

## Ecoteracy In Sarnath Banerjee's Corridor And All Quiet In Vikaspuri

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### Abstract:

*During Anthropocene epoch, understanding the ecosystem and the socio-cultural interactions of humans is essential for sustainable development. Ecoteracy provides a social infrastructure to understand the natural and human environment with sustainability as its major focus. In addition to that, it addresses the environmental issues like climate change and commodification and overexploitation of water and its impacts on humans. Moving towards a participatory action, ecoteracy needs a tool of representation to convey the environmental awareness inclusive of its complex multifaceted social and cultural structure. Hence, the article positions graphic novel as an effective means for disseminating ecoteracy through the visual and verbal medium of storytelling to engage the readers and to sustain their interests. Hence, this article aims to study the significance of graphic novels in generating eco literacy through analysing Sarnath Banerjee's Corridor (2004) and All Quiet in Vikaspuri (2015).*

**Keywords:** Corridor; All Quiet in Vikaspuri; Graphic Novels; Ecoteracy; Indian Anthropocene.

### Introduction

The post-millennium deals with social constructionist issues which ultimately give way to the realisation of the environmental protection. The linear and enormous development of the twentieth century resulted in the over exploitation of natural resources. The awareness of the management and sustainable development are discussed in the recent decades. This is due to the increasing awareness and working understanding of the Anthropocene epoch as one of the catastrophic biophysical changes in the Earth. In addition to the overexploitation and extraction of natural resources, population growth, industrialization, urbanization, intensive and unsustainable agricultural practices, deforestation, and waste generation, and the impacts of slow violence are yet to be addressed. These circumstances call for ecoteracy across the globe while this article<sup>1</sup> focuses on the Indian scene. Ecoteracy addresses the understanding of the fundamentals of ecosystem to the social, political, cultural, economic and technological process. Enormous impact of human beings on the biophysical environment is visible through the advent of the new epoch. Social constructionist knowledge system cannot be ignored as the influence of human and the culture which have framed the technology, social and political interactions towards the biophysical environment. The dominant interactions of people towards the environment have created major impacts on the environment affecting the non-human components of the ecosystem. Though technological innovation and scientific interventions have created noticeable changes, narrative and storytelling are inevitable for creating everyday use of environment.

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The need for environmental based literacy is essential for an alternative interaction. Everyone needs to understand and work in providing solutions through the understanding the social structures, law, public policies, sustainable architectures, management of resources, advances in technology, research and institutional arrangements. The need for shifting attitudes is widely influenced by the popular culture – media, films, and literature. To enhance people’s understanding of anthropocentric approach towards the environment, the need for innovation in the education system is needed. Thus, this article aims to study the significance of graphic novels in generating eco literacy. The article analyses the two graphic novels of Sarnath Banerjee – *Corridor* and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* as tools for ecoliteracy.

Ecoliteracy is attributed to the broader use of humanities and it “focus[es] on the creation of sustainable human communities and society” (McBride et al, 2013, p. 3). It is differentiated from (i) environmental literacy which focuses environmental pedagogy and awareness of basic environmental concepts as a part of environmental education and (ii) ecological literacy which understands the cause effect relationship of environmental concerns (p. 13). The usage opted in this article is ecoliteracy as its objective is the attitudinal response to environmental issues and promoting “participatory action” (p. 14) in sustainable development. An ecoliterate person understands the infrastructure of the environment and ecosystem in relevance to the socio-economic and cultural involvement and works towards sustainable future and also has a constructive attitude towards non-human stakeholders of nature. Based on Daneil Goleman’s idea, ecoliteracy’s fundamental practices include “developing empathy for all forms of life; embracing sustainability as a community practice; making the invisible visible; anticipating unintended consequences; and understanding how nature sustains life” (Hollweg, 2012, p. 286). Code uses the progressive skills of the term literacy to highlight the importance of readings on nature to articulate ecoliteracy based on the individual decoding, interpretation and cognition of the readings of related texts on environment. A significant part of ecoliteracy is creating awareness of the existing environmental problems. The graphic novel undertakes an important role in enhancing the everyday aspect of environmental problems by incorporating defamiliarization which reawakens the perspective to the habitual object or idea in a newer light (Bond, 1988, p. 65). The effective use of defamiliarization creates a renewed impact on the readers to look into the simpler versions of the environmental concerns and work towards rectifying it. It changes the attitude towards a holistic understanding of climate change and their multifaceted effects on the people.

