



Ecological Capitalism in *Pushpa: The Rise*: An Eco-cinematic Critique

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the cinematic portrayal of ecological capitalism in *Pushpa: The Rise* through the lens of John Bellamy Foster's and David Harvey's theoretical frameworks on ecological capitalism. The film, directed by Sukumar, provides a striking commentary on the nexus between natural resource exploitation and capitalist power structures. The narrative of red sandalwood smuggling epitomizes the commodification of nature, showcasing how ecological resources are co-opted into capitalistic ventures, thereby marginalizing local communities and ecosystems. By dissecting the film's depiction of environmental degradation and labour exploitation, this study delves into the intersections of environmental justice, capitalist expansion, and individual resistance. Additionally, it highlights the aesthetic and narrative strategies used to critique these socio-economic phenomena. This analysis contributes to the broader discourse on ecological capitalism and its cultural representations, offering a nuanced perspective on how cinema can expose and critique systemic environmental inequalities. The author affirms that there is no conflict of interest and no external funding was received for this research. All referenced materials are publicly available or cited, and the analytical tools are original and fully embedded within the article.

Keywords: Ecological Capitalism, Smuggling, Capitalist Greed, Nature Commodification.

The exploitation of natural resources as an instrument of capitalist accumulation has long been a subject of socio-economic and environmental critique. *Ecology Against Capitalism*, succinctly elucidates how capitalism inherently undermines ecological balance to

sustain economic growth and consequentially ignores, "external" as well as "social" costs. Capitalism and its advocates have often treated ecological problems as mere obstacles to be avoided rather than significant issues to be directly addressed. During the well-known

"limits to growth" debate, economic growth theorist Robert Solow, writing in the May 1974 issue of the American Economic Review, suggested that if it is easy to replace natural resources with other factors, then there is essentially no issue. In his view, the depletion of natural resources is merely an event rather than a catastrophe, implying that the world can function without them (Foster 9-10). David Harvey coined the term "accumulation by dispossession" as a contrast to "accumulation by expanded reproduction." For Harvey, accumulation by dispossession represents a modern adaptation of the ancient concept of primitive accumulation. This process not only renews its expansion but also affects fully developed capitalist countries. It involves the stripping away of rights and the establishment of capitalist control over collective forms of property, such as nature, water, and knowledge, thereby facilitating increased accumulation (119). These critical perspectives provide a theoretical framework for analysing cultural narratives that reflect and critique the dynamics of ecological capitalism in *Pushpa: The Rise* (2021), a Telugu-language action drama directed by Sukumar, offers a compelling cultural narrative that aligns with these theoretical insights. The film, set against the backdrop of red sandalwood smuggling in the Seshachalam Hills of Andhra Pradesh, India, portrays the intertwined themes of environmental exploitation and labor marginalization.

The story follows the journey of Pushpa Raj, a laborer who rises to power within the smuggling syndicate, symbolizing the complex interplay between ecological degradation and socio-economic struggles. Red sandalwood, an endangered species native to southern India, has been the focus of extensive illegal trade due to its high value in international markets, particularly in China and Japan. The film's depiction of the red sandalwood smuggling network serves as a metaphor for the broader capitalist practice of commodifying natural resources, often at the expense of ecological

sustainability and local communities. This illegal trade exemplifies how profit-driven entities exploit scarce resources, reflecting Foster's assertion that capitalism's relentless drive for growth leads to environmental degradation. The environmental impact of red sandalwood smuggling is profound. The deforestation of the Seshachalam Hills not only threatens biodiversity but also disrupts the ecological balance, leading to soil erosion and loss of habitat for various species. Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession" is evident in how local communities are displaced and marginalized as their land and resources are expropriated for illegal logging. The film portrays these dynamics through vivid cinematography, juxtaposing the natural beauty of the forests with scenes of environmental destruction, thereby reinforcing its critique of ecological capitalism. The film also delves into the exploitation of labor within the smuggling operations. Pushpa Raj's ascent from a marginalized laborer to a dominant figure within the syndicate highlights the precarious conditions of workers who are integral yet undervalued in the profit chain. The narrative captures the socio-economic factors driving individuals into illegal activities, such as poverty, lack of education, and limited legitimate employment opportunities. This human dimension aligns with Harvey's critique of neoliberal capitalism, which often exacerbates inequalities and perpetuates exploitation. In contrast to the harsh realities of smuggling, the film includes elements of glamour and entertainment, such as the song "O Antava Mava" and the iconic dialogue "Pushpa, Jhukega Nahi Sala." These elements highlight the duality of the protagonist's life, oscillating between moments of power and vulnerability. This juxtaposition serves to underscore the moral ambiguities and ethical dilemmas faced by individuals within the system. *Pushpa: The Rise* provides a rich cultural narrative that encapsulates the theoretical critiques of ecological capitalism posited by scholars like Foster and Harvey. Through its exploration of

red sandalwood smuggling, the film underscores the systemic dynamics of resource exploitation, labor marginalization, and resistance. This paper aims to situate *Pushpa* within the broader discourse on ecological capitalism, demonstrating how popular media can serve as a powerful medium for raising critical environmental awareness.

