts one by one, thus making the viewer see the entire picture. That is why it is important to analyze *Irada* as a work of art that makes the audience wonder who exactly is committing these crimes, who is getting away with them, and who must pay for them with their lives. *Irada*'s value in terms of green criminology lies in its ability to depict the toxic combination of capitalistic exploitation and abuse of state resources and the damage done to the lives of ordinary people who must live with the consequences of the industry's toxic waste.

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