

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

PREVENTION OF THE GREAT DERANGEMENT: THE IMPACT AND ECOCRITICAL VALUE OF ROHAN CHAKRAVARTY'S 'PUGMARKS AND CARBON FOOTPRINTS'

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Article info

Article Received:18/08/2023

Article Accepted:27/09/2023

Published online:30/09/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.3.267](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.3.267)

Abstract

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Earth's temperature will most likely rise at least by 1.5 degrees Celsius between 2021-2040. It also revealed that the sea levels are rising more rapidly than estimated. It is certain that unless we take drastic and immediate actions, we are heading towards a grim future. Even though the world is literally and gradually burning around us, it is not covered by the media as frequently as it should. Amitav Ghosh accurately points out that art and literature are unable to represent the severity of climate change, and that we are yet to have a serious fictional novel exclusively about environmental damage and change. This paper illustrates the significance and efficiency of *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprint* by Rohan Chakravarty as an ecocritical comic. It also interprets the comic as a response to Ghosh's observation in his work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The paper highlights how an ecocritical comic is uniquely equipped to transcend temporal and geographical constraints and is able to educate and sensitize its readers about the colossal and attritional impact of global warming without overwhelming them. It analyzes the ecocritical value of Chakravarty's book in detail and calls for academic attention to the comic as a significant literary genre that reflects climate crisis and environmental deterioration and, in the process, motivates readers for change.

Introduction

Art not only reflects life but also impacts and influences it. Literature, just like any art-form has not only represented and constituted life, but has also contributed to significant behavioral and societal changes with respect to gender, race, and class. For instance, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* not only accurately foretells the ordeal of women in a religiously extremist society, but also sparked crucial debates on women's reproductive rights and control on their bodies.

Similarly, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson effectively conveyed a severe warning about pesticide poisoning. Literary texts such as *Native Son* by Richard Wright (1940), *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960), *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982), *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai (2013) and many others have caused crucial and impactful social and behavioral changes.

There is no iota of doubt that global warming and climate changes are happening, and that we need to take immediate and drastic measures to

mitigate the greenhouse emissions. Our actions today will decide our future and life on Earth. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its Synthesis Report based on the Sixth Assessment Report (AR 6) on 20th March 2023. It presented terrifying information about climate change and its inevitable and pervasive impact throughout the globe. The key findings of the report were:

- Human activities have “unequivocally” contributed to global warming primarily through the emissions of greenhouse gasses such as Carbon dioxide, Methane, Nitrous oxide, etc.
- The greenhouse gas emissions have perpetually increased because of the callous use of unsustainable energy, and reckless consumption patterns and lifestyle. The global surface temperature is 1.1°C higher in 2011-2020 than it was in 1850-1900.
- Communities that are the most vulnerable and have the least contribution to climate change and environmental degradation are the ones that are most adversely impacted.
- Despite the continuously growing policies and laws aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it is suggested that warming would exceed the 1.5°C mark within the 21st century and it is going to be extremely difficult to keep it below 2°C.
- As global warming continues to increase, we are heading for a bleak future. The environmental risks and long term impacts of global warming are higher than assessed in the fifth IPCC Assessment Report.
- With every rising degree of global temperature, climatic and non-climatic risks will inevitably interact with each other and will become extremely complex and hard to handle.
- As the environment continues to deteriorate, it will become increasingly

challenging to implement the options that are easily feasible at present.

- Limiting the carbon emissions within this decade will significantly determine if we will be able to contain global warming within the 1.5°C or 2°C mark
- The perpetual climate change and environmental deterioration is a severe risk to all forms of life. The window to secure a habitable future is rapidly closing. Our actions in this decade are going to determine our near and distant future.

As we continue to cause environmental deterioration, and as pollution and global warming become critical threats to our survival, artists too have begun to represent human callousness towards nature. This paper assesses Rohan Chakravarty's *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprints* as an effective ecocritical work that not only impactfully and compellingly forces us to face the harsh reality of environmental deterioration, but also brings the readers closer to wildlife, environment and its conservation.