Graphic novel is an effective means of disseminating ecoliteracy as it uses visual and verbal medium for storytelling to engage the readers and sustain their interests. Graphic novels have their relevance and reception among the postmodern readers whose interest has been evolving in the digitized age of culture industry. The increase in the commercialization of the contemporary publishing scene determines medium of representations and creation of meaning and socio-cultural constructions. With the commercial demand of the culture industry and the postmodern readership, the choice of representation in graphic novels supplies an effective avenue of interaction. They provide “alternate views of culture, history, and human life in general in accessible ways, giving voice to minorities and those with diverse viewpoints” (Schwarz, 2002, p. 264). The hybridization capabilities of graphic novels reflect multiple realities of various socio-cultural issues keeping pace with other mass media through its visual and verbal elements. The scope of the genre – to evolve and include a wide range of themes, concepts, and issues – generates a “potential to appeal to almost any reader” (Hansen, 2012, p. 58). The alliances of graphic novels with other fields of study such as gender, postcolonial, life writing, and environmental studies provide positive reception of the genre in academia and research.

The subject matter of graphic novels is in the iconoclastic tradition including the treatment of serious topics for adult audiences ranging from the auto/biographical elements – confrontation of traumatic experiences; adaptation of classic literary texts or parodies,

historical events, and films. Most of the graphic novels in India provide question of marginality and offers broader narrative of the nation state critiquing the contemporary socio-cultural constructions (Agarwal, 2016, p. 278). Varughese et al., points out that in India, visualization has always been a part of social and cultural life. The genre has created a subculture dissident of the dominant discourse especially dealing with socio-political factors of contemporary issues (p. 1266-7). The “theory-of-mind adaptations” (Gardner and Herman, 2011 p. 10) pertaining to the readers of graphic novels create intrinsic experiences to comprehend the composite social and cultural implication of development induced displacement. In the multilingual and diversified readership of Indian context, graphic novels have taken elitist preference due to the cost and the medium of delivery (Nayar, 2016, p. 191). Nevertheless, its thematic scope and visual-verbal narrative structure are quintessential in making the genre an inevitable medium of representation and ensures its consistent growth and permanency in culture studies.

Growth of graphic novels in the concurrent decades is drastic. It has also provided “first, an increasingly visual orientation due to the internet and second, the increasing interpenetration of popular culture and high culture” (Martin, 2011, p. 178). This inclusive cultural position of graphic novels creates high impact and thus promotes eco communicability among people. Thus, ignoring the significance of graphic novels would be “at the risk of our intellectual impoverishment” (Ibid). The demography of graphic novel, unlike the earlier sequential comic strips of venerable comic books is inclusive of gender, class, ethnicity, etc. The impact of the narrative is enhanced by the incorporation of defamiliarization. The adaptation of film into graphic novels and the consistent innovative strategies and creative process – like including photographs ensures the popularity of the genre. The subject matter of the graphic novel is in the tradition of social critique including the treatment of serious topics for adult audience ranging from the auto/biographical elements – confrontation of traumatic experiences; adaptation of classic literary texts or parodies, historical events, and films. The roles were mostly iconoclastic in the representation of social issues (Martin, 2011). This can be validated in Agarwal’s statement that rewriting mythologies provide alternate histories and various perspectives, thus, give way to multiple interpretations of the contemporary issues. Most of the graphic novels in India provide minority and broader narratives of the nation state critiquing the contemporary constructions. *Hush*, *Bhimayana*, *The Harappa Files*, *The Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers*, *Delhi Calm*, *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, *Kari*, *Drawing the Line*, *This Side That Side*, and *The River of Stories* (Nayar, 2016; Agarwal, 2016) are a few examples of such graphic novels. In India, the medium of graphic novel had developed from the domestic market with the change in the publishing scenario from the multinational publishing company to independent publishing houses. They capture the socio-political and cultural realities and represent the contemporary conditions of the country holistically and create cathartic effect on the readers. Through the visual-textual components unlike any other textual medium, creates a better interaction of the issues and the reader.

