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VISUAL POLLUTION AND ECO-DYSTOPIA: A STUDY OF BILLBOARDS AND SIGNS IN BHARATPUR METROPOLITAN CITY

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to investigate the role of billboards and signs in creating visual pollution and ultimately in destroying the natural environment. Taking the biocentric position I have analysed billboards to prove that they create visual pollution; that they have adverse effect on natural environment and that they reinforce anthropocentric world view. This study is a textual study carried out on the basis of my own observation and evidence available in academic studies of outdoor advertising. The advertisements as texts have been photographed purposively and sorted out for the analysis. The analysis shows that outdoor advertisements like billboards and signs play significant role in creating visual pollution. In the name of disseminating certain messages, they destroy natural environment and disturb the harmony among the species of the earth. They also reinforce anthropocentric world view, ultimately leading to eco-dystopia.

KEY WORDS: billboard, biocentrism, anthropocentrism, visual pollution, eco-dystopia.

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the human life on earth can be traced back to the time three million years ago in Eastern Africa from where they spread in Europe, Asia, Australia and North America (Chamley 1). Man started to occupy and exploit the earth's environment since their early appearance on earth. The environmental degradation is rapidly intensifying in the successive phases of human civilization. When industrial revolution in the 19th century brought urbanization with it, the encroachment of earth and nature increased in a massive scale. Most dangerously a hierarchy has been established between human and non-human. The anthropocentric view of the world puts humanity at the centre and the non-human, including nature, is merely to be consumed by men. "Marxism" for example, as Richard Kerrige writes "is often regarded as a set of anti-environmentalist

philosophy, because of its confident emphasis on nature as a set of restraining conditions to be overcome by technological progress..." (531). Marxism in this sense emphasizes on anthropocentric attitude to the world which actually got its hold from the fifteenth century when, as Stephen Mosley states:

Economic expansion, technological innovation, population growth and increasing urbanization have seen humans transform the earth to an unprecedented degree. Overseas colonialism, especially the advance of European empires after 1492, reordered the world's ecology. (113)

Anthropocentric thought is countered by what is called biocentric or ecocentric view of the world. This world view particularly "came into prominent notice after Darwin and Einstein with the emphasis that we cannot separate ourselves from

where we exist" (Khanal 144). The advocates of this view see the whole existence as a single unit because "we cannot see the world from outside our own situation (Westling 26).

Ecological concern as an agenda crept into literary and cultural study only after 1970s. The need for this discipline has been popularized by the biocentrists because the consumption and exploitation of the natural beauty has been increasing at an alarming rate. The biocentrists take, to use Glotfelty's term, "an earth-centered approach" (xvii) to study literary and cultural artifacts.

Taking a biocentric position, I propose to study the role of outdoor advertisements, particularly the billboards and signs, of Bharatpur Metropolitan City, in the destruction of natural world. I here attempt to discover the darker side of the commercial world in which outdoor advertisements play significant roles. I propose to investigate how outdoor advertisement corrupts the natural world and how it is going to have penetrating effects not only on the 'human' but also on the 'none-human' existence. .

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ecocritical study of cultural artifacts as such began from the time when the word "ecocriticism was possibly first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism'" (Glotfelty xx). Eco critical study or "ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture" (Glotfelty xix). Without a clear distinction between nature and culture, without understanding the relationship between human non-human we cannot understand and save the 'natural world'. By 'natural world' I mean, the co-existence of the living and the non- living organisms. William Rueckert makes a comment on anthropocentric world perception that "man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanizes, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing (113). Anthropocentrism as human flaw has ruined the beautiful globe. It creates hierarchy between 'human' and 'none-human' and considers the 'non- human' made for the human.

This anthropocentric view of the world has become more destructive in the present time of consumer cultural, especially with process of massive urbanization and mass production of consumable goods. Growing urbanization and development of mass media "marks another stage of human encroachment of the earth. The modification of earth's natural look and natural phenomena like soil, rock, lakes, river, forest etc. for construction works has not only destroyed the environment but also deformed the natural beauty" (Khanal 141). One of the modern factors responsible for the deterioration of natural world is prolific use of outdoor advertisements, particularly billboards. Cat Chien states that before the advent of computers and the internet, television and print publications dominated mental attention within the home space, but billboards were the identified go-to method for outside-the-home, outdoor commercial communication tactics (88). Historically, the first 24 sheet billboard was displayed at the Paris Exposition in 1889 (Cat Chien 88) and since then billboards have been in prolific use in the urban areas.

