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Water Wars and Eco-dystopia: Re-reading Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*

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Abstract: Sarnath Banerjee, through the medium of visual storytelling in *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, portrays a dystopian future associated with the water wars of Delhi. The concept of water wars was first addressed in the 1990s by Ismail Serageldin. The water wars discourse was conditioned by the overlapping concepts of water inequality, scarcity produced by capitalism and existing hierarchies of power. Sarnath Banerjee succinctly portrays the overlapping factors which lead to water crisis in India in his text. He visually elaborates how such political forces, capitalist corporations, financial institutions and greedy local elites try to extract wealth by damaging the society and environment. He also shows us how this crisis affects the middle class and lower-middle class through the portrayal of Girish, the plumber who loses his job and later tries to find the mythical underground river Saraswati, to solve the water crisis. The paper will explore how Banerjee's unique blend of image and text helps us to get an alternative view on the discourse of water wars (deviating from the mainstream water war novels) and how it predicts the uncertain dystopic future associated with it. It will also elaborate on how the reality of the water crisis has significantly entered the political domain in recent times leading to the actualization of the textual content on water emergencies.

Keywords: Eco-dystopia, crisis, environment, marginalisation, Water wars.

> They keep saying that climate change is an existential threat and the most important issue of all. And yet they just carry on like before. – (Thunberg 7)

The word 'dystopia' comes from two Greek words (*dus* 'bad' and *topos* 'place') which means "diseased, bad, faulty or unfavourable place" (Claeys 4). Dystopia is usually considered to be the opposite of utopia, it is usually seen as an antithesis to utopia, but it often talks about a failed utopia of totalitarian systems (Claeys 5). Dystopian texts critique the hegemonic forces and hierarchies within power structures. They also help us question the existing modes of knowledge production and subsequently critique the projected image of an egalitarian society. According to Pramod K. Nayar, dystopian texts also "speculate on the state of the earth if existing socio-historical conditions – industrialization, hyper-consumption, unchecked pollution – continue unregulated" (47). Gregory Claeys had identified that there are three main types of dystopias, namely, "political dystopia," "environmental dystopia" and "technological dystopia" (5). But one can decipher that there are overlapping zones of interaction between the three and one cannot easily separate them. Any political or economic chaos can lead to an ecological disaster and vice versa. Wars due to technological advancement or epidemics form the content of dystopian fiction where humans (in their current injured or deformed state) must adapt to their new dystopic condition and space. Many authors have addressed the theme of environmental degradation through their depiction of a dystopic world to talk about the urgency of climate crisis. Eco-dystopian texts not only talk about the past or the present, but they often talk about a perilous future and serve as warnings. Pramod K. Nayar in his recently published book *Vulnerable Earth,* states that "… literature's role – and more broadly narrative's – has been central to not only the documentation of disasters but also *imagining* of future disasters, alternative worlds, and an environmental ethics that promises justice to human and the more-than-human" (2). Hoda M. Zaki states

that "These texts in effect warn that if certain social trends go unchecked, the future will exhibit certain specific undesirable qualities…" (244).

Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* belongs to the genre of speculative fiction. It portrays a dystopian future (also present and past) associated with the water wars in Delhi. It freely explores possibility and impossibility alike. As per the description of the book, it is "A Homeric tale of a man's journey to the centre of the earth to find the mythical river Saraswati… set against the fictitious yet ever-so-real Water Wars of Delhi" (Banerjee). It talks about a dystopian future with elements of cli-fi (climate fiction) exploring the themes of water scarcity, urban planning, and resource management. The concept of water wars was first addressed in the 1990s by Ismail Serageldin who had stated that the "wars of the next century will be over water" (Selby 49). Such predictions became a part of reality when scarcity of fresh water was associated with the rhetoric of 'climate crisis' and 'climate emergency' (Boast 2). The water wars discourse was conditioned by the overlapping concepts of water inequality, scarcity produced by capitalism and new forms of business opportunities which were created by 'disaster capitalism' (Boast 3). Political ecologists now deal with the concept of water wars with greater caution than how it has been liberally used in most policy debates and media. Literary critics have also addressed the apocalyptic nature of water wars to point out the urgency of dealing with climate change and how humanities, as a stream, is trying to address it (Boast 2). There is also a growing tension within the geo-political domain where nations seem to exploit the existing courses of rivers by building dams and literally adding to the concept of water wars. According to Jan Selby and Clemens Hoffman, "predictions of water wars seem to be intuitively plausible. These predictions are typically found on the Malthusian concept that resource scarcity will lead to conflict" (Boast 76). Population growth tends to outpace the growth of resource, leading to inevitable shortages and crisis, potentially resulting in famine, disease and war. Hannah Boast elaborates how the water wars discourse has certain concerning implications. For example, she talks about how future predictions related to water wars often divert the attention from present day water-inequalities. Such predictions overshadow the realities associated with the present crises in the lives of the four billion people who suffer from water crises every year. It is also important to note that water crisis is not 'natural', it is produced or often generated by privatization. In India, we have a wide range of conflicts starting from protests about creation of dams to community level water wars between cities and slums.