*Corridor* (2004) a realistic depiction of urban life in the Indian capital through the interwoven tales of six men. Brighu Sen, the book’s narrator is a postmodern urbanite searching for a romantic partner and strange artifacts. Jehangir Rangoonwalla is an enlightened purveyor of tea, wisdom, and used books. Prof. DVD Murthy is a forensic expert whose world revolves around Poison, Reggae, and John Keats. Shintu is a newly married young man looking for an aphrodisiac to enhance his libido while Anger Bosch is a man who searches for karma. Digital Dutta is an Aptech C++ professional. Through the portrayal of the character’s everyday life, the graphic novel provides a hint of precarious lifestyle of an urban landscape that does not provide interaction with natural environment. The characters are busy living their life and thus, they are seldom aware of the climate change and environmental pollution that affect them. The narrative portrays the climate change in the background while the characters of the storyline move in the foreground. The author uses the technique of defamiliarization to highlight the markers of climate change

like hot summer and sudden outpour of rain. The visual medium of representation supplies additional effect to the technique creating awareness about climate change.

The graphic novels *Corridor* and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* capture the environmental realities of the urban communities. They represent the environmental concerns such as climate change, water management, waste treatment and slow violence. The visual medium of the graphic novels captures the social as well as cultural relation through the “reflection of the creator’s culture and upbringing” (Downey, 2009, p. 183) and increases cognition and holistic understanding of the issues. For instance, in *Corridor*, the heat wave in the city is illustrated with the picture of men walking in the streets of Delhi. They are shown with scooped down shoulders, extended tongue, and drenched in sweats which can be understood as a man wipes his forehead grudgingly (Banerjee, 2004, p. 3 & 9). The images have increased impact on the readers who can imagine and relate to the scenes. The usages like “soul of Chengiz Khan” “Urban warriors” (p. 3) addressed to those who work through the heat keeps the readers engaged. Similar images can be seen for the “strong winds, heavy rains/unusual for this time of the year” (p. 105). The presentation of the character Digital, a postmodern hero who challenges four men for insulting his mother is yet another instance. His exhibit of his masculine power in front of his lover in a late-night rendezvous. The big fight was stopped by a mosquito bite and that made Digital hospitalised over a month. Banerjee’s gradual escalation of tension build up through frame-by-frame illustration of images that the mosquito creates humorous representation of the human and non-human relationship. The understanding of the natural ecosystem become a basis of ecoliteracy to incorporate the complex social constructions as add on.

*All Quiet in Vikaspuri* provides similar representation woven into the storyline. The main character Girish the plumber is one among the “displaced thousands, who journey to the big cities in search of a livelihood” (Banerjee, 2015, p. 16) finds a job under the Rastogi who has been trying to find the mythical river Saraswathi. During his journey in search of the river, Girish meets five people who are representative characters of common public. They also provide perspectives various aspects of issues related to water such as commodification and overexploitation. Delhi Jal Board employee, Jagat Ram sells water illegally to the private tankers and Tanker Rajen, the owner of Tandav Tankers sells the siphoned water to the luxury corners of Delhi at an expensive rate. They represent the objectification and commodification of water. The late colonel Gambhir who steals water from the neighbour’s overhead tank for pleasure represents the precious attitude of humans towards water. Awasthy, once a corrupt official of Municipal Corporation of Delhi who exploits public water for his own benefits illustrate the political control and power relations in the exploitation of water. Philippa Carrey Jones, the wife of an ambassador who overuses water unsustainably represents the class relation in exploitation of water. The regret and plight of these five people along with Girish to prevent the exploitation of the newly found river Saraswathi at the centre of earth wraps up the story. It gives the message of sustainability after the elaboration of its alternative impacts. The roundabout of illustration creates fear of uncertainty without losing hope towards better understanding of one’s role in environmental protection.