During my search of relevant literature on billboard in Nepal, I found nothing notable except Michael Baltutis's article "Constructing the new Nepal: Religious Billboards in Nepal's Second People's Movement," in which he has studied how religious and royal billboards were thrown away due to the concept of 'new Nepal' after the Monarchy was abolished in Nepal. Outside Nepal, however, many research works have been carried out on the usefulness of the billboards as a means of informing the customers about the goods and services. Kayoed, for example, finds billboard as a formidable medium of product and service advertisement that is spreading and yielding amazing results (64). The amazing results he refers to is nothing other than high increase in the sale of the product advertised. Charles R Taylor, on the other hand, explores that billboards have amazing quality of giving information to the customers. Rizwan Iqbal and Sana Batool in a similar fashion have studied the impact of billboard advertisement on customer buying behaviour. They found that advertisers are interested in selecting billboards as an advertisement tool because they effectively convey

message to the target people (9). Arch G Woodside similarly establishes the effectiveness of outdoor advertisement and validity of studies on outdoor advertisements effectiveness. B. A. Ogunlade goes one step further in his research to investigate the roles and benefits of billboard advertising. Enumerating the functions of billboards he writes:

Billboards / Signposts are expected to perform such roles as locating users in an environment, providing information on merchandise, labeling of structures, embellishing or enhance beautifying the appearance of an environment as well as protecting the safety of the public ... and to complement the built environment effect. (3)

The value of the concerns and research findings viewed above cannot be denied and minimized. However, I find them all guided by the modern consumer culture, one of the most important capitalist agenda. The connection between commercial advertisement and consumer culture is highlighted by Malik when he states, "Globalization of commodities and cultural flows with a substantial role played by sophisticated advertising spurred consumer culture in late capitalist era" (87). This 'spurring' shapes the consumer behaviour in which "ads do not only sell commodities, they sell fictions, often personal ones, that seduce the customer and invites him to access their realm through the act of consumption" (Dimulescu 509). Corporate houses invite the customers to consume their goods. That is their business. They see a very glorious and utopian world of business and advertisement.

However, this is only one facet of the issue, the brighter one. There is more somber side of this issue: the dystopian side of the outdoor advertisements. A clutter of billboards and signs unevenly assembled at every nook and corner "becomes a part and parcel of the urban life which actually degrades the quality of environment in several subtle yet significant ways" (Jana and De 6). My purpose in this article, therefore, is to investigate the role of outdoor advertisements in general and the billboards and signs, in particular, in creating visual pollution and the corrupting the

serene and natural environment, therewith affecting human life. The guiding principle of this article is that modern urbanization, in the name of creating commercial utopia has ironically created ecological dystopia. My hypotheses, therefore, can be stated as follows:

- a. Billboards and signs create visual pollution.
- b. They have adverse effect on ecology and environment.
- c. They reinforce anthropocentric ideology.

METHODS USED

The area of study in this research is Bharatpur Metropolitan City, Nepal. Because the city area is very large, my observation concentrates on mainly the dense market area and the suburb. This study is basically a textual study carried out on the basis of my own observation and evidence available in academic studies of outdoor advertising. The texts I analyse are snaps taken from different parts of the study area. Because of a small scale study, I have analysed 6 representative photographs to prove my hypotheses. Observation, taking photos, selecting photos, arranging them and analyzing are the major steps taken during the research.

