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Hymns to the Himalaya: Interactive Space and Community Memory in Post-Millennial Indian Cinema

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Abstract

The Himalaya has historically occupied a central place in South Asia's sacred, ecological, and geopolitical imagination. However, post-millennial Indian cinema reconfigures this monumental landscape as an interactive space and a repository of community memory. This article examines how select films such as *Haider*, *Highway*, and *Kedarnath* transform the Himalaya from a static backdrop into a dynamic narrative agent that mediates identity, trauma, mobility, and belonging. Drawing on spatial theory, memory studies, and eco-critical frameworks, the article argues that cinematic techniques—long shots, ambient soundscapes, and itinerant camera movements—render the Himalaya as an affective archive. By situating personal histories within collective memory and ecological contexts, these films reimagine the Himalaya as a participatory landscape that is simultaneously sacred and contested, intimate and geopolitical.

Keywords: Interactive space, Community memory, Post-millennial Indian cinema, Spatiality, Eco-criticism, Nationhood, Landscape politics

Introduction

The Himalaya has long been perceived as an immutable symbol of transcendence, spirituality, and natural grandeur. From ancient mythologies to colonial travelogues, the mountains have been imagined as distant, sacred, and often inaccessible. Yet, in contemporary Indian cinema, particularly after the turn of the millennium, this perception undergoes a significant transformation. The Himalaya has existed as a powerful symbol within the cultural, spiritual, and geopolitical imagination of South Asia. Traditionally envisioned as a site of transcendence, divinity, and sublime natural beauty, it has often been framed as a distant and immutable backdrop—an eternal presence beyond the flux of human life.

The Himalaya is no longer a passive scenic backdrop; instead, it emerges as an interactive and affective space that participates in the construction of narrative and meaning. This shift reflects broader theoretical developments in spatiality, where space is understood not as a neutral container but as a socially produced and dynamic entity (Lefebvre 26). Cinema, as a visual and sensory medium, plays a crucial role in shaping this reconfiguration. Through cinematic techniques such as framing, movement, and sound design, filmmakers transform the Himalaya into a lived space where identities are negotiated, memories are preserved, and histories are contested. However, post-millennial Indian cinema reimagines this mountainous terrain in strikingly different ways. Rather than presenting the Himalaya as a passive scenic expanse, contemporary films transform it into an

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interactive space—one that actively shapes narratives, mediates identities, and stores layers of community memory.

This article explores how post-millennial Indian cinema mobilizes the Himalaya as a narrative agent, focusing on three films—*Haider*, *Highway*, and *Kedarnath*. These films offer distinct yet interconnected representations of the Himalaya as physical, spiritual, and social spaces. By analysing these representations through the lenses of memory studies and eco-criticism, the article argues that the Himalaya functions as an affective archive—a repository of community memory that mediates the relationship between individuals and their environment.

Theoretical Framework: Spatiality, Memory, and Eco-Criticism

The reimaging of the Himalaya in contemporary cinema can be understood through the intersection of spatial theory, memory studies, and eco-critical thought. According to Henri Lefebvre, space is socially produced and shaped by human practices, perceptions, and representations. This concept of lived space is particularly relevant to cinema, where visual and auditory elements create immersive environments that influence audience perception.

Memory studies further enrich this framework by emphasizing the role of space in preserving collective memory. Pierre Nora introduces the concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), suggesting that certain locations serve as repositories of cultural and historical memory. In the context of the Himalaya, the landscape itself becomes a site where memories of conflict, migration, and spirituality are embedded and recalled.

Eco-criticism, on the other hand, foregrounds the relationship between humans and the natural environment. Scholars such as Lawrence Buell argue for a rethinking of anthropocentric perspectives, advocating for a recognition of the agency of non-human entities. In cinema, this translates into a portrayal of landscapes as active participants in narrative processes. Together, these frameworks enable a nuanced understanding of the Himalaya as an interactive space—one that is continuously shaped by and shaping human experiences.

Himalaya as Physical Space: Trauma and Memory in *Haider*

Haider offers a powerful representation of the Himalaya as a physical space marked by political conflict and historical trauma. Set in Kashmir, the film situates its narrative within a landscape that is both visually stunning and deeply scarred by violence. The snow-covered valleys, often depicted in long, static shots, evoke a sense of stillness that contrasts sharply with the turbulence of human experience.