Amitav Ghosh very acutely observes in *The Great Derangement* :

“In a substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York and Bangkok uninhabitable, when readers and museumgoers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look first, and most urgently for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they -- what can they -- do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? Quite possibly then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement.” (Ghosh 15)

Chakravarty's work is an impactful and significant step towards not only depicting a rapidly altering and deteriorating world, but also holding us accountable for it. Being an ecocritical comic, it

treats environmental exploitation non-didactically but never fails to reveal how much destruction we have and still continue to cause to the environment, natural resources and the wildlife. There are certain factors that make Chakravarty's work an extremely profound ecocritical and eco sensitive literary work.

Comic as a significant ecocritical and eco-sensitive tool

Scott Mccloud defines comics as the "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." (p 9). Comics have not been as seriously and rigorously analyzed as other established literary genres such as novels, poetry, and drama. However, this lack of academic attention to the innovative literary genre must not lead us to undermine its efficiency in depicting environmental distress, global warming and wildlife declination. It is an ideal genre to raise ecological awareness.

Even though climate activists, scientists and researchers have constantly raised alarms about the ongoing global warming, this urgency does not reflect as seriously and frequently in serious fiction. This is not due to the absence of awareness among writers. The traditional novel is constrained by certain limitations that hinder its ability to portray environmental degradation accurately. In contrast to fiction, the comic has no such limitations. There are certain aspects that make non-fictional comics an excellent ecocritical medium.

1. Comics have the unique ability to effortlessly collate and overlay the past, present and the future. The slow violence of climate change is extremely widespread and attritional that spans decades and transcends geographical boundaries. Being a hybrid of both pictorial and textual elements, the comic is particularly equipped to portray the slow, global degradation of our planet that detrimentally impacts generations. The compilation of diverse illustrations, accompanied by factual information that is presented through satirical commentary and dialogue, addresses the issue of

collective anthropogenic indifference toward the planet, rendering *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprints* a significant ecocritical work.

2. The constant alarm and unrest about climate change and impending doom often results in counterproductive compassion fatigue. It is extremely probable that as natural disasters, wildlife extinction, and food and water crises become more severe, the readers would likely avoid any serious fiction about climate and environmental deterioration and would prefer an escape. An ecocritical comic strikes a perfect balance between thought provoking sharp humor and addressing significant but unpalatable truths about global warming, wildlife exploitation and extinction, and loss of fragile ecosystems and natural habitats. The sarcastic and humorous presentation of grim environmental news effectively prevents compassion fatigue among the readers and raises crucial awareness without overwhelming them.
3. Being a non-fictional comic, *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprints* makes dense information simple, retainable and comprehensible. Every single page in the comic comprises a lot of layered information. For instance, a single illustration in figure 3 consists of multiple data points.
 - I. Chakravarty updates the readers about the 29 species of Indian freshwater turtles and tortoises out of which 26 are already enlisted in the red list of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).
 - II. It also includes the names of various turtles and tortoises - we are introduced to the Indian Star Tortoise, Asian Giant Softshell, Indian Eyed Turtle, Red-Crowned Roofed Turtle, and the Keeled Box Turtle.

III. The illustration informs us about the factors the anthropogenic activities that are impacting each species and driving them near extinction. We come to know that the Indian Star Tortoise is exploited by illegal pet trade; the Asian Giant Softshell is vulnerable to poaching and habitat loss; and the Red-Crowned Roofed Turtle has lost its natural habitat due to sand mining and destruction of river banks.

The comic is a spectacular amalgamation of digestible scientific data about climate change and entertainment. A reader, irrespective of their age, enjoys the cartoons, learns about the environment and at least begins to comprehend the gravity and severity of the state of our natural world without becoming overwhelmed. Imparting such scientific information to the reader without becoming tedious and instructive is something that the conventional literary genres have yet to achieve. As the world continues to slowly but surely burn around us, climate degradation demands urgent, better, and effective representation. The comic accommodates it all. Thus, literary scholarship needs to direct dedicated attention towards this indispensable ecocritical medium.

Impactful Depiction of Environmental Damage and Slow Violence.

Rob Nixon defines the term 'slow violence' in his *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*:

"By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. ... Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively." (Nixon 2)

Chakravarty's illustrations compiled in *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprints* are a significant attempt to depict slow violence. Throughout the comic, the readers come across various instances that expose the decades long climate degradation and its consequences.