BILLBOARD AND ECO-DYSTOPIA: AN ANALYSIS

Although Media Policy of Nepal government 2012 states that it the government is committed to "ensure safety of the people" perusing VDCs and all Municipalities "to create and implement proper zoning of area where hording board, electronic displays, tower and high raised balloons are not permitted and develop system for preapproval of any construction erection of such construction" (17), the mess of billboards and signs can be visualized at every nook and corners of any urban area of Nepal like Bharatpur. Billboards are the major factors of creating visual pollution, not generally known by the common populace. Water, air, soil, sound pollutions are well known as conventional health hazards but visual pollution is rarely noticed even by the pollution experts. As the consumption culture has grown rapidly, the commercial world has invented newer methods to reach to the customers. Billboards and newly invented electronic billboards are the byproducts of this culture. These kinds of advertising tools are responsible for creating visual pollution and

ultimately ecological degradation. Brule and Young have identified the relationship between environmental degradation, material use, and consumption. They argue, "One central factor of global environmental change is the continued expansion of consumption levels. The relationship between individual consumption and environmental degradation has been well recognized for over half a century" (522) and the consumption culture has a direct link with the advertisements. The equation is this: consumption-production-advertisement-pollution-ecological degradation. Image 1 shows a clear picture of how green vegetation is being



Fig.1. A Photo Taken at Chaubis Kothi

replaced by billboards. Even trees are used to hang signs. Natural greenery has been replaced by artificially colourful designs. The bare unpleasing ground symbolizes man's detachment from green vegetation and a slow process of how ecosystem is being hampered without knowing its long term effects. Man forgets at the time of installing these commercial structures that trees also have lives and that existence of other living organism is contingent upon the green vegetation. If greenery is irreparably damaged like this, sooner or later, human beings are going to face unprecedented threat to the whole living existence. Similarly Fig. 2 presents man's disregard of natural function of a tree. The tree's trunk is covered by the advertisement of a car on all sides. This is a powerful symbol of how technology and commercialization has taken over what Allison Dunlap calls "'natural' harmony among species" (2) because a tree is not only a tree but symbolically a natural world, an empire of many living creatures, which has been fouled by man's thirst of material consumption symbolized by the car.

This kind of industrialization and commercialization has mobilized environmentally damaging practices over recent centuries (Geoff Berry 81). So visually more impairing is the place represented by Fig. 2. Jana and De define visual pollution as "anything that interferes with the

'pretty scenes' and other defacement" (2) and Fig. 3 has nothing pretty but a complete defacement of the place. Most of the space of the building is covered by the unevenly hung billboards and signs. Visual purity is as essential as clean water and pure air for healthy and soothing experience as we feel when we see a green lawn and picturesque landscape. What do the clutter of billboards offer to the beholder? Jana and De think that the effect of exposure to visual pollution is "vast and penetrating" (3).



Fig. 2. A Photo Taken at Astha Chowk



Fig. 3: A Photo Taken at Sangam Road

Regular exposure to them can cause chaotic feelings and loss of the aesthetic sense. Information overload puzzles the beholders and decreases awareness about the outer reality. When a person sees so many things at a time and at a place, one is lost in the visual mirage. The perceiver has no sense of a particular object. Clutter of information creates a loss of the focus and the person finds it pretty difficult to fix the attention. There is no experience other than the bewilderment and psychological confusion. This psychological effect ultimately leads to the loss of the sense of place and placeness. Placeness refers to certain distinct features of a place which can be differentiated from other places. A river as a place refers to a large stream of water having green vegetation on either bank with all kinds of flora and fauna. Fig. 4, for example, presents how the boards alter our sense of a river. The beholder has a visually polluted view of the river. The image of a river set in the mind of the beholder is corrupted by this kind of the view of a river.

Although the messages in the boards are of social campaign and awareness, they perform the same role as the commercial ones in the degradation of naturalness of the environment.



Fig. 4: Photo taken on Narayani river bank

Billboards are abundant not only in the city centers; they have enlarged their empire even in the rural parts of the city. Figure 5 represents the encroachment of large billboards in the arable land. The main function of fertile land is to produce food but the land is not only the means of producing food, it is a whole empire of unicellular living organisms to small insect to rodents to mammals. So the function of the land is invaluable for the whole existence but as we have seen “billboards and other blight could compromise that function significantly” (Vaspe 177). The conversion of the beautiful and natural earth into an ugly clatter of metals and colours signifies man’s irrationality and unwise thirst for material gain. Can we compare the value of the land, now made barren, and the billboard that advertises Ruslan vodka to the human life? No way. What actually happening is that human beings have forgotten what terrible future is being invited in the name of commercial gain.

