



LANDSCAPES OF UNCERTAINTY: ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN NILAMADHAB PANDA'S *KADVI HAWA*

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Abstract

*This paper examines the representation of environmental crisis and climate vulnerability in Nila Madhab Panda's *Kadvi Hawa* (2017). Set in the drought-stricken region of Bundelkhand, the film foregrounds the socio-economic and psychological consequences of climate change on marginalized rural communities. Drawing upon concepts such as the Anthropocene, slow violence, ecocinema, precarity, and necropolitics, the study explores how ecological degradation intersects with debt, displacement, and agrarian distress. Through the experiences of Heddu, a blind farmer, and Gunu, a debt recovery agent displaced by floods in Odisha, the film reveals the uneven yet interconnected impacts of environmental instability across different regions of India. The paper argues that *Kadvi Hawa* transcends conventional disaster narratives by presenting climate change as a lived reality embedded in everyday experiences of uncertainty, loss, and survival. Ultimately, the film emerges as a powerful critique of ecological injustice and the human costs of environmental change.*

Keywords

Climate Change, Ecocriticism, Anthropocene, Slow Violence, Ecocinema, etc.

Full Article

Climate generally refers to the average pattern of the atmospheric conditions observed within a specified geographical space varying across days, month, years and decades. Although climatic variations have occurred throughout the evolution of earth and was long recognized as a natural phenomenon. In recent times, climate change is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity and this issue has transformed into a matter of global concern. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defines climate change as a change which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and is in addition to natural climatic variability observed over comparable time periods.

In today's time, climate change has transformed not only the natural environment but also social, economic and cultural conditions of human existence. The central concern of global warming, erratic weather patterns, untimely floods, cyclones, forest fires and extreme climatic events has disrupted and threatened the ecosystem and livelihood of people across the world. This concern has further aggravated the concern of food and livelihood insecurity, human displacement and survival.

As Dipesh Chakrabarty in *The Climate of History: Four Theses* (2009) argues that the climate crisis compels humanity to rethink its relationship with the planet. He further mentions that:

The situation changed in the 2000s when the warnings became dire, and the signs of the crisis—such as the drought in Australia, frequent cyclones and brush fires, crop failures in many parts of the world, the



melting of Himalayan and other mountain glaciers and of the polar ice caps, and the increasing acidity of the seas and the damage to the food chain— became politically and economically inescapable. Added to this were growing concerns, voiced by many, about the rapid destruction of other species and about the global footprint of a human population poised to pass the nine billion mark by 2050 (Chakrabarty, 197).

The growing concern of scientists, scholars, artists and writers with environmental crisis has also generated new forms of cultural representation. Literature, cinema and other cultural texts increasingly engage with climate change. This theme of climate change has recurrently featured in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, *The Gun Island*, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. These literary environmental narratives foreground the deep interconnections between human culture and nature. Similarly, cinematic representations on climate change have also visualized this complex environmental crisis for wider audiences. Films such as *Princess Mononoke* (1997), directed by Hayao Miyazaki, explores the conflict between industrial expansion and ecological preservation. Similarly, *Avatar* (2009), directed by James Cameron, highlights ecological interconnectedness and the destructive consequences of resource exploitation and Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* (2021), offers a satirical critique of climate change denial and political inaction.

Within the Indian context, a growing number of films have begun to address the issues of environmental degradation and climate vulnerability and Nila Madhab Panda's *Kadvi Hawa* (2017) occupies a distinctive position that deals with the climate change in rural India. *Kadvi Hawa* represents an unnamed village in Bundelkhand that is undergoing environmental catastrophe and ecological disaster. The film reveals that climate change is a living reality that is deteriorating and impacting the lives of ordinary marginalized people of rural India. The relationship of humans with nature has been historically documented in various cultures across the world. Oral traditions, folk literature and mythologies have effectively stressed upon the sacred relation between humans and nature. In contrast to the historical belief, the film depicts a dystopian space in modern times where the relationship between the villagers and nature appears strained. This place is marked by drought, absence of rain and loss of natural resources. The film depicts the negative impact of climate change and how nature violently impacts the life of the inhabitants.