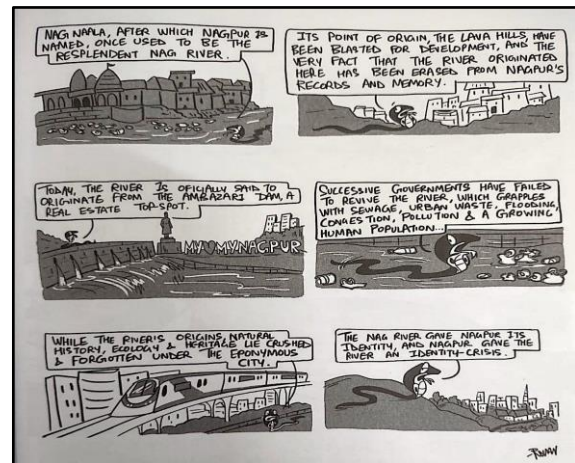


Figure 1: What was once a thriving river that gave the Nagpur city its name, is now reduced to sewage ridden polluted sludge. (Chakravarty 21)

The reduction of a pristine river with a diverse ecosystem to a body of silt and sewage is one of the most telling evidence of slow violence nature and environmental deterioration over a vast period of time. The spectacled cobra or Nag narrates the story of a once mighty river that originated from the lava hills. He laments and mourns the death of the river and its complete erasure from history and eventually from people's memory. This highlights how slow violence in climate change is not only difficult to detect until it's too late, but is also subject to being removed or completely escaping people's memories.

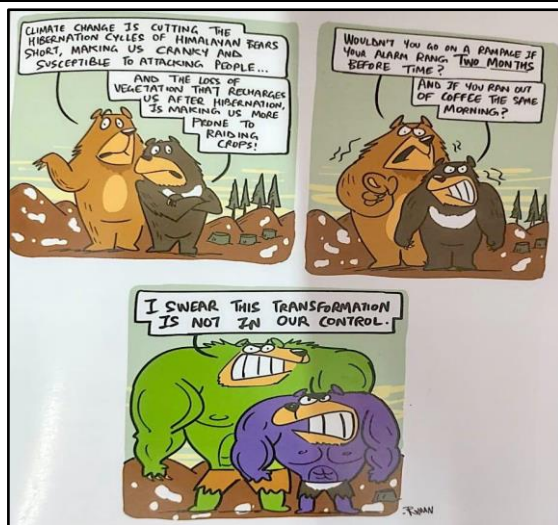


Figure 2: The impact of climate change on the Himalayan Bears.

In the above illustration Chakravarty draws the attention to the impact of climate change on the Himalayan Bears. The reduction in the hibernating cycles of the bears is a telling evidence of slow but ongoing, perpetual climate change that impacts the wildlife in ways that are rarely talked about in the media. Through the above figure, we realize the fragility of the natural environment and how climate change offsets crucial timers and impacts the natural wildlife that is completely dependent on it. While the impact of a warming planet on humans is often discussed and addressed, this figure shifts the attention to its impact on wildlife that is exponentially more vulnerable to a rapidly degrading environment. The Himalayan Bears directly ask the reader about how they would react and behave if they were sleep and caffeine deprived. This comparison effectively helps the readers to begin to imagine and comprehend the plight of animals who are being robbed of the safety of their homes, food and sense of comfort.

Throughout the book, there are several comics that reveal a degrading natural environment and declining wildlife. We come across the endangered ecosystems of the Myristica swamps in the Western Ghats, declining population of sharks, pangolin, and even the reported extinction of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker. These are the tell-tale signs of anthropogenic slow violence against wildlife and its natural habitat.

Anthropomorphism for Educating and Sensitizing about wildlife, and environmental exploitation and deterioration.

Anthropomorphism refers to “the representation of Gods, or nature, or non-human animals, as having human form, or as having human thoughts and intentions.” Throughout *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprints*, the animals vocally express their disappointment and annoyance about their habitats getting vandalized and hold political leaders, organizations, and the general public accountable. Being a comic, Chakravarty’s work is in a unique position to inform and educate the readers about wildlife and its natural habitat without becoming tedious. The animals in the comic are not just stock characters. They possess a sharp witty personality and never hold back from exposing how the callousness of humans costs them their lives and habitat and brings them to the verge of extinction.