Theoretical Framework

The term "ecological capitalism" critiques the capitalist model's inherent exploitation of natural resources, wherein environmental degradation is often justified as a necessary byproduct of economic growth. John Bellamy Foster, in his seminal work *Ecology Against Capitalism*, argues that the essence of capitalism lies in its dynamic nature, as the concept of stationary capitalism would be inherently contradictory. However, as we step into the twenty-first century, it becomes increasingly evident that the rapid economic growth required by the capitalist system to sustain itself – growth that now spans the entire globe – is no longer ecologically sustainable. This is due to its reliance on high consumption of materials and energy, which places immense pressure on both the Earth's resources and the ecosystems responsible for absorbing the resulting waste (74-75). This critique highlights the contradictions within capitalist systems, where the relentless pursuit of profit directly undermines ecological sustainability. One of David Harvey's most important contributions is his advocacy for integrating urban environments into progressive environmental politics. He contends that a dialectically informed perspective on social and environmental change should highlight the idea that the "environment is where you live." This approach broadens the focus from just "nature," often seen as the non-human world, to a more inclusive notion of "environment." According to Harvey, the constructed environments of urbanized areas should be at the center of attention, rather than the prevalent focus on

wilderness, peripheral peasant movements, and the preservation of scenic landscapes (186).

Harvey differentiates between "productive accumulation" and "predatory accumulation," though he acknowledges that these concepts often intersect. He asserts that capital accumulation possesses a dual nature. On one hand, there is expanded reproduction, which involves reinvesting profits into productive enterprises. On the other hand, there is accumulation by dispossession, which entails acquiring assets through means that often strip others of their property and rights. Harvey emphasizes that these two aspects are fundamentally connected and interact in a complex, dialectical relationship (144). But Virginia Fontes observes that, the appearance of promoting a collective approach, generating "externalities," or acting unilaterally, such as through "appropriation" or "commodification," should not mask the reality that these actions highlight the intensification of the core attributes of capital reproduction. This process is not merely an ostensibly "normalized" economic form but encompasses a network of social relations. For instance, capital investment in previously underexploited areas or sectors, like the seas and oceans, can only be fully understood when recognizing that it represents a significant expropriation of natural resources that were previously accessible to humanity as a whole (2210).

This framework is essential for understanding the socio-economic impacts of ecological exploitation. These theoretical insights offer a robust lens for analyzing the film *Pushpa: The Rise*. The narrative encapsulates the dynamics of ecological capitalism through its depiction of red sandalwood smuggling. Red sandalwood, a highly valued and endangered species, becomes a commodity exploited for profit, mirroring real-world environmental exploitation driven by capitalist motives. The film portrays how the illegal trade of this resource leads to significant environmental degradation, reflecting Foster's assertion that

"capitalist systems inherently degrade their ecological base" (Foster, 2002). Moreover, *Pushpa: The Rise* illustrates the socio-economic impact of ecological capitalism by highlighting the labor exploitation within the smuggling operations. The protagonist, Pushpa Raj, represents the marginalized labor force whose precarious conditions underscore Harvey's argument that "neoliberalism exacerbates socio-economic inequalities by dispossessing vulnerable communities" (Harvey, 2003). The film's portrayal of Pushpa's rise to power within the smuggling syndicate serves as a critique of the systemic inequalities perpetuated by capitalist systems.

The film also addresses the resistance against these capitalist hierarchies. Pushpa's defiance against corrupt authorities and entrenched power structures exemplifies individual resistance to systemic injustices. This reflects the broader social movements that challenge ecological and economic exploitation, emphasizing the potential for transformative change. Harvey notes that "resistance to accumulation by dispossession often manifests through grassroots movements and localized struggles" (Harvey, 2003). The theoretical frameworks provided by Foster and Harvey offer critical insights into the dynamics of ecological capitalism. *Pushpa: The Rise* effectively encapsulates these dynamics, illustrating the environmental and socio-economic impacts of resource exploitation. By situating the film within these theoretical perspectives, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between capitalism, environmental degradation, and social inequality.