The film further highlights that the entire village is in massive bank loan debts and only poverty echoes through the barren landscape of the village. To recover some portion of the economic loss, people are migrating to the cities with better employment opportunities. Nila Madhab Panda dismantles the illusion that climate change is an event waiting to arrive in the future. Instead she uses realist visual style that depicts the emotional and social condition of the people. This avoids excessive melodrama and spectacle and relies primarily on dramatic plot developments. The camera frequently captures barren fields, deserted roads, cracked grounds and disturbed faces of the villagers. This deliberate visual technique intensifies the representation of the climate change with a realistic everyday touch on the environmental crisis.

The film opens with a close up shot of Hedu (Sanjay Mishra) walking through the parched drought stricken landscape of Bundelkhand. This visual sequence of shots introduces the rural space to the viewers as an area that is ecologically imbalanced and is on the verge of depletion. The village can no more sustain life and is presented as a dystopian space to the spectator's eyes. In a sequence of static wide shot, the entire landscape of Bundelkhand is captured by the director. The visual clarity showcases the cracked soil, dust filled roads and the small measured steps of the old blind man Hedu, walking with the help of his wooden cane. This scene symbolizes and



functions as an allegorical statement about the insignificance of human beings in the magnitude of changing climate and also proposes the idea that human activities are the prime reason for depleting environment and climate change. In this light, *Kadvi Hawa* profoundly articulates the concerns of Anthropocene, a term popularized by Nobel laureate chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000. They primarily argued that human activities and agencies have become a dominant reason for altering the basic ecosystem of the nature.

The scene transitions from the open barren lands of the rural village to the enclosed space of the world of rural Mahalaxmi Grameen bank. This bank represents a world of finance that provides loans to the farmers for agricultural practices and possesses contrasting features to the silence and stillness of the opening sequence of the village.

The spatial architecture of the bank is chaotic and the sound scape inside the bank is harsh, noisy and devoid of any natural emotions. This government bank has long queues of exhausted people, struggling to exercise patience in this harsh and hot weather. Within this rural landscape, the bank becomes a symbol of financial control and spatial hierarchy that controls the life and destiny of these rural villagers. Drawing on Frantz Fanon idea of colonial division of space, Achille Mbembe mentions that:

colonial occupation entails a division of space into compartments. It involves the setting of boundaries and internal frontiers epitomized by barracks and police stations; it is regulated by the language of pure force, immediate presence, and frequent and direct action; and it is premised on the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. But more important, this is how necropower operates: “The town belonging to the colonized people . . . is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees.”⁵⁰ In this case, sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not (Mbembe, 79-80)

This sequence at the bank also introduces Gunu (Ranvir Shorey) where he for the first time meets Hedu. This meeting is symbolic from the context of the film. The introductory shot of Gunu entering with a ledger speaks about the nature of his work as a debt recovery agent. He was forced to displace from Odisha due to floods and he himself is a victim of nature’s fury and an active subject of forced displacement. The scene further highlights the apparent suffering of farmers due to the impact of ecological imbalance and the burden of finance that climate change has caused upon the lives of these farmers standing inside the bank.

Hedu patiently waited for his turn and finally receives his chance to meet Gunu. This short meeting between Hedu and Gunu introduces one of the central concerns of the film. Hedu and Gunu acquire different social positions in the society but the film clearly presents that the disruptions caused by environmental crisis will produce similar experiences of hardships, loss and insecurities across different regions. When the blind farmer simply enquires about the total amount of interest and debt, Gunu reacts with impatience and frustration. However, this angry reaction is not directed personally towards Hedu. This angst is against the systemic and structural compulsion that prioritizes financial recovery over personal empathy and sufferings. Gunu only



understands data and his primary objective is to earn maximum commission through recovery of debts.

In contrast to Gunu's perspective, Hedu is primarily concerned with the increasing interest of the debt and is constantly stressed and tensed for his son Mukund. Through the sequence of these scenes, the film critiques the impersonal nature of the institutional power of the financial system and clearly establishes that these economic structures frequently transcend the emotional and social consequences of the voiceless or the subaltern who are constantly living under the fear of losing their livelihood. These marginalized communities constantly remain absent from the models and narratives of development and progress of the national growth and modernization. The effects of this environmental and economic crisis are relational and becomes visible in everyday spaces of human life. Hedu's home in the village serves as a microcosm of emotional hardship and also powerfully represents the impact caused by ecological degradation in Bundelkhand. His modest home built with typical material of mud, straw, bricks and wood is dominated by blackened utensils, barren soil and an open courtyard. Hedu's home is devoid of any modern amenities such as electricity, furniture and running water. The *mise-en-scene* conveys an atmosphere of exhaustion and decline which is aptly communicated by the shades of brown and grey of the deserted landscape around the home. The overall atmosphere of the village is under economic hardship. They are hoping for rains to provide redemption from the drought. Their constant hardship has also eroded social relations amongst the villagers and in extreme cases farmers are committing suicides in the village. Every social and personal grief is inextricably linked to global warming, environmental catastrophe and climate change. Rob Nixon conceptualizes such forms of environmental destruction as "slow violence," which he defines as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2).