What makes *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprints* a significant ecocritical work is its use of Anthropomorphism to educate and sensitize the readers about wildlife exploitation. Majority of the educated urban population is becoming increasingly detached from wildlife. Additionally, the rapid decline in wildlife population due to anthropogenic activities rarely constitutes major news headlines. This makes the alarming and critical occasion of the endangerment of a wildlife species even more inaccessible to the common reader. It is difficult to act for or sympathize with something that one does not know exists in the first place. Chakravarty ensures that wildlife declination is not reduced to mere momentary news. Through anthropomorphism, the animals in his comic come alive and register their strong and reactive presence. They introduce themselves, their lifestyles and habitats, comment sarcastically, plead, accuse, ask questions, crack jokes, and even express their gratitude. Most importantly, the animals *expect* and *demand* empathy and basic human decency from us that effectively makes us abashed and conscious of our past and present actions.

The comic very effectively forces us to acknowledge that Earth, with its diverse and rich natural resources, does not belong exclusively to us.

We share this home with multifarious wildlife that is getting annihilated due to our reckless and selfish activities. The image below is a telling example of the efficacy of anthropomorphism in both educating and sensitizing the readers about wildlife.

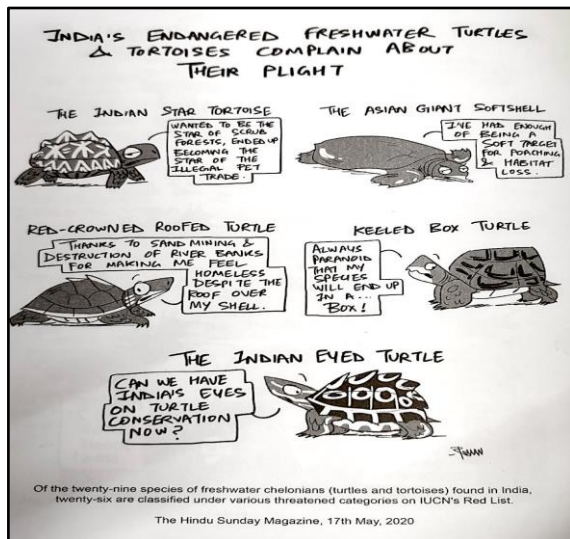


Image 3: India's Endangered Freshwater Turtles and Tortoises complain about their Plight (Chakravarty 8)

In the above comic strip, Chakravarty employs anthropomorphism to sensitize us towards the plight of the freshwater turtles and tortoises. The Indian Eyed Turtle, Keeled Box Turtle, Red Crowned Roof Turtle, and the Indian Star Tortoise are personified and they humorously and sarcastically highlight how they are on the brink of extinction due to varied human activities such as the illegal pet trade, poaching, sand mining, destruction of river bank, etc.

The language used in the comic panels further humanizes the vulnerable chelonians. When the Red-Crowned Roofed Turtle talks about becoming homeless due to mining and reckless destruction of river banks, the readers cannot escape the sense of accountability and responsibility. If someone vandalized the home of another human, or harmed them in any way, they would not only face legal consequences but may also be ostracized from society. Through anthropomorphism, we are compelled to acknowledge that we have and continue to vandalize the natural habitats of vulnerable wildlife that are not effectively protected by law.

By anthropomorphising the above Indian freshwater turtles and tortoises, the readers are introduced to critical wildlife that is teetering on the edge of extinction, and is listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature or IUCN's Red List. It is unlikely for genres like novels, poetry, or drama to be as impactful and deft at educating and entertaining simultaneously.

The figure below is another example where Chakravarty's use of anthropomorphism in the comic sensitizes the readers about the distress caused to wildlife and their fragile habitats on the pretext of development.

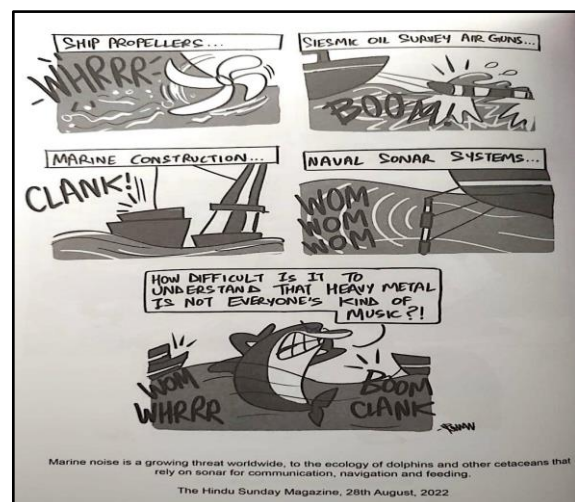


Image 4: Dolphins expressing their dislike of the constant noise pollution contributed by various human industrial activities. (Chakravarty 168)