Critical Analysis of the film

In *Pushpa: The Rise*, red sandalwood is not merely a plot device but a potent symbol of ecological commodification. The illegal trade of this endangered resource represents the Western capitalist system's relentless drive (that believes nature is servant to mankind) to extract

value from nature, regardless of ecological or legal consequences (Foster 9). The smuggling network depicted in the film mirrors real-world dynamics, where profit-driven entities exploit scarce resources, often at the expense of ecological sustainability and local communities which Vandana Shiva, an ecofeminist from Bharat greatly observes in her book *Ecofeminism* related to the exploitation of natural resources in the state of Uttarakhand. Red sandalwood, scientifically known as *Pterocarpus santalinus*, is native to the southern parts of India and is highly valued for its rich red hue and medicinal properties (Ramabrahman 57). This 'endangered specie' has been the target of extensive illegal trade, driven by high demand in international markets, especially in China and Japan (Mishra). The film's depiction of the red sandalwood smuggling operation underscores the broader themes of ecological degradation and environmental exploitation, which are characteristic of capitalist ventures. The illegal trade of red sandalwood in *Pushpa* highlights the commodification of natural resources. This commodification is a reflection of ecological capitalism, where nature is viewed as a mere resource to be exploited for economic gain. On the other hand, there is now a global scientific consensus that if the current trend of global warming is not halted, it will lead to ecological and social catastrophes on a planetary scale within this century (Foster 120). In the film, the protagonist, Pushpa Raj, rises from being a lowly labourer to a key player in the smuggling network. This ascent is driven by his ambition and the lucrative nature of the red sandalwood trade. Pushpa's journey symbolizes the capitalist ethos of relentless pursuit of profit, often at the cost of ecological and social well-being.

The smuggling network in the film is depicted with intricate detail, showcasing how various stakeholders, from labourers to corrupt officials, are involved in the trade. This network mirrors real-world scenarios where illegal logging and wildlife trafficking are facilitated by

a nexus of powerful individuals and institutions. The sustained high demand in the global market over many centuries highlights why Red Sanders has been excessively exploited through illegal harvesting. In its native region of Andhra Pradesh, during the 2012-13 period, 1,488 forest offense cases were registered specifically for Red Sanders. Additionally, 1,002 vehicles containing a total of 1,390 tons of wood were confiscated (Ramabrahmam 60). The film's portrayal of this network emphasizes the systemic nature of environmental exploitation under capitalist systems. It highlights how profit motives drive unsustainable practices, leading to habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and disruption of local ecosystems. Rachel Carson aptly argued that our most severe ecological problems stem from the transformation of nature into factory-like systems, driven by the pursuit of swift economic returns (qtd. in Foster 24). One of the most striking aspects of *Pushpa* is its depiction of the environmental impact of red sandalwood smuggling. The dense forests of the Seshachalam Hills, where the smuggling operations take place, are shown as both sites of natural beauty and arenas of capitalist greed due to which the forests have become merely a product of commodification. The visual contrast between the lush greenery and the scenes of deforestation serves as a powerful commentary on the consequences of ecological commodification. This portrayal is aligned with John Bellamy Foster's critique in *Ecology Against Capitalism*, where he criticises the critique an economist K. William Kapp who asserted that, "capitalism must be regarded as an economy of unpaid costs" which is merely a nature-subordination-syndrome. (Foster, 57)

In the film, the illegal trade is portrayed through various sequences that show the extraction, transportation, and sale of red sandalwood. These sequences are interspersed with moments of glamour and power, reflecting the duality of the smuggling world. For instance, the song "O Antava Mava" juxtaposes

the allure of wealth and status with the underlying illicit activities that fuel it. This contrast highlights the ethical and moral ambiguities inherent in the pursuit of profit through ecological exploitation. The character of Pushpa Raj embodies the complexities of labor exploitation within the smuggling operations. As a laborer, Pushpa represents the marginalized workforce that is integral yet undervalued in the profit chain. His rise to power within the smuggling network underscores the precarious conditions faced by workers in such illegal trades. The film delves into Pushpa's struggles, capturing the socio-economic factors that drive individuals into illegal activities. These factors include poverty, lack of education, and limited access to legitimate employment opportunities. Pushpa's character arc also reflects the theme of resistance against capitalist hierarchies. His defiance against corrupt officials and rival smugglers exemplifies individual resistance to systemic injustices. This defiance is poignantly captured in his iconic dialogue, "Pushpa, Jhukega Nahi Sala" "Pushpa, I will not bow down". This declaration signifies Pushpa's refusal to succumb to the oppressive structures of power and his determination to assert his agency within the system that he proclaims with his dialogue, "Me idhar kisi ke fatte me taand adane ko nahi aaya, raaj karne ke liye aaya main" "I haven't come here to interfere in someone else's matters; I've come here to rule".

