

SPECIAL SECTION ON ECOCRITICISM

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Water's Societal Ripples: Ecocritical and Geopolitical Analysis of Subhash Vyam's *Water*

Bala Agarwal

Abstract

Subhash Vyam's works reveal undeniable environmental concerns, which indicates his interest in natural artistic methods such as folklore and graphic representations which reflect the pathetic plight of rustic people. It offers a profound visual narrative that transcends traditional artistic boundaries and delves into the realms of eco-criticism and geopolitics. This paper presents a concise analysis of the artist's depiction of water, examining its multifaceted role as a social, environmental, and geopolitical force. It reflects upon the ecological concepts of the novel with geopolitical implications. It endeavours to highlight the struggle of the rural people to assimilate with the political policies imposed by an invading group. It further offers a geographical blending of human and natural ecosystems involving political policies. Through the implication of ecocriticism and geopolitics *Water* presents the importance of the ecological balance between nature and human beings. Interweaving folklore and graphic representation, Vyam's *Water* illustrates ecological issues along with political conflicts and explains the geographical variations and the movements of people in the world from the marginalized point of view. It is more like a warning to those who neglect the promise of nature. He subtly explains the role of mankind in the destruction of nature and elaborates on the environmental and social injustice in the contemporary era through the angst of the rustic people and the aloofness of the elites. The geopolitical dimension of "Water" becomes evident as it highlights the disparities in access to this precious resource.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, geopolitics, folklore, graphic representation

Introduction

“Water, in all its forms, is our most precious resource. It’s the lifeblood of our planet, and its availability or scarcity can shape the course of nations.”

Ban Ki-moon

Eco-critical and geopolitical literature in English has evolved as an important field of literary study, analyzing the relationship between environmental concerns and world politics. This critical examination dives into the evolution, themes, and relevance of eco-critical and geopolitical literature, revealing how it contributes to our knowledge of the complicated link between the environment and geopolitics.

The roots of eco-critical and geopolitical writing may be found in the larger ecological campaign that gained traction over the twentieth century. While environmentalism was concerned with conservation and action, eco-critical and geopolitical literature evolved as a scholarly subject examining environmental concerns through the prism of literature and literary criticism. Eco-criticism may be traced back to the writings of writers such as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, who admired nature’s beauty and raised awareness about environmental issues. Their writings paved the way for literary explorations of environmental issues.

Geopolitical literature, on the other hand, gained prominence during the 20th century as global conflicts and political tensions increased. Writers like George Orwell and Arthur Koestler produced works that reflected the geopolitical anxieties of their time, contributing to the genre’s development. Eco-critical literature investigates a wide range of environmental topics and problems, frequently questioning societal norms and emphasizing the effects of human actions on the natural world. Eco-critical literature often portrays nature as a character with agency (Glotfelty 18) and significance. Authors imbue natural elements with symbolic meaning, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life forms (Glotfelty 18)

Many eco-critical works address issues such as deforestation, pollution, climate change, and species extinction. Authors use their narratives to draw attention to the consequences of environmental

degradation. One of the central themes in eco-critical literature is the examination of the complex relationship between humans and nature. The authors explore how human actions affect the environment and challenge anthropocentric perspectives.

Ecocriticism is one of the modern trends to explore literary work from an ecological angle. Cheryl Glotfelty terms Ecocriticism as:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty18)

Glotfelty adds that “nature per se is not the only focus of eco-critical studies of representation. Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the body” (Glotfelty 23).

Subhash Vyam, a luminary in the world of contemporary Indian art, has transcended boundaries with his remarkable contributions to the revival of Gond art. His captivating works not only resonate with the cultural richness of his native Madhya Pradesh but also carry profound messages about nature, society, and human existence.