The above illustration is an excellent instance where dolphins react and respond to the rampant and callous industrial marine activities. To the dolphins and other animals who rely on sonar for their basic survival activities like communicating, feeding and navigating, this perpetual noise pollution is distressing and debilitating, and poses a serious threat to their existence. Chakravarty very effectively and humorously compares the distressing marine industrial noises to metal music. The Dolphin is astounded and annoyed at the complete disregard of their safety and comfort by humans. The readers are immediately educated about the impact of noise pollution caused by marine industrial activities on marine wildlife and its habitat. At the same time, they are amused by the witty comparison between

the drilling and propelling noises and heavy metal music.

Anthropomorphism: a resemblance to Strategic Essentialism

The concept of strategic essentialism was first introduced by the renowned postcolonial and post-structuralist thinker Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak during an interview with Elizabeth Gross. Strategic essentialism temporarily and strategically employed essentialism to confer a consolidated presence or agency to the disenfranchised. Rohan Chakravarty’s anthropomorphization of animals and the environment throughout the comic has a strong resemblance to the use of strategic essentialism. Humanizing the animal kingdom by attributing human speech, culture and a sharp witty personality, Chakravarty attempts to give them the means to advocate for themselves. Once the animals begin to speak and criticize us through their sharp, dry humor and sardonic commentary, we are forced to acknowledge our abysmal and selfish attitude towards nature and environment. The comic successfully asks: would we burn down the homes of fellow humans as ruthlessly as we destroy the ecosystems inhabited by various living beings? Thus, anthropomorphism in some ways becomes a strategic essentialist tool that provides the vulnerable and an otherwise voiceless wildlife, a medium to react and respond to the perpetual anthropogenic atrocities perpetrated upon them and their fragile habitats.

Holding Politicians, Media and Powerful Organizations accountable

Politicians and political organizations, and media are equipped to cause impactful environment changes that might improve our current and future living conditions. Unfortunately, most politicians and political organizations have and still continue to appallingly fail in taking any considerable measure at protecting or improving the rapidly deteriorating natural environment. What is even more concerning is that wildlife exploitation and declination, and threatening impacts of climate change rarely get the urgent and immediate media coverage that they deserve.

Regarding this phenomenon, Nixon insightfully observes

“Politicians routinely adopt a “last in, first out” stance toward environmental issues, admitting them when times are flush, dumping them as soon as times get tight. Because preventive or remedial environmental legislation typically targets slow violence, it cannot deliver dependable electoral cycle results, even though those results may ultimately be life saving. ... Many politicians-- and indeed many voters-- routinely treat environmental action as critical yet not urgent. ...

How can leaders be goaded to avert catastrophe when the political rewards of their actions will not accrue to them but will be reaped on someone else’s watch decades, even centuries from now? How can environmental activists and storytellers work to counter the potent political corporate, and even scientific forces invested in immediate self-interest.” (p 9)

Chakravarty’s *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprints* is a compelling effort in this direction. Throughout the comic, there are several accurate illustrations that highlight the governmental apathy towards climate change and wildlife exploitation. They expose and hold the powerful responsible and accountable. Some of them are given below.



Figure 5: Apathy and indifference of the Himachal government and the HPPCL (Himachal Pradesh Power Corporation) towards the fragile regional ecosystem and people’s safety (p 82)

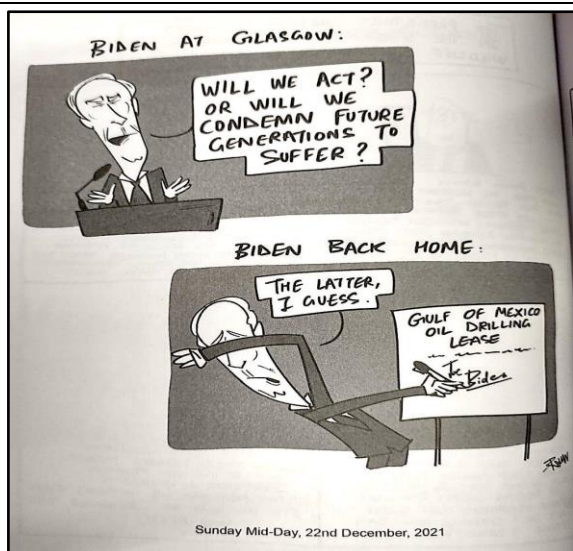


Figure 6: The U.S President Joe Biden delivers a speech at the COP 26 and but then also signs the lease for the Gulf of Mexico Oil Drilling (p 96)