The film's narrative techniques further enrich its critique of ecological capitalism. The use of flashbacks, parallel storylines, and detailed character development provides a multi-layered perspective on the impact of resource exploitation. The film's pacing and structure allow for an exploration of both the macro-level dynamics of capitalism and the micro-level experiences of individuals. This approach creates a cohesive and impactful narrative that highlights the interconnectedness of environmental degradation, labor exploitation, and social resistance. *Pushpa: The*

Rise also touches upon the broader implications of red sandalwood smuggling for local communities. The displacement and marginalization of these communities are evident in the film, where the traditional ways of life are disrupted by the illegal trade. This displacement aligns with David Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession," which emphasizes how neoliberal policies result in the expropriation of resources from marginalized communities as he defines that the accumulation driven by predation, fraud, and violence to an 'original stage,' which is then deemed no longer relevant or, as Luxemburg posits, as being somewhat external to the capitalist system. A comprehensive re-evaluation of the ongoing role and persistence of predatory practices of 'primitive' or 'original' accumulation within the extensive historical geography of capital accumulation is, therefore, necessary, as several commentators have recently noted. Since it seems odd to label a continuing process as 'primitive' or 'original,' he instead used the term 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, *The New Imperialism* 74). The film portrays the socio-economic upheaval caused by the smuggling operations, illustrating the far-reaching consequences of ecological commodification.

In addition to its thematic depth, the film employs vivid cinematography and evocative storytelling to underscore its critique. The dense forests and rugged landscapes are captured with striking detail, juxtaposing the natural beauty with scenes of environmental destruction. The film's visual style reinforces the narrative's commentary on the impact of capitalist greed on the environment. Moreover, *Pushpa* uses its characters to convey the moral and ethical dilemmas associated with ecological capitalism. Pushpa Raj's actions, though driven by personal motivations, raise questions about the legitimacy and efficacy of resistance within an inherently corrupt system. The film invites viewers to consider the complexities of ethical decision-making and the potential for

transformative change in the face of systemic oppression.

Labor Exploitation and Class Struggles

Hindi cinema has never merely entertained but has often served as a visceral archive of India's socio-economic anxieties. At its most powerful, it gives voice to the silenced, dramatizing the friction between labour and capital, dignity and deprivation. From the black-and-white realism of the 1950s to the stylized grit of contemporary blockbusters, the screen has reflected the struggles of those who toil unseen. For example, in *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953), Bimal Roy crafts a haunting portrait of Shambhu Mahato, a farmer crushed by the weight of urban capitalism. His transformation into a rickshaw puller is not just personal tragedy—it's a metaphor for postcolonial displacement, where land and labour are stripped of meaning and dignity (Singh). Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957) similarly elevates the peasant woman Radha into a symbol of moral resistance. Her refusal to yield to feudal coercion, even at the cost of her son's life, renders her struggle mythic—a cinematic invocation of collective endurance (Singh).

Bollywood has grown distant from the everyday struggles of the poor—those left behind by the promises of liberalisation and globalisation. Their stories, once central, now flicker faintly behind glossy frames of wealth and ambition (Dawyer 385). *Pushpa: The Rise* (2021), a Telugu film has exploded across linguistic borders, becoming a cultural phenomenon in Hindi-speaking regions by focusing on a labourer, Pushpa Raj, played by Allu Arjun, who gets involved in the red sandalwood smuggling trade—a man born into marginality, negotiating caste, class, and masculinity. His refusal to submit to his landlord's demand for servitude echoes the foundational cinematic trope of labour dignity. As *Feminism in India's* review notes, Pushpa's journey exposes the caste-based hierarchies that still govern labour relations, where physical

work is devalued and respect must be earned through brute survival. Pushpa, the protagonist, symbolizes the exploited labour force that forms the backbone of capitalist ventures like red sandalwood smuggling. His journey from a marginalized labourer to a dominant figure that even continues in the sequel of the film which somehow showcases the unending chain of capitalism and exploitation of nature. The smuggling operations carried by the central protagonist Pushpa (played by megastar Allu Arjun) highlights the precarious condition of workers who are integral yet undervalued in the profit chain. The film's focus on his struggles provides a human dimension to the critique of systemic labour exploitation under ecological capitalism. Pushpa's character is introduced as a labourer working under harsh and exploitative conditions in the red sandalwood smuggling network. This setting reflects real-world scenarios where labourers in illegal logging and smuggling operations often face hazardous environments, inadequate pay, and lack of legal protection. These conditions are depicted through scenes showing Pushpa and his fellow workers cutting down trees and transporting the heavy logs under the watchful eyes of their overseers.