The first section of Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel shows us the contrasting pictures of pre- and post-privatized Tambapur. Banerjee paints a picture of how things drastically change in Tambapur after the Indian government had decided to sell Bharat Copper limited (a fictionalized version of India's Hindustan Copper Limited). The quality of life of the people of Tambapur change due to pollution, scarcity of water and depletion of natural resources, all caused by the Australian multinational/profit-oriented private company. Girish, the psychic plumber, loses his job as he is fired by the Platypus Group and goes to Delhi to look for a job. Before talking about Girish again, Banerjee gives us a glimpse of the morning routine of the people of Delhi, where we see that they must get up early in the morning to switch on the water pumps, almost like a ritual, so that they can get water throughout the day. Girish finds a new role for himself under the influence of an entrepreneur named Rastogi. Rastogi had initiated a project called *Pataal Jal Anusandhan Vikalp*, to find the mythical river Saraswati and eradicate the water crisis in Delhi. Rastogi states that "I fund expeditions into the earth's core, in the hope that one day we will discover the mother of all rivers, the mythical Saraswati" (Banerjee 17).

Girish starts digging the earth to find the mythical river but finds several characters (water-borne criminals) living beneath the surface of the earth. Banerjee creates a hell-like image to accommodate all the water-borne criminals (Jagat Ram, Tanker Rajan, Lt. Col. B. K. Gambhir, L.M. Awasthy and Philippa Carrey Jones). Jagat Ram used to work at the Delhi Jal Board, and he was blamed for the losses of the company as he

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sold water to the private tankers illegally. The Delhi Jal Board's statement on the water crisis gives a shock to the readers, "A report came out, that of all the water pumped into Delhi, only 37 per cent reaches the consumer. PREPOSTEROUS. Consumers always lie" (Banerjee 22). He took the blame entirely but got demoted from his position and was ultimately instructed to find the mythical river but was banished to Patalpuri (*Patal* means hell in Sanskrit). Tanker Rajan, owner of Tandav Tankers Pvt Ltd, used to buy water from Jagat Ram and sell it at an exorbitant price (5k to 15k depending on the colony) during emergencies. He regarded this action as a "tiny toll tax for an important social work" (Banerjee 25). He wanted to avoid any more scandals after getting caught and decided to find the river himself. Lt. Col. B. K. Gambhir was a 'fallen soldier' who had been stealing water from his neighbor's overhead tank. He talked about how stealing water "grew into an obsession" and that he "continued doing it every night. During the day it was ok, but at night my desires spiked. I felt the intense pull of Mishra's tanker" (Banerjee 29). After he received a letter from Mishra's young wife Kusum, his guilt intensified. He wanted to clear his conscience and find the source of underground water for his neighbors but ultimately settled in Patalpuri after a point of time. Awasthy was a corrupt high ranking MCD officer who was seen to be residing beneath the surface because of his sins and his policies which caused constant damage to the environment. Banerjee portrays Awasthy as someone who "achieved notoriety by hacking down branches of ancient trees in order to let in the winter sun" and who had designed ornamental gardens after chopping trees which Banerjee ridiculed as "The sort South Delhi's affluent class adores but barely visits" (34). He casually makes fun of the word apparition and called it "Appa-Rao-Nation" (Banerjee 33). As a punishment, he was thrown into Patalpuri and expressed his regret to Girish with statements like "I will never waste water" and "I will protect trees with my life, please take me home" (Banerjee 37). Girish finally met Philippa Carrey Jones, the ambassador's wife from an unnamable country, who got transferred to India as a part of punishment posting. To match her living conditions, she wasted a lot of water and ended up swimming into this hellish world because of her actions.

