Sundarbans Disappeared, Kolkata Drowned: Climate Peril, Planetary Precarity and the Uncanny in *Wade*

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Abstract

Upamanyu Bhattacharyya and Kalp Sanghvi's *Wade* (2020) is a dystopian eco-horror animated short film that imagines Kolkata as a deserted wetland after the climatic apocalypse inhabited only by a band of climate refugees and a roving gang of hungry tigers from the Sundarbans. Through scary frames of the landmark places of the climate-imperilled city in the first part and the dreadful encounter between the human survivors and the aggressive predators making extreme choices for survival on the flooded streets of the abandoned city towards the end, this "cinema of catastrophe" (Keane) engages with such significant issues as planetary crisis, climate migration, climate change denial, plastic pollution, endangered ecosystem and the human-animal conflict for survival in a vulnerable ecology. This paper reads *Wade* through the lens of "eco-horror studies" (Tidwell and Soles) to see how the film imagines a climate-ravaged future by representing the city of Kolkata as an inhospitable and unfamiliar space where death, displacement and disorder prevail. It focuses on how the eco-cinema evokes the idea of "ecoprecarity" (Nayar) in its representation of the fragility and contingency of human lives in a world of anthropogenic geological disaster where all forms of life are uncannily precarious. Finally, it engages with how the uncertain lives, bizarre scenes, spectral landscape, and empty public spaces produce an "ecological uncanny" (Carroll) which serves as an eco-cautionary trope in making people see an ominous climate future, a catastrophe of their own making.

Keywords: Ecocinema, vulnerability, deluge, ecohorror, cityscape, emptiness

Introduction

In each of the last five years, the Sundarbans delta has faced the onslaught of at least one major cyclone – Amphan in 2020, Yaas in 2021, Sitrang in 2022, Mocha in 2023 and Remal in 2024. In every case, the combination of high-speed cyclone winds, heavy rainfall, and ocean water influx has wreaked havoc on many coastal settlements in the archipelago. The rising frequency, greater intensity, and prolonged duration of tropical cyclones in the deltaic landscape in recent years have become a major cause of concern for climatologists who are now seriously

alarmed not only about the future of the fragile Sundarbans ecosystem but also about the broader implications of the destruction of this vital ecosystem for the city of Kolkata. The importance of the Sundarbans mangrove forest as a natural shield for Kolkata has been extensively documented in various reports highlighting the imperative of preserving the *badabon* to mitigate the city's exposure to cyclones, floods, and subsidence. Climatologists have repeatedly foregrounded that the fate of the city of Kolkata is directly linked to the Sundarbans ecosystem, a connection that has become glaringly clear amidst the current climate crisis. In an article titled "Ecosystem Based Disaster Risk Reduction at Indian Sundarbans: A Lesson Learned from AMPHAN Supercyclone", Chowdhury et al. observe that "mangroves are proven to have enormous ecosystem services. One of the foremost of which is to save the vulnerable coastline from furies of cyclones, storm surges, and tsunami by acting as a natural bio-shield" (3). This "ecosystem-based disaster risk reduction" capacity of the Sundarbans mangrove forest has further been highlighted in an article written soon after the southern West Bengal was hit by Cyclone Bulbul in 2019:

> The Sundarban mangrove cover played a primary role in resisting the storm – by reducing wind speed and breaking the waves, thus protecting the Delta as well as the city of Kolkata from greater devastations…the uniqueness of Sundarban mangroves primarily lies in its ability to absorb the storm steam through the impenetrably thick cluster of prop-roots, extricating the cyclone of its severest effects. (Sen and Mukherjee)

In recent times, multiple reports have highlighted the precarious state of the mangrove forest in the Sundarbans, citing climate change-induced sea level rise and extreme weather phenomena as primary drivers pushing the forest cover towards rapid decline. Over the past few years, the mangrove forest cover has alarmingly declined, and the islands of the delta have been shrinking at a critical rate. There has been a continuous outflow of islander refugees from the Sundarbans due to the challenges posed to their existence by the complex interplay of environmental factors. Now, given the threats facing the Sundarbans ecosystem, what is the future of Kolkata? Would Kolkata be submerged if the Sundarbans continue to shrink? Considering the direct link between Kolkata and the Sundarbans discussed above, the disappearance of the delta would clearly result in the city being submerged. Then, what would a flooded Kolkata look like? Where would the people of the submerged islands in the Sundarbans go? If they come to Kolkata, would the people of Kolkata welcome them or turn them away? These questions, although they appear distant and unlikely, provide a haunting glimpse into an unsettling future marked by chaos, conflict, and existential crisis.

