

ECOCRITICISM AND CLI-FI IN INDIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A STUDY OF *A CLOUD CALLED BHURA* BY BIJAL VACHHARAJANI

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Abstract:

This paper offers an ecocritical reading of Bijal Vachharajani's *A Cloud Called Bhura*, situating the text within the emerging field of Indian children's climate fiction (cli-fi). Using Cheryll Glotfelty's foundational framework of ecocriticism, this study investigates the interactions between the environment and human and non-human beings in the novel to highlight the ecocritical discourse on the Anthropocene and the Capitalist Anthropocene, Eco-affect and Eco-anxiety, and Eco-ethics and Eco-consciousness. It also examines the novelist's use of Anthropomorphism to further reconfigure the relationship between nature and society. Ultimately, the paper outlines the significance of children's literature in shaping environmentally conscious subjectivities in an era of accelerating climate crisis.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, *A Cloud Called Bhura*, Anthropomorphism, Anthropocene, Eco-anxiety, Eco-ethics.

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Literary studies over the past few decades have expanded to incorporate new ways of criticism time and again. A fast-changing postmodern era has seen the rise of a multitude of complex social, economic and political issues compelling literary scholars to rethink their frameworks to address pressing twenty-first-century concerns and initiate critical discourse that informs and educates readers.

Ecocriticism, or the study of ecology and literature, stands as a paramount example of a new-age literary multidisciplinary theory that found its footing due to the growing number of environmental issues worldwide. From the mid-eighties, scholars had begun to seek an increased awareness and concern for the environment in literary disciplines. In 1978, the term ecocriticism was coined by William H. Rueckert in his essay titled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* and by 1993 ecocriticism had established itself as a green branch of literary study in academia.

Ecocriticism

The field of ecocritical studies was later popularised and institutionalised with the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996. This seminal anthology, containing many historic and groundbreaking essays on ecocriticism, was co-edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Their work helped collate essential studies on the relationship between literature and the physical environment under a single title, thus giving a strong push to research in the field of ecocriticism.

Cheryll Glotfelty (1996), the author of the introductory chapter of the anthology, defined ecocriticism as "the relationship between literature and the physical environment," foregrounding

the school's 'earth-centered approach' towards literature. According to Glotfelty, human society and culture are interconnected and deeply affected by the environment, and ecocriticism makes this interconnectedness its subject of critical scrutiny. As opposed to traditional criticism, ecocriticism shifted away from a human-centered focus to a more nature-centered focus, forcing writers and literary scholars around the globe to question the relationship between humans and nature and probe "how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications" (Glotfelty 25).

Ecocritical scholars no longer treated nature as merely an aesthetic setting in literature but rather questioned its representation and role within literary texts. In fiction, nature no longer exists as a decorative or passive element; rather, authors portray it as a dynamic and interactive force within the story to ascertain the many alarming environmental conditions gripping the world. The key motive of an ecologically focused criticism is to educate and raise consciousness among the masses and foster debate and discussion pertaining to the health of the global environment.

Climate Fiction in Indian Children's Literature

In recent years, climate fiction, commonly referred to as cli-fi, has gained prominence as a literary genre. The term 'cli-fi' was first coined by a blogger and reporter named Dan Bloom in 2007. Post its birth, it gained widespread traction from 2013 onwards due to its coverage on NPR radio in the U.S. Cli-fi engages directly with the realities of climate change using fictional stories to raise awareness about the negative repercussions of ecological disasters, spanning anthropomorphic stories, dystopian narratives and apocalyptic chronicles. The focal point of climate fiction is to expose anthropogenic climate change and explore possible measures to conserve nature, including technological interventions such as climate engineering or climate adaptation practices.

More recently, Indian literature, especially written for children, has turned its attention to climate change stories. A plethora of Indian children's fiction writers are beginning to contribute to green studies by positioning their stories within the fraught intersections of ecology, culture and lived experiences of human society. These works are enlightening readers about post-colonial environmental degradation, climate anxiety, ethical dilemmas associated with economic development, and the disproportionate impact of climate change on vulnerable communities.

Children's cli-fi breaks down the complexities of environmental crisis into accessible and emotionally resonant narratives, employing lucid language and often blending folklore, Anthropomorphism and illustrations to deepen young readers' engagement with the text.

