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Ecoprecarity: An Exploration of Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet In Vikaspuri*

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Abstract
Ecocritical texts aim to create a sense of ecological awareness through the exploration of the interdependence of nature and humankind. Ecoprecarity is a central theme of all the ecocritical texts. Banerjee's All Quiet in Vikaspuri can be read as a part of the burgeoning field of climate fiction. This paper examines the idea of Ecoprecarity manifested in the vision of barren land, polluted rivers, dusty/smoky air throughout the text. Woven into this segment of Ecoprecarity is also the portrayal of wastelands of the decadent sublime to generate the idea of a strange and unnatural kind of nature also known as 'ecological uncanny' in the post-catastrophic setting. Banerjee explores a relation/unseen link between the post-apocalyptic future of Gurgaon and the precarious present of the other cities like particularly Delhi. He employs the juxtaposition of the old lost world with the contemporary altered world as a structural feature of his narrative, both visual and verbal. The paper also intends to illustrate how the water crisis/wars in Delhi is the spitting image of the anthropogenic water crisis in India. Particular emphasis is given on the idea of 'Short-termism' policies and rampant privatization of natural resources which triggers the water crisis. Banerjee illustrates the traces of 'slow violence' in social and environmental terms behind the name of development or economic progress.

Keywords: Nature, ecoprecarity, ecological uncanny, wasteland, decadent sublime, precarious present, apocalyptic future

Introduction
"You must make your choice. Our civilization has chosen machinery … and happiness" (226). The above quoted lines from Brave New World functions as one of the vital themes in the ecological texts. It unfolds as an exploration of this human choice as the cause of eco dystopia followed by the degradation of the ecosystems, unfit to sustain life. They portray instances of man-made eco catastrophes with a special emphasis on a modern and unnatural environment which has put the humankind to grave crisis. They try to visualise how through unlimited deforestation and pollution, a very dangerous situation has been created, done by mankind purely to master the nature. What is common to all such literary texts is the idea of Ecoprecarity. Pramod K Nayar describes the concept of Ecoprecarity as a multifaceted one which refers to the themes of fragility, vulnerability of nature and imminent extinction of species due to abnormal or unnatural conditions it is manifested in the depiction of nature which has been rendered toxic and alien due to anthropogenic activities. This idea of precarity is not about a particular event or catastrophe; instead it is a result of processes and practices over a period of time (7-9). Nayar relates this idea of Ecoprecarity with the exploration of environmental degradation by Rob Nixon as a slow violence. Nixon defines the term 'slow violence' as acts of "delayed destruction" on nature which leads to slow but irrevocable damage to the long term. As he puts it, such "catastrophic acts are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects" (10). These catastrophic acts refer to violation of nature in the form of excessive deforestation, contamination of the ecosystems, overuse of natural resources and so on.

Graphic novels have emerged as a new medium of expression in Indian English literature. There has been much controversies on the nature and usage of this term 'Graphic novel'. Hillary Chute, a prominent comic scholar, proposes the term 'Graphic narratives' rather than 'Graphic novel' due to its multifaceted nature. He defines 'Graphic narratives' as an umbrella term/genre which includes Graphic works of fiction as well as non -fiction. In the

words of Karin Kukkonen, the graphic novel is "a publication format of the comics medium, which is a self-contained, non-serialised comics narrative" (172). Orijit Sen's The River of Stories (1995) is generally considered as the first graphic novel in Indian writing in English (IWE). Though the first long-form comic immensely/fondly marketed as a graphic novel is considered Sarnath Banerjee's Corridor: A Graphic Novel (2004). The significance of the graphic novels lie in the distinctive way of representation of the multi-faceted themes. They use distinctive technique of a combination of verbal and visual imagery in order to illustrate the themes. Talking about the significance of Graphic novels, Nayar writes: "The graphic narrative, with its verbal-visual and critical literacy, is the medium India needs to address contemporary concerns and provide a politically edged cultural critique and demands that the reader becomes alert to the position he or she takes vis-a-vis not just the text but the social domains represented in it"(8). In other words, such narratives illustrate various culturally and socially relevant issues or evils such as casteism, religious intolerance, gender inequality etc in novels such as The Believers (2006) by P.P. Abdul Sultan, Kari (2008) by Amruta Patil.