The dreadful images of a diminished Sundarbans and a climate-imperilled Kolkata that the questions above evoke have been brought to life through a sequence of chilling frames in Upamanyu Bhattacharyya and Kalp Sanghvi's animated short film *Wade* (2020). The 11-minute eco-horror film produced by

Ghost Animation imagines Kolkata transformed into an empty drowned land in the aftermath of a climatic apocalypse, with its inhabitants reduced to a group of climate refugees and a roaming gang of hungry tigers from the Sundarbans. This "cinema of catastrophe" (Keane) presents a chilling narrative that begins with eerie scenes depicting the city's desolate landmark sites, followed by an intense clash between human survivors and aggressive predators on the waterlogged streets of the deluged city towards the end. The dystopian cli-fi (climate film) embodies "the weight of End-feeling" (Kermode 25) in engaging with the multiplicity of planetary challenges facing the "thoroughly humanized earth" (Vermeulen 10) today. It dwells upon issues like climate catastrophe, climate-driven displacement, climate scepticism, plastic pollution and the human-animal conflict for survival in an increasingly vulnerable environment to give us "a sense of the ending", the "immanent apocalypse" (Kermode 272). This article reads *Wade* as an apocalyptic climate film to see how the cinematic visuals serve as an "imaginative space" (Bracke 8) for perceiving the climate emergencies facing the planet Earth today. In the first section, the article places *Wade* within the broader context of the contemporary eco-film movement in Indian cinema to show how the film brings the climate problem into popular imagination through audio-visual language. The second section uses the lens of "ecohorror studies" to see how the frightening frames of unfamiliar Kolkata indicate the return of the repressed and violent nature retaliating against human interventions by engulfing the city in water. The third section focuses on how the film portrays planetary precarity in representing the uncertainty of lives in a world of anthropogenic geological disasters where all forms of life are uncannily precarious. The final section examines how the emptiness of the city implies a de-humanisation of the cityscape and how the "decolonised agora" (Nayar 270) produces ecological uncanny coupled with gothic terror.

Indian Ecofilm and the "cinema of catastrophe"

Wade stands out as a quintessential example of ecocinema in raising consciousness about and stimulating meaningful action in response to the environmental predicament facing the planet Earth today. The film employs an eerie setting, compelling visuals, and a thought-provoking narrative to highlight the climate-related risks on the horizon, leading viewers to reflect and act upon them. It is this emphasis on translating awareness into action that sets ecocinema apart from an environmentalist film which usually uses the natural environment either as a scenic backdrop for the enhancement of visual appeal or as a background to human drama. In *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (2000), David Ingram highlights "the interplay of environmental ideologies at work in Hollywood movies" (x) and observes that the commercial interests of Hollywood have mostly used environmental calamities just as another topical issue at its disposal. Taking clues from Ingram's idea of "environmentalist films" with their spectacular representation of eco-disasters, Willoquet-Maricondi posits that ecocinema's

"overt intent is to educate and provoke personal and political action in response to environmental challenges" (44). Willoquet-Maricondi writes:

> An important distinction…between "environmentalist" films and ecocinema is the latter's consciousness-raising and activist intentions, as well as responsibility to heighten awareness about contemporary issues and practices affecting planetary health. Ecocinema overtly strives to inspire personal and political action on the part of viewers, stimulating our thinking so as to bring about concrete changes in the choices we make, daily and in the long run, as individuals and as societies, locally and globally. (45)

Sheldon Lu offers a similar view when he calls ecocinema a "cinema with an ecological consciousness" (Lu 2). There is no denying that moving images, through their multisensory engagement, communicate the urgency of the environmental crisis more powerfully than the logocentric approach of verbal narratives. The unsettling atmosphere, sombre scene and grim music that accompany the riveting moving images in an ecocinema also contribute to evoking a profound sense of the impending threat. The multisensory experience deeply engages the audience by stimulating their affect, prompting them to reflect more deeply on the implications of the catastrophe(s) they see on the screen. The filmic representation of eco-disaster in films like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *2012* (2009), *Contagion* (2011) *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), although sometimes unreasonably sensational and melodramatic, makes people see the imminent crisis of their own making.