Subhash Vyam was born in the Gond-dominated area of Dindori in Madhya Pradesh, India, in 1970. His boyhood was steeped in the Gond people's rich oral traditions, mythology, and creativity. Vyam grew up in an atmosphere that appreciated and celebrated the earth and its inhabitants. This strong connection to the environment and indigenous culture will eventually serve as the foundation for his creative path. Vyam had a natural talent for drawing as a child, frequently sketching on the walls of his rural house with locally obtained materials. Jangarh Singh Shyam, a prominent Gond artist who played a vital role in popularizing Gond art outside tribal tribes, encouraged and taught him. Under Jangarh's tutelage, Vyam's creative talent blossomed, and he began to acquire acclaim for his detailed and evocative works.

In the early 2000s, Vyam's artistry caught the attention of the larger art world, leading to numerous exhibitions in India and abroad. His unique style, characterized by detailed depictions of the

natural world and the seamless blending of traditional and contemporary elements, set him apart as a visionary in the field of Gond art.

Subhash Vyam's masterpiece, "Water," is a testament to his deep ecological consciousness. This artwork, which weaves together elements of nature and human existence, exemplifies the quintessential Gond art style. Vyam's intricate detailing of flowing rivers, aquatic creatures, and human figures tells a story of the interdependence of life on Earth. It serves as a powerful eco-critical statement about the importance of preserving our water resources and biodiversity. The major concern of Vyam's novel is water scarcity, and how it affects people. "Water shortages can lead to conflict as competition grows for diminishing resources, as any scarce resource on which people depend is likely to become political at some point in time" (Anderson 4).

"Did we take more than our due?" (Vyam), by portraying a story around the elixir of water, Indian tribal artist Subhash Vyam explores the idea of sustainability and social justice in his novel *Water*. Through this novel, the author interprets the element of life and humankind's unquestionable relationship with it. With his personal experience, he draws a framework that demonstrates insurmountable affiliation with water and thus reflects moving international connections. The tale is about a small village and the people who reside there. The people in the village have everything available for their needs except one thing and that is water, which darkened their contentment in everything else. Slowly they developed things helpful for gathering water and soon become victims of the injustice of the conurbation. *Water*, which is part folkloric and autobiographical, hoists the geopolitical and ecological queries.

The geopolitical component of the artwork highlights how crucial environmental diplomacy is. "Water" serves as a sad reminder of the necessity for diplomacy and teamwork among states for handling shared water resources effectively in an era where transboundary water concerns necessitate international cooperation. "Thinking about international resource flows and the relations between democratic peace and environmental security suggests that these simple geopolitical frameworks are inadequate to understand

both the processes of political change and environmental degradation” (Dalbey 1999). Geopolitics is something that is directly attached to geographical features of the earth and shows how it works through variables to shape our society.

Subhash Vyam adds an indigenous viewpoint to the geopolitical perspective as a Gond artist. Indigenous populations usually take the most hit from resource extraction and environmental deterioration. The artwork underscores the significance of engaging various voices and viewpoints in global debates and environmental and water policies.

The profound masterwork “Water” offers a platform for eco-critical and geopolitical analysis. Vyam emphasizes the value of water as a life-sustaining force, the vulnerability of ecosystems, and the geopolitical issues surrounding shared resources through elaborate details and symbolism. Vyam’s artwork serves as a potent reminder of the urgent need for group action, diplomacy, and the promotion of indigenous experiences to preserve our planet and guarantee reasonable access to vital necessities like water in a world beset by ecological issues and geopolitical tensions.

Subhash Vyam’s storytelling techniques are distinguished by his ability to seamlessly blend traditional art forms with contemporary themes. He draws inspiration from his cultural roots, primarily the Gond and Bhil art traditions, which are known for their intricate detailing and vibrant colours. By infusing these traditional aesthetics with modern stories, he creates a unique visual language that resonates with a wide audience.

One of the most striking aspects of Subhash Vyam’s narrative techniques is his adept use of symbolism and metaphor. He employs elements from nature, mythology, and everyday life to convey deeper meanings within his artworks. Vyam’s narrative techniques are characterized by vivid and imaginative visuals that captivate the viewer’s imagination. His storytelling prowess is characterized by symbolism, metaphor, and vivid visuals that transport viewers into a realm where art is a language of emotions and ideas.