This motif of farmer suicide functions as a powerful critique that highlights the consequences and impact of climate change on agrarian communities. The film raises this grave reality of farmer suicides silently and suggests that the crisis is not merely agricultural but also existential. Every failed harvest in the village increases the financial burden on the farmer and their future depends on the hope for favourable climatic conditions and adequate rainfall. According to the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) report on "Accidental Deaths and Suicides" 2024, a total of 10,546 individuals, including farmers and agricultural laborers died by suicide in India. The government has introduced various policies and measures to curb down on the number of suicides in India. Despite various efforts and policy interventions, the overly dependence in the monsoon rainfall, persistent crop failures and increasing debt and market fluctuations has eroded the mental health of the farmers. This socio-economic vulnerability haunts the future of people engaged in agriculture. The representation of suicide in the film is deliberately left unresolved and unsettled. The film indirectly gives a reference to the increasing number of suicides under the surmounting financial pressure of debt on the farmers. In a sequence, the director deliberately captures grieving family members of the farmers committing suicide. The film refuses to create a spectacle of suffering and encourages the viewers to engage primarily with the conditions that give rise to such issue of suicide.

Scott MacDonald observes this kind of filmmaking as ecocinema. A cinematic tradition requires attentiveness and mindfulness by the spectator. He observes the importance of this cinematic tradition and mentions that:

I see the fundamental job of an ecocinema as a retraining of perception,
as a way of offering an alternative to conventional media spectatorship,



or to put it in terms I've explored in detail elsewhere, as a way of providing something like a garden—an "Edenic" respite from conventional consumerism—within the machine of modern life, as modern life is embodied by the apparatus of media (MacDonald, 109).

The film further demonstrates that climate change within Bundelkhand is not only an economic or agricultural catastrophe. A minor scene in the film illustrates the theoretical comprehension and long term consequences of the environment within the premises of the school. During a routine classroom lecture of Geography, the teacher discusses about the four seasons of the year. When a hesitant child identifies two seasons, the teacher enquires further based on his pedagogical skill and theoretical knowledge. The young child answers that the two seasons are summer and winter and erratic rains occur for three or four days in his area. This response highlights an ecological reality that has altered the understanding of the seasonal cycles of the familiar weather. The film mentions that environmental change has impacted the inter-generational memory through the lived experiences of the transforming landscapes.

On the other hand, the psychological and the emotional burden of debt increase a sense of hopelessness and fear in the mind of Hedu. At this stage of the narrative, Hedu wishes to meet Gunu and seek a solution. Through his unique stone throwing method, Hedu interrupts Gunu on his routine visit to the village. Hedu has a false notion that Gunu might help him to reduce his interest without any payment. Gunu initially resists any information provided by Hedu, but when Gunu successfully recovers the loan, he strikes a deal with Hedu for providing more information.

Hedu further invites him to an open space, Gunu consults his ledger and tells him that his son owes the amount of forty two thousand five hundred and eighty rupees to the bank. In the interest of his family and the fear of his son's suicide, he strikes a deal with Gunu and agrees to provide information on interest basis to the loan recovery agent. He sees this as the only way out of this trouble and intends to repay the loan of his son as soon as possible.

Gunu ensures him a portion of interest in every recovery from his village. At symbolic level, this deal seems to be financial, but at the core of the two men, this deal is for survival. Nila Madhab Panda here clearly renders that a part of our nation is deeply burdened by economic coercion and ecological collapse has further led to moral exhaustion of the people. Gunu here becomes a part of systemic violence that has manufactured apprehension in the minds of the people like Hedu. Although Gunu himself is under forced displacement and his work situates him into a system that transforms environmental loss into financial compulsion.

