Passionate yet Aggressive: Sherni

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Vidya Balan, also known as the Fourth Khan of Bollywood, may have disappointed many of us with her latest film Sherni (2021). Her role in Kahaani and other films in fact made even made the academia rethink the definitions it had attributed to the role of women on the Indian film Screen. Sherni raises serious environmental questions and human interventions that disturb the tranquility of the fragile balance that help and allow us to sustain and maintain the ecological balance.

Sherni, talks about Vidya Vincent (Vidya Balan), a new committed D.F.O (Divisional Forest Officer) who takes charge of her position in the forests of Madhya Pradesh. Sherni, not only digresses us from the usual narrative pattern of Bollywood and Indian cinema, which is usually set around the life of the middle class in urban settlements or cities; or the hero who kills the tiger either to avenge the loss of his family, as can be seen in the south or to save the life of the villagers from the animal.
The forest and its inhabitant very rarely become a subject for the big screen in India. It is usually seen as an apt subject for documentaries and educational videos. Sherni, subtly unwraps the consequences hid behind the unscientific mineral explorations carried out in the name of development and also exposes the corrupt political and bureaucratic elements who manipulate news and ecology with their (un)corrupt silence for a better tomorrow.
Vidya Vincent, is a forest official who has not been able to get a promotion in nine years, and after spending six years of her life handling official files in the forest office. Her new field position in the forests of Bijaspur comes with its set of unique challenges. Her world seems isolated in a male dominated department. Vidya is a woman of few words but it does not take away from the fact that she is determined to conserve the forest and intensely passionate about her work. For the villagers, tigers passing through their fields is a norm, as their village is flanked by forests on both sides. In their own words, the tigers often pass by without even glancing in their direction, but this new development spreads the fear of lives and livelihood. The film focuses on her attempt to rescue a tigress, identified as T12, by the forest department, that starts hunting near the village. Vidya tries and puts in her best effort with the help of her team to catch the tigress alive, but the local politicians use were more interested in killing the tigress to gain more political mileage.
The film is more realistic in nature and shows the limitations of a civil servant in the society. It shows the expectations of ordinary people for them and at the same time shows how they are controlled and ruled by their bosses, both in the bureaucratic and political circles. On many occasions we see a pessimistic Vidya who prefers to resign from her job but is persuaded to continue in her job by her husband who works in the private sector. Sherni, questions the role of the people who term themselves as conversationalist and also shows the true spirit of the inhabitants of the forest who try to coexist with the nature and all its inmates. Towards the end of the film we see the real friends of the forest, the villagers who are committed to Tiger cubs after their mother is killed by the authorities.

The director Amit Masurkar, undoubtedly takes up an issue that needs serious debates at this hour. But while trying to present both the sides of this complex issues of the conflict between the humankind and animals, he ends up giving the film a documentary film feel, which might not provoke a large section of audience.
At times the narrative is moves in a very sluggish pace which reminds one of the National Geographic Channel documentaries. Even while the cameraman captured the essence and scenic beauty of the forest, the music and editing team failed to do justices. The film would have been a box office disaster if it would have reached the theatre directly, thanks to OTT platforms. The team behind Sherni was not able to utilize the sherni of Bollywood (Vidya) and her talents.

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