The film, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, situates its narrative within the context of the Kashmir conflict, transforming the Himalayan landscape into a site of physical space saturated with historical trauma. The stark whiteness of the snow contrasts with the darkness of human suffering, creating a visual metaphor for the erasure and persistence of memory. The terrain becomes a silent witness to acts of violence, its vastness echoing the absence and loss experienced by the characters. Through this representation, the Himalaya is not merely a setting but a participant in the narrative—a space that embodies the unresolved tensions of a contested region.

The use of long shots in *Haider* emphasizes the insignificance of individual lives against the immensity of the landscape, while simultaneously highlighting the deep imprint of human actions on this seemingly indifferent terrain. The ambient soundscape—comprising wind, silence, and distant echoes—further reinforces the sense of isolation and haunting memory. In this way, the film transforms the Himalaya into an interactive space where personal grief intersects with collective trauma, and where the boundaries between past and present blur.

The Himalaya in *Haider* functions as an affective archive, preserving the memory of disappearances, militarization, and resistance. The landscape becomes a silent witness to these structures, its vastness reflecting the scale of collective suffering. The use of ambient sound—wind, silence, distant echoes—further enhances this sense of haunting presence. In this context, the Himalaya is not merely a setting but an active participant in the narrative. It shapes the characters' experiences and influences their actions, embodying the intersection of personal and political histories. The physical space of the mountains thus becomes inseparable from the emotional and psychological dimensions of the story.

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Himalaya as Spiritual Space: Liberation and Identity in *Highway*

In contrast to the sombre tone of *Haider*, *Highway* presents the Himalaya as a space of spiritual transformation and psychological release. The film follows the journey of a young woman who, through her travels across diverse landscapes, discovers a sense of freedom and selfhood in the mountains. The Himalaya here is characterized by openness and fluidity. The winding roads and expansive vistas symbolize movement and possibility, contrasting with the confinement of urban spaces. The use of handheld camera techniques and natural lighting creates an intimate connection between the viewer and the landscape, emphasizing its role as a space of healing.

This representation aligns with the concept of spiritual space, where the environment facilitates introspection and personal growth. The protagonist's journey through the Himalaya becomes a process of renegotiating identity, challenging societal norms, and reclaiming agency. The mountains, in this sense, act as a catalyst for transformation, highlighting the interactive nature of the landscape. The Himalaya in *Highway* is characterized by its openness and fluidity. The itinerant camera movements capture the changing landscapes, reflecting the protagonist's evolving emotional state. The use of natural light and ambient sounds creates an immersive experience, allowing the audience to feel the sensory richness of the environment. Unlike the oppressive atmosphere in *Haider*, the Himalayan space here offers a sense of release and possibility. It becomes a site where trauma can be confronted and reinterpreted, enabling the protagonist to renegotiate her identity and reclaim her agency.

This transformation of space into a medium of healing underscores the interactive nature of the Himalaya. The landscape does not merely reflect the character's inner state but actively facilitates her journey towards self-realization. The mountains, in their vastness and solitude, provide a space for introspection and emotional catharsis. In this sense, the Himalaya emerges as a participatory landscape, one that engages with the human psyche and fosters personal growth.

Himalaya as Social Space: Community and Crisis in *Kedarnath*

Kedarnath offers yet another dimension of the Himalaya, portraying it as a social space shaped by community interactions and ecological crises. Set against the backdrop of the 2013 Uttarakhand floods, the film explores the intersection of spirituality, commerce, and environmental vulnerability. The sacred geography of Kedarnath, a prominent pilgrimage site, serves as a focal point for the narrative..

In Kedarnath, the Himalaya is both nurturing and destructive. The serene beauty of the landscape is juxtaposed with the devastating force of natural disaster, highlighting the precarious balance between human activity and ecological systems. The film emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and non-human elements, illustrating how environmental degradation can have profound consequences for communities. The floods are not merely a plot device but a manifestation of the ecological fragility of the region, reminding viewers of the urgent need for sustainable practices. The floods, while devastating, also reveal the resilience of local communities and the importance of collective memory in coping with disaster. The landscape, in this context, becomes a site of both loss and renewal, embodying the cyclical nature of life and the enduring strength of human connections.