It is striking to note that, until quite recently, mainstream Indian cinema has significantly overlooked the pressing issues of environmental degradation and climate change in its storytelling. While environmental issues found some brilliant representation in Indian films during the 1950s and 60s in the works of the veteran filmmakers of the time, the subsequent decades witnessed a gradual relegation of these concerns to the background. In a conversation with Sunita Narain, Amitav Ghosh, while addressing this "crisis of imagination" (Ghosh 9), regretted: "In Ritwik Ghatak or in Satyajit Ray's films there are wonderful representations of the monsoon and its effects on the climate of India as whole. But today we do see the representation of monsoon less and less in our films. Half of the films are not even shot in India" (Ghosh). This lack of cinematic engagement with the current climate predicament, despite the increasing frequency of extreme weather events in India, has further been highlighted by film critic Anuj Kumar. Kumar observes: "While Hollywood has been churning out disaster movies for decades, Hindi film industry seems to be breathing a different air. It is not that we were not hit by tsunami or cataclysmic cyclones on our eastern coast, but somehow our filmmakers believe that all is well with the environment" (Kumar). However, in recent years, India has witnessed a notable upsurge in the production of ecocinema which marks a significant cultural and cinematic shift. These films span a spectrum of genres, styles and languages, all aimed at bringing the pressing issue of climate change into the popular imagination. It is the producer-director Nila Madhav Panda who

is widely credited with pioneering the contemporary ecocinema movement in Indian cinema through his powerful eco-disaster films and web series like *Kaun Kitne Paani Mein* (2017), *Kadvi Hawa* (2017), *Kalira Atita* (2020) and *The Jengaburu Curse* (2023). Subsequently, a wave of eco-disaster films and web series has swept across Indian cinema, gradually coalescing into what is now recognised as an Indian ecocinema movement. Contemporary survival films and web series like Aparnaa Singh's *Irada* (2017), Abhishek Kapoor's *Kedarnath* (2018), Shiv Rawail's The Railway Men (2023), Sameer Saxena and Amit Golani's Kaala Paani (2023) place environmental challenges in the context of broader socio-economic and political problems in India. Wade stands out as a significant representative of the contemporary ecocinema movement in Indian cinema. It is important to note here that Ingram's study of Hollywood environmentalist films omits animation, whereas Willoquet-Maricondi includes animation, along with the documentary, art cinema and experimental cinema within the scope of ecocinema. As an Indian eco-animation Wade uses the setting of a climate-ravaged metropolis in India to bring the climate crisis into popular imagination and engage the audience with the pressing issue of climate peril.

Wade effectively incorporates different cinematic elements to produce the desired ecocinema effect that is to engage the audience on both an emotional and intellectual level. The cinematography, with its sustained focus on the dilapidated cityscapes and the ruined natural world, makes the audience envision the terrifying consequences of anthropogenic climate change. The unsettling frames of drowned and derelict urban structures with surreal inscriptions like "Where the fuck will you hide?", "last (train) service HWH→NDL", "save Kolkata from climate change refugees", "evacuate", and "we did this" serve as a stark visual metaphor that viscerally conveys the criticality of planetary crisis. The poignant visual of a makeshift raft made of plastic bottles floating down on a flooded city street and the emaciated bodies of the climate refugees reinforce the film's urgent message about the looming existential threat posed by environmental breakdown. The film, in its short canvas, features the disturbing representation of four deaths—both human and non-human—intensifying the film's message of impending doom. The sombre background music that permeates the film in the absence of human dialogue highlights the exigency of the issue the film deals with. The pervasive presence of primal sounds like groans, cries, and screams underscores how the hyperobject of climate crisis imprints its power onto the bodies of the refugees. The deterioration of human language and the reduction of humans to primal sounds imply the erosion of the ontological sovereignty of humans in the climate-ravaged world.