Herein the novel, the writer uncovers a traditional village that is subjugated by the developments and derelict by human greed.

Expansions and obliteration of environmental resources are two sides of one penny. Here, Vyam raises the question of political chaos due to ecological division and that eventually ends up in a hegemonic setup. When it comes to developments, it serves the interests of upstream who have power. Enlargement is a strategic term that will progress with the needs of those who use it and elevate the question of environmental security in the present scenario importance of environmental security has special concerns over politics, and it often specifies the earth in terms of geopolitical chaos. The environmental sanctuary is incontrovertible from global change. Geopolitics and ecological degradation are the two recurrent themes in this novel and the author portrays how they affect two categories of people who are ecologically and economically different.

Geopolitics can be understood as geographical politics thus it entails that the environment will affect the whole political system. “Geopolitics can be well-defined as geographical politics, that it is the impact of geography on the entire political spectrum” (Ates). The effect of geopolitics can be seen through illustrations such as how authorities make judgments focusing on ecological aspects. Political variations and environmental destructions are intertwined in the vast expanse of geopolitics thus it elucidates that ecological traits are the heart of power relationships in political policies. “There is a fundamental opposition between two global powers and that is Geopolitics, precisely” (Dugin).

Geopolitics helps us to understand the world as a whole and suggests the strategic relationships in it. Here, through ecological scarcity, geopolitics portrays a hegemonic setup and the chaos produced by it. On the other hand, functions based on nature are the major functions in this world that help humankind to understand their role in this universe. When individuals intervene in the environment, nature punishes them through a natural catastrophe. So ecocriticism discloses the mandatory interrelation between natural surroundings and human beings.

People who are at cross-purposes with nature are cynical about mankind and ill-at-ease with themselves. Modern man must reestablish an unbroken link with nature and with life. He must again learn to invoke the energy of growing things and to recognize, as did the ancients in India centuries ago, that one can take from the earth and

the atmosphere only so much as one puts back in them. (Deloughrey and Handley 17)

Eco critical and Geopolitical Implications in Subhash Vyam's *Water*

Water explains the process of diplomacy connected with ecological regulations and vice versa. As the community in this novel grieves from water scarcity, it displays that ecological source scarcity can root political and economic division and further lead to political conflicts. Environmental dilapidation will cause political and social instability and produce inter-state conflicts. Thus here it sooner or later develops politically affected migration and it subsequently disturbs other policies. "I live in a city now, but I come from a small village. I'm an artist, and like many people in my community; I had to move in search of work" (Vyam).

As rural people concentrate more on agriculture, a small calamity can affect them negatively. Inadequate distribution and lack of resources led to an unbalanced growth thus it emboldens individuals who reside there to run away for better openings for their sustainability. This human displacement affects the identity of the community because of their long-term social mingling, kinship, and neighbourhood. Apart from ecological, sociopolitical and economic variables, it will further affect international relations. It will later influence every stratum to move and transform thereby affecting entire movements. "We had heard that life in the city was very different. Everything was available there, and it was not difficult to earn money and live comfortably" (Vyam). When people from one lower stratum migrate to an upstream where they can access everything easily it will raise an undeniable economic division and thus it will lead to a future generation with two opposite perspectives. For the elite's development, they strategically bring highly abled people from inferior strata. Thus these individuals from the village become homeless and destitute and they are the ones who suffer in the name of pseudo-development.

Most of the cities in the world face an unavoidable water shortage in this era. Even though they all are well-established, water scarcity is something that is a major threat to humankind. If water shortage is a threat to a well-established city there is no doubt how it

will affect the other strata. Vyam's village is mostly an agricultural area irrigated by rain and also a small lake a couple of kilometres away. Before the threat of industrialization, the relationship of people to their nature and their respect for it was intrinsic. But slowly a vast change occurred in the community's interactions with natural resources and especially with water. Soon, political policies intervened in their village in the name of profitable developments. As water shortage is a sustainability crisis for them, they are influenced to focus on new policies based on farming and their daily needs with more investments. So primarily they raised a well in their village as a symbol for development. In addition to that slow hand pumps and other signs of progress are indicated in this novel: "Over a while, people came up with simple but useful ways of directing water. They dug small canals, letting the water from the lake flow through their fields. Farming becomes easier" (Vyam). Then another big moment: "I remember when the first well was dug in the village" (Vyam). For their ease, they forgot the pact with nature and progressed another marvellous jiffy for them and Vyam marks in his novel as: "later, another great development came to the village: A hand pump" (Vyam).