The narrative captures the socio-economic factors driving individuals like Pushpa into illegal activities. Poverty, lack of education, and limited access to legitimate employment opportunities force many to engage in these high-risk endeavours. Pushpa's rise within the smuggling network symbolizes the precarious nature of such labour, where workers must navigate systemic inequalities to survive and thrive. This journey is the symbol of broader labour struggles faced by marginalized communities in capitalist economies. Critics of ecological capitalism, such as David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) emphasises Neoliberalism is a political-economic theory that promotes human well-being through individual entrepreneurial freedom, supported by institutions that uphold private property,

free markets, and free trade. The state's role is to maintain this framework—enforcing legal, military, and police structures to protect property rights and ensure market stability, even though coercion if necessary (64). He asserts,

This system was much more volatile and predatory and visited various bouts of accumulation by dispossession – usually as structural adjustment programs administered by the IMF – as an antidote to difficulties in the realm of expanded reproduction. In some instances, such as Latin America in the 1980s, whole economies were raided and their assets recovered by US finance capital. The hedge funds' attack upon the Thai and Indonesian currencies in 1997, backed up by the savage deflationary policies demanded by the IMF, . . . The crisis also conveniently sparked a flight to the dollar, confirming Wall Street's dominance and generating an amazing boom in asset values for the affluent in the United States. Class struggles began to coalesce around issues such as IMF imposed structural adjustment, the predatory activities of finance capital and the loss of rights through privatization. (Harvey, *The New Imperialism* 78)

Pushpa's story aligns with his critique, as it highlights the systemic exploitation and marginalization faced by the labour force in the smuggling network. The film also portrays the power dynamics within the smuggling operation, where labourers like Pushpa are often at the mercy of corrupt officials and powerful middlemen like Mangalam Srinu and Konda Reddy in the film who controls the smuggling and is later overpowered by Pushpa. These figures profit immensely from the illegal trade while exploiting the labourers who undertake the most dangerous and gruelling tasks. This hierarchy is evident in scenes where Pushpa is coerced into compliance by threats and violence, illustrating the power imbalances that characterize such exploitative ventures. One of the film's pivotal moments occurs when Pushpa's defiance resonates with the broader

theme of labour resistance against capitalist exploitation. It underscores the potential for individuals to challenge and disrupt the hierarchical systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice. Giovanna Ricoveri in *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism and* describes the deep struggle between economic growth and the natural world. It's crucial to recognize that humans are part of the environment, so harming nature also means harming people. When the environment suffers, human relationships deteriorate as well. Achieving environmental sustainability is closely tied to ensuring fairness and justice in society. Working towards a healthier planet goes hand in hand with fighting social inequality. (116-117; qtd in Foster 81)

Resistance Against Capitalist Hierarchies

Eco-Marxism rooted in Karl Marx's critique of capitalism, this approach powerfully exposes how capitalist systems distort the relationship between humans and the natural environment. Its strength lies in merging Marxist interpretive methods with ecological analysis, offering a robust framework for understanding environmental degradation within socio-economic structures (Shafqat 3). Pushpa's defiance against rooted hierarchies reflects individual resistance to systemic injustice. While his actions are morally ambiguous, they underscore a critique of how ecological capitalism prioritizes profit over human and environmental well-being. His character challenges not only the capitalist power structures but also the social hierarchies that perpetuate inequality. Pushpa's rise within the smuggling operation is marked by his confrontations with various authority figures, including corrupt police officers, rival smugglers, and local elites. These interactions highlight the pervasive influence of power and corruption within the capitalist system. Pushpa's defiance is emblematic of broader social and environmental movements that challenge the status quo and advocate for more equitable and sustainable practices. The film portrays the moral and ethical dilemmas faced

by individuals within this context. Pushpa's actions, though driven by personal and communal motivations, raise questions about the legitimacy and efficacy of resistance within an inherently corrupt system. The narrative invites viewers to consider the complexities of ethical decision-making and the potential for transformative change in the face of systemic oppression. Critics of ecological capitalism, such as Naomi Klein, emphasize the need for systemic change to address the root causes of environmental and social injustices. In a conversation with *Earth First! Journal*, environmental justice pioneer Dr. Robert Bullard explained that the environment includes every aspect of our lives—where we live, work, play, attend school, and the natural world itself. He emphasized that we cannot separate the physical environment from our cultural surroundings, and highlighted the importance of integrating justice into all our activities ("What Environment"). *Pushpa: The Rise* echoes this sentiment by depicting the intertwined struggles for ecological and socio-economic justice.