Banerjee presents a variety of water-borne criminals belonging to different class positions. He consciously creates such a wide range of characters who have been exiled for wasting/ misusing water. The consequences of environmental degradation are subtly portrayed by Banerjee. He also critiques the existing power hierarchies and the corrupt policy makers and officials who are responsible for the water crisis in Delhi. Girish finally discovers the mythical river Saraswati and finds his way back to the surface, along with Awasthy, to inform Rastogi and his associates. He discovers that Delhi is in a state of war (the battle of Kalkaji). The war has in fact been manufactured by Rastogi. He had planned to acquire plots in Delhi at lower prices and sell exclusive apartments built by private companies in Gurgaon to wealthy Delhi-ites. Water Wars, as we can see in the text, is entirely manufactured, and the text stresses the idea that scarcity can be created by socio-political factors and is not always a natural phenomenon.

One of the most interesting sections in the text is titled "Short-termism". Banerjee critiques short term policies adopted by the government (policies that contribute to water scarcity and chaos for vulnerable communities). He defines short-termism as "when floors upon floors are held together by optimism" or "when armies of young people are employed in an industry that develops no skills" or "when industries take over agricultural land and dams drown entire villages and destroy settled communities to produce unjustifiably low amounts of electricity" or "the culture of use and throw" or "constant talk of building new institutions without restoring the old" amongst others (52-57). People in power try to define short-termism as coming from "Partition mentality", as coming from "anxiety", as a "by-product of Hindu fatalism" and as a "South Asian disease" (58-62). He destabilizes the narrative of national economic progress by demonstrating the price paid by marginal communities for development projects and by showcasing India's deep class inequalities (Madan 2).

Banerjee gives us a glimpse of Rastogi's childhood days and states that he "grew up on the wrong side of water racism" (115). Rastogi is humiliated by his peers and is referred to as "Kachra" (waste). According to Anuja Madan, "Banerjee's use of the term water racism hints at the xenophobic underpinnings of unequal water distribution of Delhi" (13). Banerjee also mentions, through the character of Prof. Satyavadi, that the amount of water varies according to the locale, for example per person in Delhi cantonment gets 569 litres, in Lutyen's Delhi it is 462 and in Mehrauli it is 29 litres. In an article by ANI, Tanya Chugh reported that a recent survey has indicated that there are "significant disparities in water supply, with some areas facing severe shortages while others receive more than their actual needs" which indicates that there's a lack in terms of effective management regarding equitable distribution of water (Chugh). For example, places like Karwal Nagar and Burari which are supposed to get 25 and 45 MGD (million gallons per day), get only 4.7 and 12.5 MGD (Chugh). Several areas in Delhi do not have proper water pipeline connections as well. Most marginalized people living in such areas do not have access to treated water and as a result suffer from several diseases. Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*,had elaborated how "communities whose vigorously unimagined condition becomes indispensable to maintaining a highly selective discourse of national development… narratives of national development are partial narratives… that hide from view communities that inconvenience or disturb the implied trajectory of unitary national ascent" (150). Similarly, this inequality which has been existing since the 1980s in Delhi, has been partially addressed through the years. The water crisis has been a part of several manifestos of different political parties, yet they have failed to meet the demands of the marginalized people in terms of per capita water consumption. The reduced water level of Yamuna has resulted in decreased output of water from treatment plants by fifty percent. Untreated waste from the industries led people to mistake the foam in the river for some sort of washing agent and as a consequence they had fallen sick in 2021, 2023 and 2024. Rob Nixon also talks about slow violence which "occurs gradually over an increased period of time due to consistent exploitation through systematic and structural socio-cultural factors. Its invisibility is caused by its dispersal across time and people in general usually respond fast to the impending problems. This demand for the representation of slow violence especially on environment based on the immediate need with the Anthropocene" (193).

In an interview, published in Dialogue Earth, Banerjee was asked a simple question by the interviewer while referring to this text – "Why water?" (Ahmad). Banerjee referred to Delhi in the 1980s and 90s when people had to get up early in the morning to start their pumps to get water. He replied by saying that "It was like having a small baby. My late uncle's vitality was depended on whether he managed to fill his overhead tanker during the summer months" (Ahmad). Banerjee uses his personal experience to visually depict how important an issue, water management, was during his childhood days, and it continues to be a massive problem. He was then asked why he chose the mythical river Saraswati and not Yamuna. He had replied by saying that "With the special brand of science and technology that the nation is currently encouraged, the prefix 'mythical' may not stick to the Saraswati for long" and that Yamuna "is destroyed to the point that it is best left in the hands of the environmentalists. Yamuna is too real for me. My narrative is unreal" (Ahmad). This unpredictable unreal which Banerjee refers to is something which eco-dystopian texts often create but there's more real in this unreal. Banerjee himself admits that "Lately it feels that the unreal has become more tangible than it ever was" (Ahmad).

Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*: *The Invisible Art*, had defined comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and /or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). This definition is also applicable for movies, but McCloud talks about a crucial difference between the two mediums. He states that "each successive frame of a movie is projected on exactly the same space- the screen- while each frame of comics must occupy a different space… Space does

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for comics what time does for films" (McCloud 7). He focuses on two important aspects related to comics, visuality and spatiality. He also notes how "In learning to read comics we all learned to perceive time spatially…" (McCloud 100). Will Eisner in *Comics and Sequential Art* had explained how the very act of "paneling or boxing the action not only defines its perimeters… it 'tells' time" (28). What he means by this is that the images, elements, symbols, speech balloons, gutters, etc. help the readers to frame their conception of time through the visualities created within and beyond the space of the comic book.Jason Dittmer, while talking about visualities, had elaborated that, "comic book visualities hold out the possibility of introducing a new 'optical unconscious' to geography, one that holds open opportunities for more plural, flexible narratives to emerge from a singular montage" (223). Banerjee creates these visually dystopic and un-real space(s) in the pages of his text to talk about real space(s). He uses his panels not only as medium of control but to break the linearity of time, causality and chronology of events in the narrative. His section on Short-termism draws on illustrations from different movies to depict the water wars in Delhi, while his portrayal of the hell for water-borne criminals helps us to understand how Banerjee breaks the linearity of time in his narrative through the visual depiction of these different spaces. Banerjee also experiments with frames and panels which not only provide structural support, but become a part of the narrative itself. The tangibility of the dystopic and unreal spaces is not only dependent on Banerjee's imagination and illustrations but how the readers imagine these spaces while reading the text. The urgency of dealing with climate change is not only felt through the actions depicted in the panels but through the blank spaces between them. Unlike a film, in which the transitions occur from frame to frame, the gutter is where the reader uses his or her imagination to fill in the gaps. Scott McCloud stressed on the importance of participation calling it a "powerful force in any medium" (69). He elaborates how gutters or the "negative spaces" play "host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics" (66). The gutters or the transitional spaces between the panels help the readers to imagine the reality in relation to such dystopic illustrations in *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*. The effect of Banerjee's illustrations is similar to that of Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010), which re-imagines Delhi during the Emergency. As Preeti Singh in her article points out that "*Delhi Calm* not only provides the reader with the picture of a turbulent time in Delhi but also narrates this time through references to popular culture" (99). She elaborates how Ghosh has depicted the episode on mass sterilization with reference to a popular scene from the film *Sholay*, with its famous dialogue "Kitne Admi The?" (99). Banerjee also uses popular film references and illustrations in his text like, "Saving Private Arora", "Bridge on the River Yamuna", "Khurana's List", "The Guns of Ghantaghar", "Chronicles of Narayana", "Justice Bipin Bose" and "The Jorbagh Circle" (92-101). The depiction of eco-dystopia and climate crisis through references to popular culture creates a new language in graphic narratives. Through a text like *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, Banerjee successfully makes slow violence visible in the reader's mind.

The representation of such dystopian settings in texts like *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* serves two purposes. The first focuses on the urgency of dealing with climate crisis as these texts give us warnings about the degrading ecosystem. The second purpose is related to Eco-literacy. M. AngkayarkanVinayakselvi and R. Abhinaya state that "Eco-literacy" is attributed to the broader use of humanities and it "focus[es] on the sustainable human communities and society"; they also explain how "An eco-literate person understands the infrastructure of the environment and ecosystem in relevance to the socio-economic and cultural involvement and works towards sustainable future and also has a constructive attitude towards non-human stakeholders of nature" (191). The graphic novel becomes a very important visual medium to make readers conscious of their surroundings and Banerjee also uses this medium in a similar way. "It gives the message of sustainability after the elaboration of its alternative impacts. The roundabout of illustration creates fear of uncertainty without losing hope towards a better understanding of one's role in environmental protection" (Vinayakaselvi Abhinaya 193). They conclude their article by saying "Banerjee creates awareness about the ecosystem and its changing nature highlighting climate change and water related issues" and they invoke

"empathy and participatory response from the readers which in turn generate eco-literacy" (194). The allegorical journey of Girish hints at the factors responsible for the city's structural inequality and water crisis. He is celebrated as the best psychic plumber at the end with a direct connection to Bunyan "the plumber's pilgrimage". Such a title indicates the possibility of a solution which would eradicate this inequality in terms of water crisis and achieve an ecological democracy.

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