Ecohorror and the deluged city

In the introduction to *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene* (2021), Tidwell and Soles observe that "we live in ecohorrific times" (1). They offer a critical analysis of the fine distinctions among eco-horror, ecogothic, and ecophobia to highlight the replacement of "cosmic fear" by "planetary fear" in the Anthropocene (Dillon). They posit that we live in a terraformed world where a

"monstrously wronged" nature runs rampant, and people stand helpless against the forces of the enraged nature (Keetley and Sivils 11). The cinematic representation of this "nature-strikes-back" narrative in Hollywood ecodisaster films has been examined by Murray and Heumann in their book *Monstrous Nature: Environment and Horror on the Big Screen* (2016). They observe that in these films "a monstrous nature that evolved either deliberately or by accident…incites fear in humanity as both character and audience" (xiv). In *Wade*, the most obvious emotional response that the frames of the drowned city produce is horror. The scary frames represent nature as an "unfamiliar, uncontrolled space", and fear arises from the inability of humans to exercise control over their lives and the environment (Tidwell and Soles 7). The uncertainty of the lives of both the refugees and nonhuman creatures in the deluged city adds to the elements of horror. The refugees' physical reactions and facial expressions, particularly in the scene of the encounter with the angry tigers, intensify the atmosphere of horror in the film. The scene of a man drowning a child to stifle its cries, to avoid detection by the hungry tiger, is intensely horrific. The city's submersion in water is nature's retaliation against the excessive human interference with the natural world. The emptiness of the city with the landmark places submerged under water, human-animal confrontation on the abandoned city street and the occupation of the city by nonhuman beings together create a surreal atmosphere that "pits a human community against a destructive form of nature" (Yacowar 277). The portrayal of the terraformed planet in *Wade* reflects the horrors we experience now and the ones we dread will happen in the future. It suggests that the oversized impacts of human actors have turned the planet Earth into *terra incognita*, an unknown land. Nature, once "the separate and wild province, the world apart from man" (McKibben 41) has been turned into something we can no longer recognise: "more chaotic, storm-tossed, disease-ridden" (McKibben XIV).

In his 2014 essay titled "Cli-fi: a Short Essay on its Worlds and its Importance", Gregers Andersen introduces the concept of "judgment imaginary" to refer to nature's fury in response to human misappropriation. Andersen's idea of "Judgment Imaginary" speaks of a vengeful and animated nature striking back against humanity's exploitation and appropriation of it for economic benefit. According to Andersen, the concept of nature transforming into a monstrous force to reclaim its agency and subjectivity through the retaliation against humans "has a cultural history dating back to the earliest myths of Western civilization– from the *Epos of Gilgamesh* to other deluge myths such as the myths of Atlantis or of Noah" (Andersen). In *Wade*, the use of the setting of a flooded city to represent humanity's environmental hubris follows the tradition of the deluge myth, used in multiple cultural texts to highlight divine retribution for human transgression. However, Noah's ark in the Genesis narrative is replaced by a raft made of plastic bottles in *Wade*. The implication is that while the Biblical Great Flood offered some hope for renewal, the flood caused by anthropogenic environmental violence provides no such hope and promise whatsoever. The use of the plastic raft is particularly significant as plastic's longevity and ubiquity suggest the vast extent

of the human footprint on the planet Earth. In *Wade*, the brutal violence and the extensive bloodshed of both human and nonhuman beings suggest that the apocalypse is not yet over. The ruthless slicing of a fish, a tiger roaring with a human hand in its mouth from which blood is dripping, and the butchering of a dead tiger's body perhaps intended for human consumption all these scenes produce an atmosphere of horror and absolute chaos. Unlike the Great Flood myths, where apocalyptic chaos is seen in terms of divine punishment, *Wade* represents it as the consequence of human *karma*. The tale of divine retribution for renewal has become outdated in today's world, where humanity has transformed itself from being a mere member of the larger ecological community to becoming the most powerful geological force on planet Earth. McKibben has poignantly summarised this replacement of the divine by the human in the current age of the human in *The End of Nature* where he observes that in the Anthropocene "hurricanes and thunderstorms and tornadoes become not acts of God but acts of man" (225).