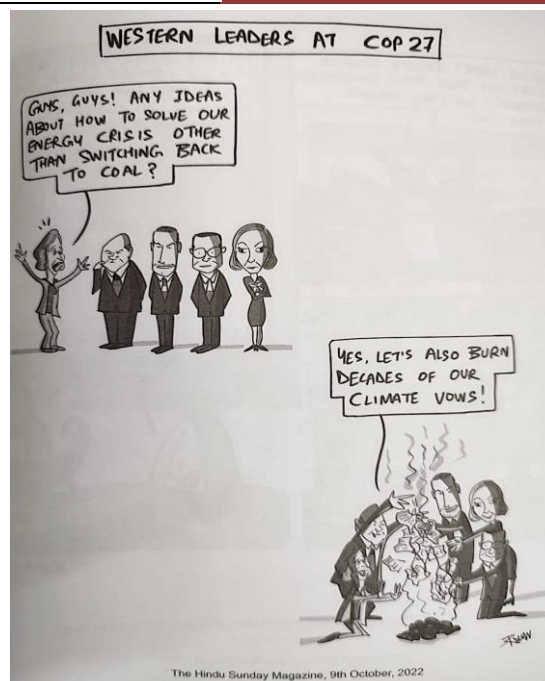


Figure 8: Criticism of Western Leaders at COP 27 (p 177)



Figure 7: The Indian Government completely ignores the environmental consequences while discussing Palm Oil expansion in the North-East and the Andamans. (p 73)

All the illustrations above fearlessly highlight and mordantly remark on the deliberate environmental negligence and indifference exhibited by the governments and other powerful organizations.

Impact of Climate change: Depicted disparities

Besides uncovering the environmental negligence and indifference often exhibited by the rich and the powerful, Chakravarty's *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprint* highlights the bleak and severe disparities between the impact of climate change on the rich and that on the poor. While global warming will inevitably impact us all, it is bound to impact the poor exponentially more than the powerful and rich, who contribute to most of the damage. The figures below lay bare the obscene dichotomy and disparity between the current impact of climate change on the poor and how it impacts the privileged.

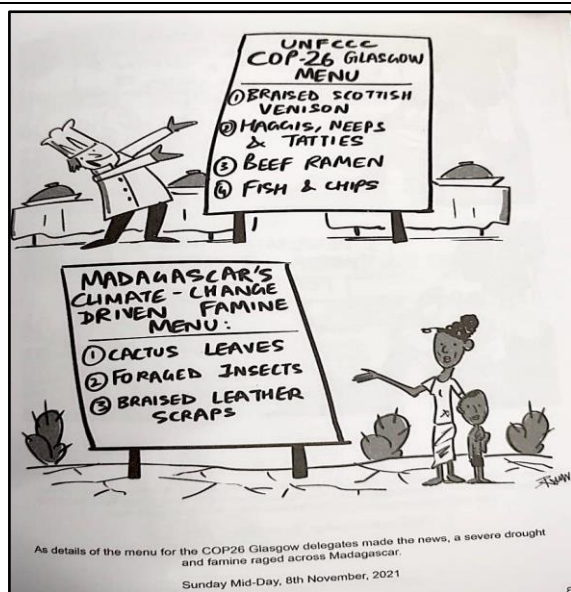


Figure 8: The UNFCCC COP-26 Glasgow Menu vs Madagascar’s climate-change driven famine menu (Chakravarty 85)

The above illustration draws a stark contrast between the menu of the 26th annual United Nations climate change Conference of the Parties or COP-26 and the bare minimal food that the people of Madagascar were forced to survive on due to the severe and unforgiving drought and famine. This is an extremely telling comic that highlights the irony of the lavish, resource intensive food menu with a substantial carbon footprint belonging to an international governing body for climate change. Besides critically commenting on a powerful and international body for climate change, Chakravarty imparts another important fact reflected in Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*: “...it is those people lacking resources who are the principal casualties of slow violence.” While the powerful and affluent attendants of the COP-26 enjoy a lavish meal, far removed from the harsh realities of climate change, it is the poor population of Madagascar that is forced to endure ruthless famine and drought caused by climate change.