Even though it was a boon for the individuals they remained unaware of what was going on there, as they were poor and illiterate they were not able to find out the strategy and crooked mind of the upstream. The power-possessing system has approached these poor people, as most of the resources come from there, not with an eco-friendly aspect but for their political stratagem thus these movements are contemporary. As water scarcity eventually produced these rural areas with unstable authority and human displacement to more developed areas, we can cognize how the geographical features have an emotional impact on the individuals in this world. Accordingly, geopolitics propagates much pertinent as it unites geographical features with how an individual transfers in this universe. *Water* explicitly implies this through the gradual displacement of the author from his origin to the neighbourhood. As the city has more promising situations and more suitable climatic conditions people reach out for these luxuries leaving their legacies. When he moves to the city he becomes aware of the power and political regulations, there he has running water in his flat but it is only available when the tank is full.

On the other hand, people with power enjoyed all the luxuries nearby, they could have those with assurance. The hegemonic setup is implied in this work as:

I was still poor, though I earned money. I lived in a small flat and missed the freedom of living in the village. The building I lived in had two huge water tanks up on the roof, and we had running water in the house, but only when the tank was full. In my neighbourhood, we often went without water, although not far from us there were rich houses with lawns and swimming pools. I discovered that you could buy water if you had money. (Vyam)

When rich ones attained their power over the accessibility of things rural individuals remained marginalized and through settlements for the urban the lower strata had to bear the burden. Despite collaboration for the crisis of their fellow being the privileged clamour to control them through various undertakings. Herein a group of inferior communities develops around the wide enlargement of the city and becomes victims of the drought, on the other hand, the elites exploit the abundance of water. When the city continuously develops and utilises a wide range of power whereas rural suffer. A most interesting example of this hierarchy can be seen in the novel when Vyam says:

However, a few roads and bridges appeared, and some of the houses got electricity...nothing very big, but they were welcome developments. Still, I have to say that the wealthier families in the village benefited from these changes, while the others continued to live in the old way. (Vyam)

Thus water politics of rural is another major instance of geopolitics in that they gather water for their needs from a small lake which is fed by a river and eventually which is undertaken by the elites. Privileged tries to exploit the lower strata for their strategic developments and people. In the contemporary era, the ones who possess power will try to exploit people below them. The major concern of geopolitics can be seen in this novel when the city begins to control the resources and thus begins bargaining between two spaces. They developed a plot to construct a dam across the river that fed rural individual's lakes.

I discovered that there were plans to build a large dam across the river that flowed upon the hills. This was the river that fed our lake, so what would that mean for us? No one knew for sure. It was all everybody

talked about. The village headman said that the dam was for making electricity for the city: could that be? Why did they want so much? It seemed greedy, without thinking about how and where it all came from. (Vyam)

In this world, most of all the large rivers are dammed in the name of development. However, it will never provide good to the local people or the rustic ones, so the large dams are raised as an ecological disaster. In this work, the dam will be constructed for the elite people for electricity but it will produce a contrary effect on the village. This dam which is to be fabricated across the river will subsequently submerge the village thus it will cause large-scale migration and glitches regarding rehabilitation. Environmental impact and the sustainability crisis are the other two major problems generated by dam construction. Here the significance of water rights becomes indubitable thus it stands out as a vital bargaining tool. It will make the life of the poor people difficult as they become landless and separated from their community thus eventually becoming estranged from their traditional way of life. Later these inferior sections lose their command over their land and they will come under the pressure produced by the mainstream thus their condition becomes more vulnerable because of unemployment and poverty. These migrated people will become part of expanding a particular sector for themselves with little wages and protection. In consequence, a wide range of haze faces can be seen in the lower strata. The dam is for the urban elites and not for the rural but ultimately the problem is to the rural and they are affected. At that point, the author remembered folklore which is about broken deals and consequences. That implies that in our mindless push to harness nature's power, we might lose our place in this universe.