Bijal Vachharajani's *A Cloud Called Bhura*

Bijal Vachharajani is a notable children's fiction author, editor, and climate activist with several 'planet-friendly' books to her credit, including *A Cloud Called Bhura* (2019), *Savi and the Memory Keeper* (2021) and *When Fairyland Lost Its Magic* (2023). She received her masters in Environment Security and Peace at the UN-mandated University for Peace in Costa Rica.

Vachharajani's *A Cloud Called Bhura* exemplifies this emerging trend in Indian children's cli-fi by reimagining the atmosphere as an active, relational presence/character within her novel. Told through a child-centric narrative, the anthropomorphised figure of the cloud named 'Bhura' not only depicts environmental degradation but also invites readers to engage emotionally and ethically with the non-human world.

Anthropomorphism in *A Cloud Called Bhura*

The term Anthropomorphism can be defined as the attribution of human qualities to non-human entities, including animals, inanimate objects, natural phenomena, or deities, and Vachharajani's *A Cloud Called Bhura* uses it effectively to establish the cloud as a quasi-sentient being with an implied agency and an emotional state.

The novel opens with a description of a peculiar environmental anomaly. The readers are enlightened about a humongous, heavy and unmoving mass of cloud that has descended upon the city of Mumbai, signalling ecological disturbance. "A turbulent, toxic ocean hovered above them" (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 17). In this chapter, the main character of the novel, named Amara/Amni, describes the cloud not just as a benign atmospheric formation but as an ominous, lingering presence, almost as if the cloud is a living being within the story, carrying its own set of emotions. Additionally, the cloud seems to resist movement, and instead of drifting naturally like other clouds, it is stationed as a brooding and watchful presence over the city, suggesting agency or will. The Anthropomorphism of the cloud is further strengthened when it is given a name, "Bhura Cloudus!" (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 18), establishing it as a human-like entity. The humans within the novel appear to perceive Bhura almost as a real person to react to, even fear or question. This creates a human-like relational dynamic between them and the cloud.

The author endows a distinct personality and voice to Bhura Cloudus through various visual illustrations of the cloud accompanied by short rhyming poems and jingles, enhancing its appeal to the imaginative sensibilities of young readers (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figures 1 and 2

Illustrations in the Novel which Exhibit Anthropomorphism of the Cloud

Note. The two figures demonstrate the Anthropomorphic representation of Bhura, showcasing how visual elements like graphics confer personality, voice and agency upon the cloud in the novel *A Cloud Called Bhura* (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 12 and 32)

Anthropocene and Capitalist Anthropocene in *A Cloud Called Bhura*

The concept of Anthropocene was coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, who proposed a geological epoch of “human age” representing the current time period when human activity has become the dominant force shaping the earth’s climate and ecosystems. In simpler terms, Anthropocene refers to human-caused environmental change, and according to Crutzen and Stoermer, the “Great Acceleration” of industrialisation, urbanisation, and technological expansion has irreversibly altered natural processes.

Vachharajani’s *A Cloud Called Bhura* deploys a wide variety of human-centric activities that have caused significant environmental degradation and ecological imbalance in the natural ecosystems of the world. The appearance of the 352-km long Bhura Cloudus on the financial capital of the country unmasked the evils of the Anthropocene. Upon investigation by the climate scientists, the citizens were told that firstly, the cloud is made up of “brown pollution full of...aerosols, nitrogen oxide, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, ammonia, and volatile organic compounds” (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 70). Secondly, such an atmospheric phenomenon was not an ephemeral weather condition. Instead, it was a dark and bulbous incarnation of climate change externalised as a noxious ball of gases in immediate reality due to the alarming levels of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere.

Moreover, the birth of Bhura Cloudus had sent animals and birds alike into a frenzy. The novel documents widespread animal distress as birds displayed atypical and disoriented behaviour, animals retreated into hiding, exhibiting signs of agitation, and fish moved away from their natural habitats (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 52), collectively indicating a disruption caused by irregular environmental rhythms.

Furthermore, the city was ravaged by unpredictable toxic rains, surging tides and fiery dust storms symptomatic of a deeply destabilised climate system caused by human-induced environmental damage. “It was a scorching downpour that scalded everything it touched...The sea swelled and rolled...Trees fell victim as burning winds scorched the city” (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 110). The author’s use of poignant imagery illustrates the extent to which natural weather cycles were completely upended by anthropogenic interventions.