Precarious lives and the shared vulnerabilities

In *Wade*, all life forms are uncannily precarious in the climate-ravaged city. In frame after frame, the film represents the environment's vulnerability through the horrific images of the drowned city. The band of refugees from the Sundarbans struggling for survival in the dilapidated city lives an uncertain life in a hostile environment where death, disorder and desolation prevail. The climate change-induced disruption has led to unbridled chaos where tigers eat humans and humans, in turn, eat tigers, underscoring the precarious existence of both human and nonhuman lives alike. This shared vulnerability of human and non-human lives in a precarious environment is what Pramod K. Nayar calls "Ecoprecarity". According to Nayar, ecoprecarity is "at once about the precarious lives *humans* lead in the event of ecological disaster…and also about the environment itself which is rendered precarious due to human intervention in the Anthropocene" (7). In *Wade*, the animators use "ecoprecarious imaginary" (Nayar 8) to highlight the shared vulnerability of human/nonhuman lives and the environment in a world perturbed by risks, hazards and catastrophes. They represent the earth as a precarisphere characterised by widespread precarity, instability and vulnerability amid growing environmental threats. If we focus on the individual members of the refugee group, we see that they lead a life of absolute helplessness in the climate-stricken city. The blind girl on the raft embodies helplessness as, for her movement, she depends on a raft made of plastic bottles to be carried by someone else. It is a poignant irony that something so damaging to the ecosystem paradoxically serves as her ark in a world of environmental ruins. Her vulnerability is further exposed when she is left behind to confront the predator after the animal kills her closest companion. The man in the mask suggests human vulnerability to tiger attacks in the submerged city where tigers from drowned Sundarbans roam around. He wears a mask on the back of his head to frighten tigers attempting to attack from behind, fooling them into thinking that they are being watched. The "bundle woman" looks

perpetually nervous and insecure. The perennially wide eyes of the old man and the bewildered eyes of the teenage girl reflect their profound anxiety and sense of helplessness. All the human characters, therefore, embody the vulnerability of human life in a world marked by environmental collapse. The animators have categorically stated that their representation of human characters as emaciated and nervous bodies has been intended "to show the effects of hunger, water logging and many many damaging years of living life on the edge of survival". ("Making 'Wade'"). The return of the enraged nature debunks the illusion of human sovereignty, and the ontological collapse implies that human beings are not likely to continue as the dominant life form on a dilapidated earth.

The tiger question in the film illustrates the vulnerability of nonhuman life in the current Entropocene (age of disorder). The human-tiger conflict issue has been incorporated into the film to shed light on the shared vulnerabilities of human and animal lives in a world of ecological chaos. The makers of *Wade* envision that as the Sundarbans disappear, both the tiger population from the mangrove forest and the human inhabitants of the archipelago will migrate directly to Kolkata, and this would lead to the human-tiger conflict, a stark reality in the Sundarbans, being replicated on the streets of the city. There is, in fact, a scene of a violent encounter between the helpless climate refugees and the hungry tigers on the flooded city street. It is suggested that the refugee tigers endure ordeals similar to those faced by human refugees in the flooded city. They both struggle with the scarcity of food in the unfamiliar land. The appearance of the "super-species" tiger walking on the water is suggestive of the mass extinction that the species is facing, because, as the makers of *Wade* recount, "when mass extinction events occur, a lot of 'super-species' emerge, rapid mutations to give the surviving species a better chance at surviving the new circumstances" ("Making 'Wade'"). The animators weave elements from myth, story, and reports to create a scene that underscores the vulnerability and possible extinction of the Royal Bengal Tiger of the Sundarbans. Finally, the scene depicting the butchering of a dead tiger's carcass for human consumption highlights the environmental chaos where climate change has overturned the food chain as we know it. Thus, in *Wade*, the vulnerability of the environment which has been rendered precarious by anthropogenic impacts is accompanied by the precariousness of all life forms on the planet Earth.