The film's use of vivid cinematography and evocative storytelling underscores the impact of ecological exploitation. The dense forests of the Seshachalam Hills, where red sandalwood is harvested, are portrayed both as sites of natural beauty and as arenas of capitalist greed. The juxtaposition of these elements reinforces the narrative's critique of ecological degradation. *Pushpa: The Rise* serves as a powerful cultural narrative that critiques the dynamics of ecological capitalism through its portrayal of red sandalwood smuggling. The film's depiction of labor exploitation and resistance against capitalist hierarchies aligns with the theoretical frameworks provided by scholars like Harvey and Klein. By highlighting the environmental and socio-economic impacts of resource exploitation, the film underscores the urgent need for more sustainable and equitable approaches to resource management. Through its compelling narrative and cinematic

techniques, *Pushpa* contributes to the broader discourse on ecological capitalism and emphasizes the role of popular media in fostering critical environmental awareness.

Cinematic Techniques and Narrative Strategies in *Pushpa: The Rise*

In the 1960s, a groundbreaking structuralist approach to film theory emerged, transforming cinema from a sensory and aesthetic experience into a system of signification. This perspective redefined film not as a medium of visual pleasure or emotional resonance, but as a coded structure governed by an abstract, finite set of rules. The specificity of film was no longer understood through its surface properties such as sound, image, or narrative flow but through its deeper, no observable system of signs. Film became a semiological object, where meaning is generated through the relationships among its internal elements, much like language. This shift laid the foundation for analysing cinema as a complex network of codes and conventions, enabling scholars to uncover the ideological and structural mechanisms embedded within cinematic texts (Metz). *Pushpa: The Rise* was not merely a piece of entertainment but cinematography provides a rich fertile ground to dissect the contrast between the untouched wilderness and the chaotic scenes of illegal logging which demonstrates the conflict between man vs nature. Wide shots of lush greenery and serene landscapes evoke a sense of tranquillity and natural beauty but these scenes are also juxtaposed with close-ups of the labour-intensive and destructive logging activities, emphasizing the physical toll on workers and the environmental destruction caused by the smuggling operations. David Bordwell, in *Film Art: An Introduction*, notes that cinematography is not just an artform about capturing images; it's about telling a story visually (156). In *Pushpa: The Rise*, the visual storytelling powerfully conveys the themes of exploitation and resistance. The narrative structure of the film revolves around Pushpa Raj's journey from a

marginalized laborer to a dominant figure within the red sandalwood smuggling network. This progression highlights the precarious conditions faced by workers who are essential yet undervalued in the profit chain. The character of Pushpa, portrayed by Allu Arjun, embodies the complexities of labor exploitation. His rise to power is marked by numerous confrontations with authority figures, including corrupt police officers and rival smugglers, reflecting the pervasive influence of power and corruption within the capitalist system. *Film Art: An Introduction* (12th edition) in the very first chapter nicely states that, "Films offer us ways of seeing and feeling that we find deeply gratifying. They take us through experiences. The experiences are often driven by stories centering on characters we come to care about, but a film might also develop an idea or explore visual qualities or sound textures." (Bordwell 3)

In *Pushpa: The Rise*, the narrative exposes the systemic exploitation of laborers and the intricate network of corruption that sustains the illegal trade. Pushpa's iconic dialogue, "Pushpa, Jhukega Nahi Sala" ("Pushpa, I will not bow down"), occurring at [timestamp: 2:10:35], signifies his defiance against the oppressive structures of power. This declaration highlights his determination to assert his agency and challenge the inequalities within the system. The film's portrayal of the red sandalwood smuggling operation serves as a metaphor for the broader capitalist practice of commodifying natural resources. The dense forests of the Seshachalam Hills are depicted as both sites of immense natural beauty and arenas for ruthless capitalist greed. This visual and thematic contrast underscores the narrative's critique of ecological capitalism which hardly differs from the 'Big other' concept of Shoshana Zuboff, which is "an intelligent world-spanning organism" which brings with it "new possibilities of subjugation . . . as this innovative institutional logic thrives on unexpected and illegible mechanisms of extraction and control that exile persons from their own behaviour"

(85). *Pushpa: The Rise* effectively exposes the contradictions between the exploitation of natural resources and the relentless pursuit of profit, highlighting the ecological and social costs of such practices.

