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## The Subaltern Gazes: Commentary on Amit Masurkar's *Sherni*

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### ABSTRACT

In this essay, I draw from my ongoing Ph.D. thesis to discuss Amit Masurkar's recent Bollywood film *Sherni* and argue that the subaltern might not speak but it gazes, creating the possibility of registering subaltern agency beyond the mechanisms of speech. Among the myriad discourses on subalternity, discussions on cinematic representability of identities on fringes are rife with issues of scopophilia, objectification, and lack of agency. Turning towards mainstream Bollywood, one often finds a subaltern entombed within hegemonic utterances, silenced, violated, and/or forgotten. Scholars like Gayatri Spivak, Ranajit Guha, and Ania Loomba have excavated historical accounts of such identities from social, cultural, colonial, and/or political spheres. I discuss *Sherni* to show how Masurkar establishes marginalized indigenous identities, shifting the focus from native elite speakers to those who are being spoken to. I further argue that Masurkar's genius also lies in coalescing the wildlife and human subalternities—a need for environmentally vulnerable global societies.

**Keywords:** Bollywood, *Sherni*, Subaltern, Film, Postcolonial

## INTRODUCTION

Among the manifold discourses on subalternity, discussions on cinematic representability of identities on the fringes are rife with issues of scopophilia, objectification, and lack of agency.<sup>1</sup> A subaltern cannot speak; it can only be spoken for, Gayatri Spivak has famously argued. The living speaks for the dead, the rich for the poor, the religious majority for the religious minority, the government for its governed, the state for its residents, men for women, and so on. Epistemologies of power construct how an “other” is looked at and spoken for. In mainstream Bollywood, especially in narratives surrounding death, one often finds marginal identities entombed within or expressed via hegemonic utterances, silenced, violated, killed, and/or forgotten. In addition to Spivak, postcolonial and subaltern theorists like Ranajit Guha and Ania Loomba have unearthed historical accounts of silenced subalternity from social, cultural, colonial, and political spheres. Guha in his essay “Chandra’s Death” shed light on the colonial manifestations of law and their failure to comprehend indigenous realities arguing that colonial law carved criminality out of native people, documenting them in English, which fell insufficient in capturing the indigenous cultural nuances and complexities. [Loomba](#) astutely complicated female agency through her study of Sati practices in India in “Dead Women Tell no Tales.” These scholars have collectively argued for the impossibility of subaltern speech as such utterances have always fallen prey to dominant linguistic frameworks. Is speech or vocal assertion the only way a marginalized person can situate themselves in a historical/cultural context? When cinema has the privilege of utilizing images to express the *not-said*, can the medium prove useful in capturing the *expression* of characters on fringes?

## DISCUSSION

In Amit Masurkar’s 2021 Bollywood film *Sherni* the subalterns gaze, sometimes speak, often loom large in the cinematic space establishing their slow and ruthless marginalization and successfully disrupting the dominant power at the center of the narrative. A nature-wildlife-human triad illuminates the environmental deterioration at the hands of a powerful few. In this restrained,

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud defines scopophilia as the pleasure of looking and being looked at. In films like *Peeping Tom* (British, 1960), scopophilia has been represented as the serial killer’s obsession with looking directly at his victims while he killed them, objectifying the dying women. Freud, Sigmund. “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume VII (1901-1905): *A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works*. 1953, pp. 123-246.

slow-paced thriller, actor Vidya Balan plays Vidya Vincent, a South-Indian Christian feminist protagonist. Appointed as a Divisional Forest Officer, Vidya embarks on solving the mystery of a tigress attacking people somewhere in Madhya Pradesh. Only when Vidya digs deeper, does she realize that the heavily forest-dependent villagers are stuck between several power conflicts. Political parties and forest department officials have spun rumors about a violent tigress on loose. The power-hungry (mostly male) utilize this self-induced gossip to control a vast land and use it for coal mining purposes. Amidst all, local farmers are manipulated by rival politicians and barred from accessing the wilderness on which their livelihoods depend. The myth of a man-eating tigress keeps the forest department funded, while powerful men remain disinterested in assisting the natives. The forest, the indigenous people, the tiger population, and gradually Vidya emerge as multiple subalternities as local, state, and national bureaucracies implement their political-capitalist greed.