More recently, prominent graphic novelists have turned towards the hybrid visual- verbal model of representation of the challenges posed by the anthropogenic activities/ Anthropocene. An ecological awareness is quite evident in the writing such as Kartika Nair's The Honey Hunter (2014), Sarnath Banerjee's All Quiet in Vikaspuri (2015), Rambharos Jha's Waterlife (2016), Subhash Vyam's Water (2017), Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's Aranyaka: Book of the Forest (2019), and Amitav Ghosh's Jungle Nama (2021). The themes ranging from extinction of biodiversity, overuse of natural resources to severe consequences of climate change, and short-sighted neoliberal policies in the name of development are vividly illustrated in the noted works. In other words, an awareness of the fragility of nature and an imminent catastrophe if destruction continues is quite evident in all these writings.

Sarnath Banerjee beautifully explores this idea of Ecoprecarity in his landmark graphic novel All Quiet in Vikaspuri. It is one of his best forays into ecocritical fiction. Woven into this segment of the fragility of nature is the depiction of an altered nature which has exceeded the tipping point or reached ecological crisis of apocalyptic dimensions. The dystopian landscape is marked by images of polluted air, water, and land. The idea of precarious present and apocalyptic future is vividly illustrated through the portrayal of cities Delhi and Gurugram respectively. Banerjee draws wastelands of decadent sublime to evoke the idea of ecological uncanny in these locales.

Banerjee's prophetical words: "80 percent of Indian cities will become like Gurgaon" (49) function as a disclaimer before we enter its post-apocalyptic landscape. The dystopian theme/aspect derives its force from the nature of this altered city which is none less than spectral. Hailed as a "satellite town" (46), Banerjee paints the landscape in dark yet light humour. Lavishly developed as a hub of capitalism to influence free trade, it turns out to be a complete failure in social, economical and environmental terms. The irony comes to the fore through the portrayal of the luxurious Golf- view which is not less than a sea view in Bombay but nothing like to "lift up one's spirit" (48). We are implicitly told how the drowsiness/dullness of the landscape is complemented by the drowsiness/dullness of the people's lives there. What is surprising/horrific is an absence of nature throughout the description of the town. Neither flora nor fauna find a place in this developed town/landscape. Banerjee, through his panel on page 49 (Figure 2), illustrates the agency of the most powerful entity in this developed city that is none other than the spectacularly furnished building. The imagery of hands drawn like wrestler's hands emphasises its strength/power that not only provide rather govern/control the supply of water, sewage system and electricity in the city. What is alarming is the idea of nature being replaced as the supreme benevolent provider of the life with these buildings now deemed as "self-contained ecosystems in the Amazon" (49). The word ecosystem stands no longer associated with nature but to a human constructed technological entity. In other words, the idyllic image of humans living in harmony with nature which sustains life is replaced with a dark image of humans living in buildings which now sustain rather than controls their life.

The dystopian motif expands through the observation of Prof. P. Satyavadi regarding the rapid urbanising process where not only is the process of urbanisation rampant but also people have immense faith in the neoliberal urban policies where the essential resources are provided by the supreme building (Bhattacharya & Sarkar 6). For these people, the idea of home is equivalent to the space of these buildings. They are happily confined to such buildings which they believe provide them everything. Here, the wilful ignorance of people towards unsustainable activities is mocked and therefore they "deserve the city they live in" (50). In other words, the choice to remain silent in the face of injustice of nature is no longer any valid excuse. The excellence of the urbanised city is exposed in the discovery of how it literally "runs on tankers and generators" (50). Nothing can be more horrifying/disgusting to live in the building in which waste is disposed of in septic tanks instead of the main sewer. It gives the impression of living with all kinds of horrible waste next door which can explode any moment. In other words, the people live in a wasteland in which the distance/ bridge between them and the waste can collapse anytime. There is a considerable lack of hygiene not only in the surroundings but also in the minds of people who are surprisingly comfortable with the same. The words: "The city will be floating in its own excrement" (50) effectively bring about the failure of the machinery or the modern urban policies/aesthetics to maintain sustainability. As Bhattacharya and Sarkar puts it, "The anthropocentric projection of the building, blatantly disregarding planning and environmental variables, not only enforces the triumph of the large-scale real estate market, but also the futuristic disaster envisioned by Banerjee" (7). What Banerjee here tries to fictionalise is the apocalyptic future of a city completely aimed at urbanisation indifferent to the entire concept of sustainability. The description fits into the category of "Postcolonial dystopias. Wherein disaster/apocalypse or historical damage appear as the defining circumstance of the present" (Chakravorty 270). The description of the surroundings implies how Gurgaon is already living in a dystopian landscape where one apocalypse has occurred waiting for another one to happen. The depiction of post-apocalyptic world is also in view with James Berger's idea on the same. The first apocalypse has already occurred with sheer magnitude explored through the