Through its portrayal of pilgrimage routes, marketplaces, and local settlements, the film emphasizes the Himalaya as a contact zone—a space where diverse cultures and identities converge. This social dimension underscores the interconnectedness of human and non-human elements, reinforcing the eco-critical perspective of the narrative.

Mobility and the Himalaya as an Interactive Contact Zone

A key feature of post-millennial representations of the Himalaya is the emphasis on mobility. The movement of characters through the landscape—whether in the form of journeys, migrations, or pilgrimages—transforms the mountains into a dynamic and interactive space. In *Highway*, mobility is central to the protagonist's transformation, while in *Haider*, restricted movement reflects the political realities of the region. In *Kedarnath*, pilgrimage routes highlight the cultural and spiritual significance of mobility. These movements create encounters between different communities, identities, and histories, turning the Himalaya into a contact zone rather than an

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isolated frontier. This reconfiguration challenges traditional representations of the mountains as static and remote, emphasizing their role in facilitating interaction and exchange.

Across these films, the concept of mobility plays a crucial role in redefining the Himalaya as an interactive space. The movement of characters through mountain roads, valleys, and borderlands creates a sense of dynamism, challenging the notion of the Himalaya as a static frontier. This mobility allows for encounters between different cultures, identities, and experiences, transforming the landscape into a space of negotiation and exchange. The journeys undertaken by the characters are not merely physical but also symbolic, representing transitions in identity and belonging.

Nationhood, Indigeneity, and Landscape Politics

The Himalaya's position as a border region makes it central to discussions of nationhood and identity. In post-millennial cinema, this geopolitical dimension is explored alongside the lived experiences of local communities. In *Haider*, the landscape reflects the tensions between state power and individual agency, highlighting the complexities of national identity. While in *Kedarnath*, the focus shifts to the cultural and spiritual significance of the mountains for indigenous communities. These representations challenge dominant narratives of nationhood, foregrounding the voices and experiences of those who inhabit the region. The Himalaya thus becomes a site of landscape politics, where competing claims and perspectives are negotiated.

Affect and Cinematic Techniques

The emotional impact of the Himalaya in cinema is achieved through a range of cinematic techniques. Long shots emphasize the scale and grandeur of the landscape, while close-ups capture the intimacy of human experience. Ambient soundscapes create a sense of immersion, allowing the audience to engage with the environment on a sensory level. In *Haider*, muted tones and stark imagery evoke a sense of loss and desolation. In *Highway*, vibrant colours and dynamic camera movements convey freedom and vitality. In *Kedarnath*, the juxtaposition of serenity and chaos creates a complex emotional landscape. These techniques contribute to the construction of the Himalaya as an affective space, where emotions are not only represented but also experienced.

Eco-Critical Perspectives: Environment and Ethics

From an eco-critical standpoint, the Himalaya in post-millennial cinema is portrayed as a fragile and interconnected ecosystem. Films like *Kedarnath* highlight the consequences of environmental degradation, emphasizing the need for sustainable practices. The representation of natural disasters, changing landscapes, and human impact underscores the urgency of ecological awareness. By depicting the Himalaya as a living entity rather than a passive resource, these films challenge anthropocentric views and promote a more ethical relationship with the environment. The narratives underscore the consequences of environmental neglect, emphasizing the need for a more sustainable approach to development. By integrating ecological concerns into their storytelling, these films contribute to a broader discourse on environmental ethics and responsibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, post-millennial Indian cinema redefines the Himalaya as an interactive and participatory landscape, rich with community memory and cultural significance. Through films such as *Haider*, *Highway*, and *Kedarnath*, the mountains emerge as dynamic spaces that mediate identity, trauma, and belonging. Through these films, the mountains emerge as sites of physical, spiritual, and social engagement, where personal narratives intersect with collective histories. By employing spatial, affective, and eco-critical frameworks, these films offer a nuanced portrayal of the Himalaya as a space that is simultaneously sacred and contested, intimate and geopolitical. In doing so, they expand the cinematic and cultural significance of the Himalaya, inviting audiences to reconsider their relationship with this iconic landscape and the memories it holds. By integrating spatial, memory, and eco-critical frameworks, these films offer a nuanced understanding of the Himalaya as a space that is simultaneously sacred and contested, intimate and geopolitical. This reimagining not only expands the cinematic representation of the Himalaya but also invites viewers to reconsider their relationship with the environment and the memories it holds.

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