Critics of ecological capitalism, such as John Bellamy Foster, thus asserts that the flaws in capitalism's relationship with the environment are evident in what we now refer to as the "environmental crisis." This crisis includes a wide range of issues such as global warming, ozone layer depletion, deforestation, coral reef destruction, overfishing, species extinction, loss of genetic diversity, increasing environmental and food toxicity, desertification, dwindling water supplies, lack of clean water, and radioactive contamination. The list is extensive and growing rapidly, with these problems manifesting on increasingly larger spatial scales (12). The film echoes this sentiment by depicting the intertwined struggles for ecological and socio-economic justice. The narrative not only critiques the capitalist exploitation of natural resources but also highlights the human dimension of these exploitative practices. The depiction of labour exploitation in *Pushpa: The Rise* extends beyond physical labour to include the socio-economic conditions that drive individuals into illegal activities. Pushpa's character arc reflects the challenges faced by marginalized communities in capitalist economies, where poverty, lack of education, and limited access to legitimate employment opportunities push individuals toward high-risk endeavours. The film delves into Pushpa's struggles, capturing the socio-economic factors that drive his actions and highlighting the systemic inequalities that perpetuate exploitation.

The pacing and structure of the film allow for an exploration of both the macro-level dynamics of capitalism and the micro-level experiences of individuals. This approach creates a cohesive and impactful narrative that highlights the interconnectedness of environmental degradation, labor exploitation,

and social resistance. Pivotal scenes in the film, that showcases Pushpa's confrontation with a Srinu, CM, Bhanwar Singh Shikawat (IPS), Murugan and Konda Reddy is his refusal to bow down to oppressive power structures which is exemplary of the broader resistance against capitalist hierarchies depicted in the film. Pushpa's defiance is not just a personal act of rebellion but a symbolic challenge to the systemic injustices perpetuated by ecological capitalism. The film's critique of ecological capitalism is further reinforced through its visual and auditory elements. The soundtrack, including the song "O Antava Mava," juxtaposes the allure of glamour and material success with the harsh realities of the laborers' lives. This juxtaposition highlights the contradictions inherent in the capitalist system and underscores the moral ambiguities faced by individuals within this context. The dense forests and rugged landscapes are captured with striking detail, juxtaposing the natural beauty with scenes of environmental destruction. The film's visual style reinforces the narrative's commentary on the impact of capitalist greed on the environment. The visual representation of the forests as both pristine and exploited serves as a powerful metaphor for the contradictions of ecological capitalism.

Conflict of Interest & Data Availability Statement

The author declares no financial, commercial, legal, or professional affiliations that could be perceived as influencing the content or conclusions of this research. No funding, sponsorship, or external support was received for the development of this article. The author affirms that there are no personal, ideological, or institutional interests that conflict with the integrity of the scholarly work presented. This article does not rely on any proprietary datasets or quantitative data requiring public access. All materials referenced—including films, scholarly texts, and theoretical frameworks—are publicly available or cited appropriately within the

manuscript. Any interpretive analyses, comparative frameworks, or methodological tools developed by the author are original and embedded within the article itself. No additional data is required to reproduce the findings or arguments presented.

Scope and Significance of the Research

The scope of the research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining ecological critique, film theory, and socio-political analysis to examine how cinema can serve as a cultural text that reflects and challenges systemic inequalities. By focusing on the red sandalwood smuggling narrative, the study reveals how natural resources are commodified under capitalist regimes, marginalizing both ecosystems and labouring communities. The film's vivid cinematography and layered narrative structure are analysed as tools that expose the harsh realities of ecological exploitation, with the Seshachalam Hills depicted as both sites of natural beauty and arenas of capitalist greed. Pushpa Raj's journey from a low-wage labourer to a dominant figure in the smuggling network symbolizes the precarious nature of survival under neoliberal conditions, aligning with Harvey's critique of dispossession and inequality. The significance of the research lies in its contribution to the discourse on environmental justice and cultural representation, demonstrating how popular cinema can illuminate

Conclusion

Pushpa: The Rise is an evocative exploration of ecological exploitation and the intricate dynamics of labor struggles within capitalist frameworks. The film employs a range of cinematic techniques and narrative strategies to underscore its themes, effectively critiquing the destructive impact of ecological capitalism. The use of vivid cinematography captures the stark contrast between the pristine beauty of the Seshachalam Hills and the chaotic, gruelling nature of red sandalwood smuggling operations. Wide shots and natural lighting

depict the forests as tranquil and untouched, while close-ups and handheld camera work emphasize the physical toll on labourers, highlighting their hazardous working conditions. In this film, the cinematography serves as a visual metaphor for the broader themes of ecological commodification and capitalist exploitation. The lush greenery juxtaposed with scenes of environmental destruction creates a powerful commentary on the relentless drive for profit that characterizes ecological capitalism.