Ecological uncanny and the "AgoraGothic"

In *Wade*, the images of uncertain lives, bizarre scenes, spectral landscapes and empty public spaces produce an atmosphere of the uncanny. The concept of "ecological uncanny" was originally introduced by Timothy Morton. Siobhan Carroll later built upon this concept, defining "ecological uncanny" as the exposure of the human in the natural and that of the natural in the human. In *Wade*, the susceptibility of the humans to the ecological chaos and that of the Sundarbans tigers to the desperate human survivors evokes an eerie sense of the uncanny. The dissolution of boundaries between the human and the natural realms, both of which are equally fragile produces an unsettling sense of the uncertainty of existence. In

Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture, Nayar has identified two types of uncanny: Architectural Uncanny and Antiquarian Uncanny. The architectural uncanny is the sense of the uncanny produced when a city appears familiar yet unfamiliar. In *Wade*, the deserted Howrah station, a metro tunnel now home to tigers, flooded Gariahat Junction pilled with waste, an empty Howrah Bridge, dilapidated buildings, an abandoned tram depot, the submerged Victoria Memorial area, and tigers roaming in the Park Street area collectively alienate the familiar landmarks of Kolkata, leaving them almost unrecognisable. This sight of the familiar city as something unfamiliar and unknown generates a feeling of uncanny, the experience of something familiar yet strange. *Wade* is also full of frames that produce antiquarian uncanny which involves "a return to primeval ways of human life that reverse the civilizational timeline" (Nayar 50). According to Nayar, the antiquarian uncanny arises from the juxtaposition of contemporary and primordial life forms. In *Wade*, the scene of the Royal Bengal tigers roaming in the streets of the city suggests "*the foreign in the familiar*" (Nayar 52). Again, the overturning of the conventional food chain suggests a temporal disjunction where the unknown is atavistic and anachronistic.

The open spaces of the metropolis, emptied of its human population suggest a de-humanisation and de-bodiment of the city (Nayar). The city's decolonisation from human pervasion makes it a *terra nullius* (nobody's land). The emptiness of the urban space and the loss of human control over it produce a horror of the empty which Nayar calls the "AgoraGothic". According to Nayar, the "AgoraGothic is effectively a decolonial Gothic, since it represents the emptying of the manufactured landscape of a human presence which has for long colonised all available space" (262). In *Wade*, the emptiness of the landmark places of human gathering like Howrah Station, Victoria Memorial, Gariahat Junction, and Park Street implies a "decolonial gothicising of urban spaces" (Nayar 264). The emptiness of the structures which are the markers of the human conquest of space suggests the loss of human sovereignty caused by his environmental hubris. However, the urban space is not actually empty even after its decolonisation from human presence as the de-humanisation is followed by a reclamation of the space by the nonhuman. As represented in *Wade*, the decolonised urban agora is occupied by nonhuman lives like alligators, snakes, tigers, grasshoppers and crows. This reclamation of the urban space which has predominantly been a human space by water and nonhuman lives again substantiates the ecohorrific "return of the repressed non-human Other" (Nayar 270).

Conclusion

One serious charge against ecodisaster cinema is that it often features a sensational, futuristic doomsday narrative that tells stories of environmental breakdown and climate crisis through thrilling and overly dramatic storylines. In these disaster movies, where narratives of fatalism, individual heroism and survival take centre stage, ecodisaster is mostly depicted not as a present problem but as a distant threat. The science fiction account of ecodisaster in these films produces thrills and

sensations but ultimately, they turn out to be inconsequential in bringing the climate crisis to popular imagination. In the end, it transforms into a mere display of entertainment and spectacle, where the focus shifts away from any meaningful engagement to superficial enjoyment. This charge of distorting public perception of climate change by depicting it as a distant menace in ecodisaster films is somewhat also applicable to *Wade*. This ecodisaster short is set in the future when the city is overwhelmed by ecological chaos. However, the first two frames, portraying the partially inundated Sundarbans in 2019 and its complete submergence in the near future respectively substantiate that the animated short is not a typical melodramatic, futuristic ecodisaster film. These two frames lead to the third frame which visually depicts a drowned Kolkata as a consequence of the destruction of its natural shield, the Sundarbans. These three frames set the essence of the film which is not to produce spectacle but to bring the reality of the interconnected vulnerabilities of the Sundarbans delta and Kolkata to the audience. In *Wade*, therefore, the elements of horror, uncanny, fear, anxiety and uncertainty have been used not to produce spectacle but to make people see an ominous climate future, a catastrophe of their own making.

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