Banerjee has coined the term “short-termism” to include the precarious lifestyle, to criticise the developmental framework that prioritises short term socio-economic, political development over long-term sustenance inclusive of people from all social strata. This term resonates Nixon’s slow violence and Arundhati Roy’s criticism of greater common good that prioritises profit of dominant few over the marginalised people who become the “surplus people” (Nixon, 2011, p. 151). Slow violence occurs gradually over an increased period of time due to consistent exploitation through systematic and structural socio-cultural factors. Its invisibility is caused by its dispersal across time and people in general usually respond fast to the impending problems. This demand for the representation of slow violence especially on environment based on the immediate need with the Anthropocene. Capra points out in understanding ecoliteracy that “solving problems in an enduring way

requires bringing the people addressing parts of the problem together” (2007, p. 14). It is essential to materialise and render slow violence “apprehensible to the senses” which is done effectively through the visual verbal medium of graphic novels. Banerjee represents environmental slow violence in his short-termism through the harmonious display of images and words. This is demonstrated in the illustration of a hydroelectric dam project, which shows a calm view above the water with the remains of a hamlet submerged underneath it, along with a defining statement about slow violence. The lines “When industries take over agricultural land and dams drown entire villages and destroy settled communities to produce unjustifiable low amounts of electricity” (Banerjee, 2015, p. 56), reflect the impacts of slow violence on marginalised people. Similar representation can be seen in another instance – the pollution of rivers and lack of centralised planned recycling system. This is visible in the lines about the river Yamuna which is drained “for the water to be treated and sent into the capital’s water networks while the rest of the river moves on, sad, sluggish and thick with industrial effluent” (Banerjee, 2015, p. 59). The visual illustration is presented through cinematic sequencing of man jumping into the river but is stuck in the thick pollutant effluents while a man passing by in a relaxed manner. The movement of the man gives timing to the still images of the jumping man which creates better perception of the scene among the readers. This scene can also be interpreted as how the decentralised treatment of water networks focused on major municipal corporations create a marginalised spaces stagnant and excluded from sustainable development.

Considering the Anthropocene epoch, there is a necessity to understand the working of the ecosystem and human involvement. The natural environment remained stable in the previous epochs before the drastic changes introduced by the human beings. The technological growth is an essential evolutionary part but their impacts on the earth began with the attitude shown by the humans as a society on the natural environmental. Unsustainable means of development and overexploitation of natural resources were prompted through the cultural values that take the nature for granted. Hence, along with the basic understanding of the ecosystem and biodiversity, the awareness of the social interactions of human with the natural ecosystem to promote sustainable development. This necessitates ecoliteracy and an indispensable way to provide it. As storytelling and narration is an effective tool employed to disseminate information and ideologies, the significance of graphic novels in ecoliteracy has a compelling role. Ecoliteracy can be attained through general understanding of the ecosystem and social infrastructure that governs it. It also involves generating awareness and empathy towards following sustainable practices in everyday lives. The graphic novels Sarnath Banerjee’s *Corridor* and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* with its inventive visual linguistic medium generate fervent pursuit of ecoliteracy among environmental stakeholders. Through the stories, Banerjee creates awareness about the ecosystem and its changing nature highlighting climate change and water related issues. They also create empathy and participatory response from the readers which in turn generate ecoliteracy.

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