The narrative structure of *Pushpa: The Rise* centres around the protagonist, Pushpa Raj, whose journey from a marginalized labourer (he gets low wages like other workers) to a dominant figure in the smuggling network exposes the systemic exploitation and corruption within the capitalist system. The narrative structure of a film can reveal underlying power dynamics and social hierarchies that can be easily extracted after applying 'structuralist film theory' according to which fundamental structuralist principles when applied to the medium of film. Films are remained not just linear narratives, but "intricate systems of signification where meaning is generated through the relationships among different elements" ("Structuralist"). The film's narrative reveals the exploitation of labourers and the hierarchical nature of the smuggling network, providing a human dimension to the critique of systemic labour exploitation. Pushpa's rise to power is marked by his confrontations with various authority figures, including corrupt police officers, rival smugglers, and local elites. His defiance against these entrenched hierarchies is poignantly captured in his declaration, "Pushpa, Jhukega Nahi Sala" ("Pushpa, I will not bow down"), which epitomizes his resistance to oppressive structures. This defiance reflects broader social and environmental movements that challenge the status quo and advocate for more equitable and sustainable practices.

Critics of ecological capitalism, such as John Bellamy Foster, emphasize the need for systemic change to address the root causes of environmental and social injustices. He argues, "There is now a worldwide scientific consensus that to fail to stop the present global warming trend will be to invite ecological and social catastrophe on a planetary scale over the course of the present century" (12). The film echoes this sentiment by depicting the intertwined struggles for ecological and socio-economic justice. The portrayal of red sandalwood smuggling serves as a microcosm of the broader ecological and socio-economic issues associated with capitalism. *Pushpa: The Rise* also employs vivid cinematography and evocative storytelling to critique the impact of ecological capitalism. The dense forests of the Seshachalam Hills are depicted as both sites of natural beauty and arenas of capitalist greed. The juxtaposition of these elements reinforces the narrative's critique of ecological degradation. The detailed depiction of the logging operations, with its chaotic and grueling nature, underscores the relentless drive for profit that characterizes ecological capitalism. Ken Coldicutt in "Cinema and Capitalism", succinctly states that a film does not only depict the external world's elements and processes as they are perceived by the mind but also effectively presents the ever-changing, conflicting ideas that mirror these elements and processes. Ultimately, the film liberates us from the need for symbolism, eliminating the necessity of converting ideas into symbols and then back into ideas for communication.

The film's portrayal of labour exploitation provides a human dimension to the critique of systemic labour exploitation under ecological capitalism. Pushpa's journey reflects the socio-economic factors driving individuals into illegal activities, such as poverty, lack of education, and limited access to legitimate employment opportunities. His rise within the smuggling operation symbolizes the precarious nature of such labour, where workers must navigate

systemic inequalities to survive and thrive. This journey aligns with David Harvey's critique that "neoliberalism exacerbates socio-economic inequalities by dispossessing vulnerable communities" (Harvey, 2003). *Pushpa: The Rise* employs vivid cinematography and evocative storytelling to underscore the impact of ecological exploitation. The film's visual and narrative techniques effectively convey its critique of ecological capitalism, highlighting the exploitation of labourers and the corruption within the smuggling network. Through its compelling narrative and cinematic techniques, *Pushpa* contributes to the broader discourse on ecological capitalism and emphasizes the role of popular media in fostering critical environmental awareness. The film's depiction of red sandalwood smuggling serves as a microcosm of the broader ecological and socio-economic issues associated with capitalism. By situating its narrative within the theoretical frameworks of scholars like Harvey and Klein, *Pushpa* underscores the relevance of cultural texts in fostering critical environmental awareness and advocating for transformative change. The film also shows tremendous possibility to look at it via 'structuralist film theory' - "... To present the very essence of a film, making the viewing public realize and understand the potential and the very core significance of a film, presenting a film in structures that can makes the movie-goers easily adapt into by means of the usage of structural techniques . . ." due to which this study via capitalist theory of ecology show not only the celebration of wrongdoing over nature in the film but lays a sharp focus on the destruction of nature in the hands of capitalist greed symbolised through the economic greed of the protagonist pushpa. ("Structuralist")

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