We need nature's water, sun, and air to survive, but she does not need us. She is generous to us, but she has some conditions, and we have to respect them. The ring in the story stands for a bargain that the sisters made with the lake- a promise that they then broke. When you go against a bargain and become greedy, nature punishes you, as the lake did with the sisters. Her laws are very strict. You cannot exceed your limits, or take more than what is due to you. (Vyam)

Conclusion

Subhash Vyam's *Water* is one of the celebrated novels which is closely connected to the environment. *Water* is an outcry against the unending exploitations of nature by humankind in the name of progress. The author claims that the unconsciousness with which we shamelessly and greedily exploit nature will consequently end in our extinction in this universe. In this novel, folklore has a special significance because it is something derived from nature and it has the power to articulate things directly to human beings. Thus using folklore as a medium to interact with people Vyam exposes the outcome of the exploitation. Folklore explains the aftereffects of exploitation through simple stories so that it performs as an influential instrument to make people aware of the importance of the preservation of nature.

Geopolitics is the interrelation between geographical features and these features' influences on power relationships and people. And, emphasis on this theory in this novel illustrates more value and meanings to it. From the very beginning of this world, geography and the people are interdependent. One cannot withstand without the support of the other. There evolves the significance of geopolitics in the contemporary era as it deals with the geography of land and its effects on politics. Geopolitics is closely linked to the environment so that, from the very past to the contemporary scenario, it succeeds in covering a safe space for it. More precisely, the concept of geopolitics acts as the core of Vyam's novel *Water*. Thus, Vyam's novel denotes the idea that communities and human beings are all related to each other by our dependence on nature. So he conveys the matter that a small variation in geography can alter the entire functions of life in this universe.

Water implies the impact of geopolitics within it. As the individuals in the author's village are closely associated with nature, we can see how harsh geographical variations affect them. Punitive environmental discrepancy affects almost all their policies. The adverse situations they faced by these variations can be seen from a wide range of examples. When they organize their policies following geographical factors to endure denotes the impression of geopolitics. The drought was one of the major crises that existed in that village.

Thus we can see how the individuals in that village make new methods and decisions concerning those natural topographies to progress their lives. From the first well dug in the village to the last decision of the government to build a dam will refer to the geopolitical aspects. Migrations, their small developments, new policies, and their acceptance of the power and greed of the city possess the geopolitical elements in it.

With the existence of geographical politics, there will be political conflicts within the people. When there are political conflicts there will be power conflicts and the probability increases when one group is subdued to another. People who have more power and money will continue to enjoy the resources available and on the other hand, the other strata which are considered to be inferior remain the victims of the elite's enjoyment. Whenever there is a hegemonic set the lower strata will suffer and the trauma they faced once will hand over from generation to generation. As they were poor and closer to nature they are not capable of understanding the strategies and will remain under the privileged. Because of this hegemonic set, the inferior people were denied access to power and progress.

In *Water*, it is evident that the individuals who are not privileged are the ones who suffer. They have no voice in the hegemonic system and have to bear the burden of the city. As they have a scarcity of resources they are succumbing to the policies and political control of the city. Geographical features particularly give the individuals certain advantages. The city has numerous ways to accomplish its needs and is economically powerful. So when environmental adversities destroy a group of people both mentally and physically they will gradually remain under the control of the powerful ones. These pathetic conditions of the inferior strata can be seen in the past, present, and future. Because we have an undeniable bond with Mother Nature the variations in it will vary our lifestyle too. So that it will directly affect the people who are so close to nature.

Water is about a community that is so close to nature, it is about individuals who once made an honest pact with nature. So they are considered to be second class and are a threat to development. However apart from choosing an epic to portray the sufferings of

these poor people, Vyam uses the small but powerful ecofriendly folklore to imply their life.