Figure 9: Impact of climate change on different people (Chakravarty p 26)

Figure 9 is an excellent depiction of extreme polarities between the privileged urban elites, industrialists, and politicians, and the marginal individuals who live in constant poverty and completely rely on natural resources for their sustenance. It is a reminder that while most of us continue to live comfortable lives, there is a huge population that has either already suffered from or is on the brink of displacement, homelessness, food insecurity and even death.

Using Pop-Culture references to educate about the Wildlife and the environment.

A majority of the population today is completely detached from the natural world. We are living in highrise societies where we can order food and every basic amenity with a single click, without ever setting foot in a farm. Nature and wildlife are continuously getting reduced to something we hope to enjoy during vacations. This detachment from our natural environment results in increased apathy and indifference towards climate degradation and biodiversity.

Pugmarks and Carbon Footprints attempts to unearth and re-establish the deep connection and

interdependency that humans share with the animal kingdom. The book is never monotonous, tedious or instructive. Instead, the readers are introduced to diverse wildlife in the most relatable pop-cultural way that is indelibly registered in their minds.

This is a comic where the Malabar Whistling Thrush has a double masters in Carnatic music; Indian legendary playback singer Mohammad Rafi is compared to a magpie robin; a bat-mom is compared to the superhero batman; the pitcher plant has a skincare routine; shapes of various butterflies are compared to human balding patterns; dung is sacred in the culture of dung beetles; leeches have strong ethical principles; bees have an M.Pharm degree; the cleaner wrasse talks about skin care; the Indian Dugong does a cameo in the Indian movie *Ponniyin Selvan 2*, the cheetah asks for suggestions from striped hyena who is a grassland veteran; a sloth is in a hair conditioner commercial; the Western Tragopan has tinder and LinkedIn profiles; a female tiger wears a red lipstick; animals skip romantic dates; and a polar bear hopes that the Hollywood actor Will Smith slaps the media instead of the comic Chris Rock for not reporting the climate change as aggressively as they cover the Oscars. Such relatable and humorous depictions of animals help the readers associate with them and know about them in ways they might not learn through any other medium.

Although Chakravarty does not discount the importance of taxonomy, he points out how it is beyond the comprehension and grasp of a common man. This complex scientific jargon further alienates the animal kingdom from humans and confines it to a space exclusively for scientists, researchers or a few passionate artists. The cartoons in *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprints* attempt to bring animals and their homes closer to us. The comic introduces us to unique and interesting animals we would have otherwise never known or remembered. Through the comic, we meet the yellow-throated marten; know about the distinction between a Himalayan and a Chinese Red Panda; learn about various animals inhabiting under the earth; understand the importance of grasslands as crucial habitats; get to know about all the Indian birds that have been uplisted on the IUCN Red list; and learn that there

are only ten Vaquita Porpoises left. These are only a few examples from the plethora of environmental and wildlife facts that are included in the book. The comic not only introduces the readers about the animal kingdom captivately and playfully, but also helps them retain the information through various pop-cultural references and comparisons. This is a remarkable way to make wildlife more accessible and relatable to the human-readers. The more we become aware about the rich and diverse wildlife that cohabits with us, and its vulnerability to climate change, the more sensitive and conscious we become. This might even lead to positive behavioral and lifestyle changes.

Conclusion

Rohan Chakravarty's *Pugmarks and Carbon Footprints* is one of the most impactful literary and artistic initiatives that helps us learn about the planet and expose the stark and terrifying realities of rapid environmental and wildlife deterioration. Through the illustrations about Hump-nosed Pit Viper, Taita African Caecilian, Mud Dauber, Narcondam shrew, Sea Pangolin, Ninja Lanternshark, Epomis Beetle and many others, we realize just how diverse and rich our planet is. Through the comic, we explore various important ecosystems, natural habitats, and realize how vulnerable they are to complete destruction. When the future generations will turn to art and literature for hints and signs for an altered world, they will not fail to find a significant ecocritical work that not only warned the readers about the impending climatic catastrophe but also attempted to bring them closer to wildlife and nature. They will not fail to find a work that has the courage to expose the shameful apathy of the rich and powerful towards the natural world. Thus, Chakravarty's comic marks a significant step in preventing an era from being remembered and known as the era of Great Derangement.

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