depiction of absence of nature and its forms majorly clean water. Not only this but also the control of water which is in the hands of tyrannical private institutions at liberty to distribute it anyway be it ethical or unethical. The crisis in nature is implied to be a crisis in humanity itself. It foreshadows more apocalyptic events more terrible than the current ones yet "absolutely conclusive" in nature which will end only with complete eradication of nature resources and the humanity itself. Berger effectively puts it, "The initial disaster, which distorts and disorients -which, in a sense, is not an apocalypse in that it does not reveal-requires imagining a second disaster that is an apocalypse and thereby gives the first disaster retrospective apocalyptic status" (7). Here, Banerjee implies how no amount of advanced human technology will be able to prevent such an eradication. What can be more horrific/ pathetic than to live at the mercy of some people for clean water which in fact has been provided to all by nature.

A peep into the pre-apocalyptic space is given through the exploration of the city of Delhi. Banerjee traces how the surroundings/ conditions in the city speak for a "slowly unfolding environmental catastrophe" (Madan 4). Banerjee employs the contrast between the pastoral metaphor and apocalyptic metaphor which effectively brings out the crisis. He creates a beautiful picture of the pastoral life in Tambapur which existed earlier where the quality of life was good. We learn how there was "job security and the environment was clean" (4). The mention of an environment in the purest form evokes nostalgia for the lost life/nature. In the episode describing the previous city, he describes how there was an equilibrium in social, economical and environmental aspects. There were proper sanitation, maintenance and medical facilities. Most importantly, the people were happy and content, hardly in a mood to complain. Through the Panel 1 on page 4, he emphasises the simplicity and beauty of the daily lives of this city. The image of the three similar houses with one tree in front of each house followed by an image of children waving at their father off to work speak for the same.

Banerjee employs apocalyptic metaphor in order to describe the picture of "disintegration of the township" (10) which all began with takeover by a private company which aimed solely at profit, profit and profit. The city soon became synonymous with disequilibrium/ discrimination in social, economical and environmental terms. The structural violence triggered by neoliberalism attitude of the company manifests itself in the violation of the environment, employees welfare, medical facilities and so on. The first Panel on page. 10 studied in contrast with the first Panel on page. 4 brings out the drastic change in surroundings, where the former one portrays simple houses with one tree facing each of them and the latter one portrays disintegrated houses with absence of trees. This stark contrast between the two images emphasise the sad shift from a simple and pleasant life to an artificial and uncertain life. Banerjee specifically illustrates the destruction of nature through the process of mining for "it is a thirsty business" (11). Here, the term thirsty refers to the insatiable greed of humans for profit making at the cost of anything, even life. The water sources are considerably polluted leaving it unfit for human use. We are explicitly told how many rivers have dried up and a considerable sum of some have turned into a wasteland. The waste present in the water bodies have reached the tipping point that the water filtration plant has collapsed. The following lines underscore the gravity of the crisis: "The water had become toxic, leading to terrible diseases. The water table fell drastically, slimy ponds emerged everywhere" (11). The image of two individuals sitting on the bank of an almost drained river on page 11 illustrates the precarious survival of humans who literally struggle to get water for basic needs. Not only is this but also there routine news of industrial accidents and employees fired from their jobs. The inhabitants of the city are affected by the kind of displacement which Nixon refers to as "the loss of the land and resources beneath (people), a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (19). The imagery of humans walking through a dark landscape detached from nature is visually evoked by Banerjee in panel (Figure 5) on page. 12 of a lone individual walking alone in an altered landscape with a last tree in the background about to disappear. What Banerjee tries to convey is the imminent ecological destruction in the cities that has already been triggered by privatisation policies aiming only at profit, and can reach the tipping point anytime.