Epics are always considered as the standard form of literature and people think that it has more content than any other form of literature. Human beings always value things which are said to be standard and powerful. For them, all other simple forms are local and with nothing particular in them. They never try to understand the hidden meaning in it rather they only try to devalue them and destroy them. Because of this reason, Vyam chooses folklore which is the traditional beliefs and stories of a community or people. More than epic, folklore can exclusively inform the individuals and can imply our unconscious turn towards the environment. Folklore can exist only with nature because it is derived from nature and thus it is one of the earliest forms. They perform as the mirror to the past and help one to view the workings of the present scenario.

When the author employs folklore in the novel it is a hope that the individuals will reconstruct our beliefs and primary values. As it is simple, every social group, no matter how powerful or minor, will easily recognize the moral lessons expressed in it. Folklores contain the key values of those poor people and will sort out in front of everyone the true values of these people. By using a folk tale, Vyam implies that this folklore is meant for us to use, to follow.

Folklores are the traditional beliefs, customs and stories of a community passed through the generations by word of mouth and will indicate a particular place, activity or group of people. "Most folk stories embody the hopes and aspirations of the majority of people in the society and are used to transmit and preserve cultural values of the group" (Shoniwa). It will allow people to give meaning to their lives and their surroundings. As it is more close to nature it will make clear sense in people about their connection with nature and will produce an opportunity to learn more about human experiences. "Storytelling and collective reflection can enrich efforts in environmental restoration" (Ghuman). When it comes to graphic representation, which is more authentic and has the audience thereby it can reach beyond all barriers. Graphic novels are probably the most diverse areas of children's literature. "If you do not take graphic

novels seriously, then you do not take contemporary literature seriously” (Murel). It is proficient in raising awareness about issues.

Vyam’s novel *Water* is a warning for the human kinds or in other words a requiem for nature. Through this novel, the author advocates the need for mutual co-existence. Thus this novel gives the impression of the understanding of the environment and declaring companionship and harmony. *Water* reflects the importance of our genuine love for nature and commitment to Mother Earth. Using folklore as a strong property Vyam denotes what is natural to us and what we are doing too. We, humankind need to fight for our necessities rather than exploit the ground resources for our greed. Nature is our mother which will offer consolation for our bleeding heart but if we do not respect nature it will make us bleed. Thus this novel serves to the relevance of the environment and cultural significance of things that are close to nature. The novel illustrates the wide immense power of geographical features in shaping the movements of individuals around the world. The analysis of rural individuals and their attachment to nature, socio-cultural conditions, geographical variables and movements of people explicitly portrays the scope for geopolitics in the contemporary era.

Along with Vyam, there is a cadre of other contemporary visual storytellers who, like Vyam, are pushing the boundaries of storytelling through art. Nidhi Chanani, an Indian-American artist, excels in using visual storytelling to explore themes of identity, migration, and belonging. Her graphic novels and illustrations often depict characters from diverse backgrounds, providing a glimpse into the complexities of multicultural experiences. Shaun Tan, An Australian artist and author, Shaun Tan has created a distinct visual language characterized by surreal and otherworldly imagery. His narratives often transcend language, relying on imagery to convey complex emotions and social commentary. His work, such as “The Arrival,” explores themes of immigration and displacement with profound impact. Marjane Satrapi, An Iranian-born graphic novelist and filmmaker, Marjane Satrapi is celebrated for her autobiographical work, “Persepolis.” Through simple yet powerful black-and-white illustrations, she narrates her childhood experiences during the Iranian Revolution, offering a glimpse into the tumultuous history of her homeland.

What unites these Indian visual storytellers is their commitment to telling diverse and multifaceted narratives. Whether they draw inspiration from mythology, history, contemporary life, or personal experiences, their stories resonate with audiences worldwide. They invite readers and viewers to explore the complexities of the Indian experience, often addressing issues like identity, social justice, and cultural heritage.

“The wars of the twenty-first century will be fought over water.”

Ismail Serageldin

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