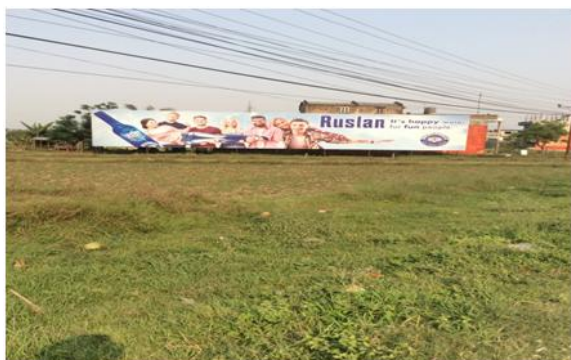


Fig. 5: A Photo Taken in Hinterland of the City.

Commercialism has affected the sense of placeness. The billboards and other signs have devalued the beautiful farm land. Clean natural landscape has been turned into an ugly place. Food

grains have been replaced by unethical alcoholic beverage. This is an extreme case of the destruction of natural idyllic rural beauty. Similar commercialization has been represented by Fig. 6. This is an entry point of a national park. Commercial and other boards have pushed themselves into the green vegetation. Many plants and small creatures must have been destroyed while erecting these boards.

What happens to the visitors’ sense of wilderness when they encounter these artificial signs? “To thrive in a beautiful environment where there is a pleasant mosaic of natural and built forms is a dire urge of our soul and the health of our psyche. Such environment inspires creativity and productivity (Jana and De 13). But the corporate houses are happy with the advertising business that has “taken on a definitive structure as an industry that relies on creativity, glamour and money” (Sharma n.p.). They forget that in the long run humanity is going to pay a lot for this kind of irrational imbalance in the ecosystem. Irrational erection of billboards are what Vespe calls blight that has direct effect on the reduction of property values, destruction of natural and scenic beauty, and degradation of communities (177).



Fig. 6: A Photo Taken at the Entry Point of National Park.

Ogden Nash has captured the damage the billboards have caused to the lovely trees and symbolically to the whole world of nature when he writes:

I think that I shall never see,
A billboard lovely as a tree.
Perhaps, unless the billboards fall,
I'll never see a tree at all (n p).

Nash actually asks the whole humanity to make a choice between billboards or trees, symbolically between anthropocentric or biocentric activities.

The right choice is suggested that the vision of a tree is possible in the fall of billboards.

CONCLUSION

The case is now clear that man's thirst for glamour and money has ruined the natural world. The so called commercial culture or modern civilization has blighted the beautiful nature. The outdoor advertisements, like billboards and other signs, are the major factors of creating visual pollution. Other factors like garbage, entangled electric and cable wires, old buildings, dumped materials, unorganized parking are being corrected time and again. Billboards use, on the other hand, is increasing day by day and every nook and corner of human reach has been visually polluted. Commercial world has given priority to human generated activities in the cost of environmental degradation.

As a result, billboards have great impact on natural world. Anthropocentric crave for wealth has ruined the green world. Particularly in the cities of Nepal a few plants are seen on the road sides but they are either dilapidated or used as sign stand. Greenery for the urbanites means a few flower pots on the rooftop. Public spaces are all occupied by corporate advertisements. This cry for money and material possession ultimately ruins natural environmental beauty. The utopian world of glamour and money the commercial world desires for, ironically leads to eco dystopia, having no natural harmony among species of this globe.

The outdoor advertisements are not obligatory activities of the commercial world. There are other means of disseminating information like, radio, TV, newspaper, social media online portals and so many others. Unorganized heap of outdoor advertisements actually promote anthropocentric ideology, which can no way be justified. Time has now come to think about and to take action against the chronic effect of anthropocentrism. The utopian society man imagines can only be realized when natural harmony is maintained among all species of the world. Man centered ideology and activities ultimately lead to eco dystopia.

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