Through the experience of one of the fired workers named Girish, we witness an imminent apocalyptic future not only in Tambapur but also in other cities like Delhi. The image of an individual hopelessly looking at a half dead tap unable to provide enough water but only sound prepares us for the water wars in Delhi. Delhi is explored as a space synonymous with all kinds of injustice be it social, economical or environmental. The most dystopian aspect comes from the tough human survival in the form of water wars waged among the inhabitants on a daily basis. Various verbal and verbal imageries are dedicated towards an exploration of the gravity of the issue particularly the way people focus solely on getting a decent amount of water as their daily "ritual" (14). Not only this but also the news of water theft is reported on a daily basis. The build up towards the climax initiates when Girish is employed by a Delhi businessman named Rastogi to drill into the earth's surface with a hope to discover "the mother of all the rivers, the mythical Saraswati" (17) to diminish the water crisis. His observations through the journey brings to fore the cause of this water crisis which is not an outcome of any natural condition but entirely "socially and politically produced" (Boast 10). In other words, it comes out as an outcome of human's tendency of controlling/ privatizing a natural resource for maximizing profit. It comes to the fore through the character of Rastogi who is depicted as one of the water mafias and sells water at exorbitant prices only to private industries, hotels excluding a large section of people mainly the middle and the poor class. Not surprisingly, the water resource has been greatly affected both in terms of quality (sublimity) as well as quantity. An egregious instance of decadent sublime of nature comes up in the scene where a swimmer struggles to dive in the river. Four panels are dedicated to the scene which illustrates how the river is so overwhelmed with sewage and waste that the diver is unable to even dive into it forget swimming. In the place of a beautiful river brimming with clean water all we see is a river "sad, sluggish and thick with industrial effluents" (59). The decadent sublime here effectively speaks for the consistent pollution of the river by humans for selfish purposes.

The dystopian critique broadens through Banerjee's detailed exposure of the concept of 'Short termism" (54) or the short

term policies aimed at short term outcomes at the expense of long term interests. Many verbal and visual imageries are dedicated towards exploration of this multifaceted concept as the main culprit behind this slow violence not only on nature but also on society. Water racism fictionalised in the text is one of the after effects of such policies which fail to be either socially or sustainably vibrant. Short termism refers to takeover of the agricultural land for industrial work and displacement of settled communities by dam to produce "unjustifiably low amounts of electricity" (56). In episode describing about such policies, Professor Satyavadi discusses with Varun about one of his projects of a steel factory which has no systematic plan to prevent pollution of fragile rivers, coastal erosion or the extinction of several endangered species. When the villagers protested against the encroachment, they were beaten as well as jailed for creating nuisance/unwanted noise. Such a mass displacement of the people and unemployment repeated itself in the hydel (Megadam) project in Uttarakhand with no redressal of the job losses. The accompanying images/panels capture the destruction of the community and the environment. Panel (Fig. 2) on page no. 80 shows an image of people huddled together like woods upon a small tract of land encircled by flood waters as they await settlement. What Banerjee tries to emphasise is the "voicelessness" (Madan 9) of the poor people like Girish and the environment/nature constantly suffering the brunt of such India's neoliberal policies implemented in the name of progress/development. Gadgil and Guha call it "environmentalism of the poor" which refers to misery of poor people due to such policies. In other words, Banerjee highlights the "impact of India's turn towards neoliberalism since the economic reforms of the 1990s" (Madan 4). The critique is mainly pointed at the unsustainable approach of these short term policies which prefers/think only about maximizing profit.

Banerjee ends the text with a hopeful vision of water democracy, even though it relies upon established institutions for its execution. A social movement fails Rastogi's aim to seize and privatise the newly discovered water resource. Rastogi is arrested and a new program is established to ensure equitable distribution of water. The ending implies how this social awareness and movements may prevent Delhi from transforming into another Gurgaon.

Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, we can conclude that All Quiet in Vikaspuri is one of the masterpieces of climate fiction. It vividly portrays the fragility of nature which we always take for granted. At the heart of the text lies the chilling message that nature is not always so green but can be toxic, unable to provide life to us if exploited. Banerjee tries to instil an ecological awareness that in the name of development our actions have initiated a chain of eco catastrophes/ environmental crisis. Though beginning the text as an exploration of the water crisis, he links it to a larger picture of "displacement, migration. Corporate greed and environmental catastrophe" (Mandhwani 127). Moreover, this precariousness or toxicity of nature will always be equivalent to the toxic or precarious nature of human life effectively illustrated in the text. Lastly, he also urges the readers to use natural resources ecologically.

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