The agreement between Hedu and Gunu initiates a significant transformation in the narrative trajectory of *Kadvi Hawa*. Hedu becomes attentive after the agreement and starts collecting information circulating within the village. Nila Madhab Panda's narrative maps through the lives of many individuals of the village. The majority of everyday conversations were dominated by the concerns of debt, property and livelihood. During one such sequence, Hedu overhears discussions regarding Ram Saran, a villager who contemplates selling his tractor due to mounting financial pressures. Although the scene appears seemingly insignificant and mundane on the surface, but this episode acquires considerable symbolic importance within the context of the film. The tractor functions not merely as an agricultural machinery but as an emblem of labour, productivity and economic survival. The decision to sell such an asset indicates the severity of financial distress experienced by farming households and the brunt of climate change on the lives of these agricultural communities. Hedu communicates this information to Gunu and in this process of the disclosure he becomes a part of a system that facilitates and exploits the economic vulnerabilities of the powerless rural households.



Nila Madhab Panda carefully portrays Hedu's actions through gestures that carry deeper social and economic significance. His affirmation and resolve to assist Gunu is a reflection of his desperation and mental anxiety that is generated by increasing debt. The centre of his concern remains welfare of his son Mukund, whose future appears increasingly uncertain under the burden of debt. This concern of Hedu is connected to the recurring references of the farmer suicides that serve as an undercurrent throughout the film. Every suicide is motivated by the cumulative pressures of debt trap and environmental instability. Hedu becomes increasingly uncomfortable at the mounting debt and fragile financial condition of Mukund and his family. Every death intensifies his determination to provide financial and social security to his family and consequently, his decision to assist Gunu emerges not from greed but from desperation. Therefore, this scene reveals how environmental and ethical catastrophe compels individuals to morally compromise and negotiate for their survival.

The successful recovery of the loan earns Hedu receiving a commission from Gunu. Yet Nila Madhab Panda deliberately presents this scene with caution and restraint. The camera lingers and pans on Hedu's body language and conduct. He appears in an emotional ambiguity and his demeanour in the exchange of money is accompanied neither by celebration nor relief. Instead, the scene is characterized by unease and apprehension that his economic gain was at the cost of economic hardship or loss of another villager. Initially he refuses to take commission but on insistence Hedu immediately requests to reduce Mukund's debt. This immediate response reveals his state of mind and his demonstrates that his agreement is not about personal enrichment. For him this commission is a simple monetary transaction that will help to safeguard his son and family from the increasing burden of debt.

Mukund in the film represents a younger generation of farmers and workers who are confronted with constant patterns of environmental change, increasing debt and innate frustration with the system and governance. This unsaid psychological pressure is impacting the rural youth and this insecurity further leads them to financial vulnerability and in extreme cases committing suicide. Unlike this generation, Hedu has gradually accepted his fate. His lifetime of struggle has taught him to negotiate and also has instilled resilience and patience within his personality. This uncertainty is presented by the director repeatedly through brief yet meaningful interactions in the film. Mukund's silence and his absence from the frame communicate more than the dialogue. His emotional withdrawal reveals the psychological distress that is being experienced by the younger generations of farmers as they live under unstable precarious future.

A critical turning point emerges in the film narrative when Mukund fails to return home. The director carefully constructs a sequence that is marked by minimal communication, subdued and dark home of Hedu. The waiting eyes of Mukund's wife are symbolic of anxiety and concern of forever losing her husband. In the morning when she communicates about the absence to Hedu, he immediately sets out for search. The recurring motif of suicide constantly haunts him and Mukund's absence evokes this uncertainty and possibility of an eventual tragedy. This sequence of search is one of the most powerful and life transforming moment in Hedu's life. The search for Mukund unfolds through a sequence of emotionally compelling scenes that capture the barren field, cracked earth and the constantly declining ecology of Bundelkhand. As Hedu moves through the deserted space, this lifeless landscape signifies not only environmental degradation but also the psychological distress of the loss of Mukund. To derive additional emotional impact of the scene, Nila Madhab Panda in the background employs a song "Main Banjar, Mai Banjar" to symbolically connect the drought stricken, desolate land of Bundelkhand with the psychological state of the characters in the film. This interplay of sound with the *mise-en-scene* shows a landscape bearing the brunt of environmental precarity and people suffering with the burden ecological desolation and loss of life in Bundelkhand.