Subalternity implies unspeakability, its ultimate formulation being death. Masurkar employs this unspeakability to shed light on the speech rendered politically unworthy—both living and dead. Vidya’s resistance loses appeal in a male-dominated space. Forest officers do not consider the villagers’ opinions crucial. Tigers are being hunted for sport. Lands are being razed for mining. To maintain the hegemony of capitalist, political, and bureaucratic speech, the myth of a murderous tigress is introduced. But by shifting the focus on the ones removed from the discourse, Masurkar interrogates the culture of silence. On a path rarely trodden in Hindi films, Masurkar employs ingenious camera shots to dismantle traditional storytelling. By redirecting the spectatorship to the “spoken at” rather than the “ones speaking,” *Sherni* tactfully inserts the peripheral “other” into active consciousness. Instead of emerging as a spectacle or a violated, infantilized investigative subject for native elite curiosity, these identities speak beyond the purview of speech.

The villagers appear nervous when listening to the bombastic speeches of politicians (see figures for reference at the end of this essay). Kids wait in an extended single shot while trying to fathom the battle between two political factions. Pictured in the background, their nervous fidgeting *speaks* of their discomfort and their cynicism toward the state workers. Women stare long into the abyss of bureaucratic, political, and male chaos. Close angle shots interlock the viewer’s gaze with the villagers, reorienting the need to focus on the ones who do not speak and mostly receive the empty promises of the powerful. In a large poster on the wall, the so-called

man-eating tigress, T12 looks menacing behind Mr. Bansal's (Vidya's boss) office desk, as if mocking his utter failure in understanding the wildlife he is supposed to be protecting. T12 overpowers Bansal, interlocking the dead animal's gaze with the living human viewer. In a medium shot, the camera focuses on the silenced yet criminalized tigress, intensifying the lost voice one comfortably does not pay attention to. The collective subaltern thus subverts their marginalized positioning as their represented gaze shakes the power play at hand and casts doubt over its rhetoric. Masurkar situates unheard voices through their silences making their emptiness, despair, desperation emerge through words not spoken.

## CONCLUSION

*Sherni* dismantles the dominance of speech when considering the question: *can the subaltern speak?* Even without the opportunity to act through the spoken word, the marginalized register the limitations to their subjective agency through their represented gazes. This establishment of the subaltern without speech creates a possibility to explore a subaltern's pause. While their outsidership does not change, camera shots focus on the villagers instead of the native elites speaking, and the film reminds one of the marginalities excluded from the process of decision making; natives kept away from deciding their own fate. Masurkar engages with the unrepresentable, positions it within the process of its marginalization, and redirects the viewership at the included yet excluded people/land/wildlife.

*Sherni*'s prowess also lies in coalescing the wildlife and human subalternities—a need for environmentally vulnerable global societies. Overhead shots of luscious forests at the beginning of the film and later its barrenness speak for human perversion. As the film comes to an end, extreme close-ups of wildlife in a museum exacerbate their lives lost to capitalist ideals. With a refreshing non-Hindu, non-male protagonist, the subalterns find a compassionate ally. Vidya's gaze guides the viewer to pay attention to murdered T12's cubs as they wait to be rescued. She believes in working with the villagers and existing in harmony with nature and its inhabitants. *Sherni* does not dismantle the center, but the center is definitely ruptured and without much speech.

**IMAGES FOR REFERENCE**

*A medium shot showing villagers expressing concern*



*Mr. Bansal in his office. The image of the tiger looms large in the background staring directly at the viewer.*



*As villagers listen to the forest officials, children wait—twice removed from the conversation.*

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