The film does not disclose the fate of Mukund but rather focuses on a sense of uncertainty that works as an emotional force in this sequence of shots. On the other hand, Heddu's helplessness about the whereabouts of Mukund intensifies his anxiety of losing Mukund and his guilt of helping Gunu. This sequence also invokes suspense and fear in the mind of the family and this pain aggravates suspiciously with the past experiences and deaths that have become a part of social reality of the village. Heddu's inability to locate Mukund mirrors his inability to secure stability and security for his family. The sequence therefore transcends individual anxiety and captures a sense of collective vulnerability that is experienced by the drought stricken communities. Judith Butler's conception in *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* resonates about the precarity of life in this sequence. She argues that "Loss has made a tenous "we" of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire". (Butler, 20). Therefore, Mukund's disappearance precisely foregrounds this condition of loss, anxiety and vulnerability.

This tragic incident and loss significantly impacts Heddu and as the narrative progresses, his guilt of helping Gunu transforms him completely. The revelation affects Heddu deeply and this emotional impact transcends the debt recovery incentives he had received for providing information. The sudden realization humanizes his compassionate aspect of personality once again. In his continuous interaction with Heddu, we see his personality transform from an oppressor, a debt collector to a displaced victim from Odisha. This transformation becomes particularly significant when Gunu's own history of displacement is revealed due to environmental crisis. Gunu was forced to migrate from Odisha due to recurrent cyclones and floods in his area. The perception of Gunu's personality as a representative of an institutional authority transforms into a victim of ecological instability and disruption. Nila Madhab Panda expands the theme of environmental crisis beyond the limited space of Bundelkhand and talks about this crisis from a national and global perspective parallels the destructive impact of environment in the lives of Gunu and Heddu. They share a common experience of survival, loss and insecurity that further breeds as a common ground of emotional solidarity and human experience. Heddu suffers because of the absence of water and Gunu's life is impacted due to excess of water and both remain victims of environmental imbalance.

The film further reinforces this shared predicament through a sequence of scenes that foreground Gunu's increasing anxiety after another cyclone strikes Odisha. This anxiety is introduced gradually through the repeated ringing of his mobile phone. Initially, Nila Madhab Panda highlights Gunu's emotional distress in an interaction with Heddu where he tries to persuade and console him to continue his work. The sequence subtly shifts attention from Heddu towards the apprehension of Gunu when he reveals about haunting loss of family and land. In the evening Gunu's unanswered calls by his family members further deepens his uncertainty regarding the safety of his family. The authoritative recovery agent of Bundelkhand suddenly appears emotionally fragile and helpless. Nila Madhab Panda here symbolically mentions that ultimately the shared condition of degrading climatic conditions transcends social hierarchies. Nature subverts and equalizes the distinctions between the powerful and the powerless, between authority and the victim. Consequently, both Heddu and Gunu are subject to similar human experience of environmental vulnerability and existential uncertainties.

The film concludes without revealing the fate of Gunu's family and allows uncertainty to linger even after the narrative has ended. The silence of the unanswered phone calls reminds us of the possibility of personal loss that has become an everyday reality of the communities living under the conditions of environmental instability. The refusal to provide closure in the film reminds the viewers to experience apprehension and anxiety that accompanies Gunu. The unanswered phone calls deny both the character and the viewers the comfort of certainty,



transforming silence into a powerful reminder of the precarious realities faced by communities living under conditions of environmental instability. This sequence generates anxiety and connects personal loss with the broader reality of environment uncertainty. In this context, Nila Madhab Panda highlights a powerful metaphor of unanswered phone calls that functions symbolically for the unpredictability of human life in an unstable ecological era. The impact of climate change continues to impact the everyday lives even after the impending disaster has passed.

The film ends on a note of information regarding cyclones and environmental devastation in Odisha and with this Nila Madhab Panda significantly broadens the scope of the narrative. Although the majority of the film remains focused on the landscape of Bundelkhand but with the addition of Gunu and his connection with Odisha, he expands ecological framework beyond the local landscape and also connects this problem to the larger discourse of migration and displacement in contemporary India. The film refuses to provide a reassuring solution and rather offers an apparent warning of climate related sufferings and farmer suicides in India. In this context, the narratives of Heddu and Gunu cease to exist as isolated narratives and they become representative of communities facing the catastrophic nature of environment in their everyday experiences. Rather than offering a reassuring resolution, the film compels viewers to recognize that environmental crises are neither geographically confined nor temporally limited. The effect of the ongoing realities continues to shape lives long after the immediate disaster has passed.

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