The author also mentioned other irrevocable ecological tragedies, for example, the drying up of groundwater reserves in Tamil Nadu, the world’s lone surviving glacier in Nepal and extreme drought in Africa, thereby reinforcing the life-threatening effects of Anthropocene.

The novel also accentuates the systemic failure of environmental governance by highlighting a catalogue of destruction, revealing a pattern of institutional neglect and regulatory inadequacy, suggesting that current systems of ecological governance are not only ineffective but ethically compromised. “The children’s legacy is a ravaged Earth, mined...rivers...sanded or pumped with effluents and our waste, swathes of forests... mowed down...killing wildlife and our biodiversity...making our planet warmer” (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 168). This incessant commodification of nature is referred to as Capitalist Anthropocene or Capitalocene. It is an ecocritical framework associated with thinkers like Andreas Malm and Jason W. Moore who argued that the current ecological crisis gripping the planet is actually driven by capitalist systems, and not humanity as a whole.

The novel delineates the relentless exploitation of nature at the hands of capitalist enterprises, thus featuring Capitalist Anthropocene through its account of corrupted government officials and politicians, and avaricious businessmen, including opportunistic doctors, self-serving insurance agents, money-grubbing pandits and many more Capitalocene elements.

The health sector's gleeful reaction, being "secretly thrilled...business was booming" (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 34), posits illness not as a plight to be mitigated but as an opportunity for profit maximization reflecting the marketisation of healthcare.

In contrast, medical insurance corporations are depicted as "very unhappy" (Vachharajani, 2019, p.34), not out of concern for public health but due to financial loss, underscoring a calculative and profit-driven logic, wherein care is secondary.

Lastly, the pandit's reaction, "Don't let Bhura Cloudus leave. Ever" (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 36), demarcates his hypocritical stance by introducing spiritual economy complicit in ecological crisis to achieve material gains.

These excerpts spotlight a sharp critique of the exploitative capitalist greed of human beings, even in the face of an environmental catastrophe. It is deeply troubling to note how the crisis is demoted of its significance as an environmental warning, only to focus on economic concerns of profit and loss for various sectors in the economy. The cataclysmic threat exposes the workings of Capitalist Anthropocene, where systems fail to respond ethically and instead cultivate new ways to benefit from an ecological breakdown.

Eco-affect and Eco-anxiety in *A Cloud Called Bhura*

Eco-affect is the emotional response of humans to climate change. In other words, eco-affect is how the climate is 'felt'. Drawing from Affective Ecocriticism, linked to Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, eco-affect includes feelings of unease, dread, grief, attachment and wonder in relation to ecological disruption.

The novel portrays a few occurrences in which the characters viscerally experience strong emotions towards the environmental crisis surrounding them. One particular scene stands out for its apt depiction of eco-affect. "Baobabs don't just suddenly wither and die...This is highly unusual...happened in Africa already. Scientists are saying that climate change is— Her voice cracked...the image kept repeating in her head" (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 42). The character of Dr. Vidisha Mehta, the conscientious twin and climate scientist, is profoundly disturbed at the sight of a dead baobab tree. She undergoes shock and encounters feelings of sorrow and apprehension at the rupture in the ecological fabric.

On the other hand, eco-anxiety is a psychological condition referring to a manifestation of chronic fear, worry or distress about environmental destruction and the future of the planet. It includes feelings of helplessness, uncertainty, and anticipatory dread about ecological collapse. Tamanna/Tammy's character defines this existential dread most appropriately. The following quotation underscores her escalating fear. "It's hard, guys. I don't know how to exactly explain it...I try to help, but I can't do much, and I feel so useless and scared" (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 88). She feels entrapped with no reprieve, reinforcing the sense of a crisis that is continuous and uncontrollable as the story transforms the climate emergency into an immediate embodied reality for its characters instead of a distant abstract phenomenon.

Eco-ethics and Eco-consciousness in *A Cloud Called Bhura*

Eco-ethics pertains to the moral framework of principles and values that govern the relationship between humans and nature. It emphasises ethical responsibility towards non-human life-forms, ecosystems and future generations. Vachharajani's sketch of a morally sound character in the guise of Amni is noteworthy.

Amni's character bears strong ecological morals, which are reflected in her empathetic engagement with nature and her erudite interest in understanding the reasons behind ecological

imbalance. Her refusal to use plastic or straws, along with her attentiveness to animal suffering, reflects a deeply ecologically conscious individual. Moreover, unlike many adults around her who normalised the crisis, Amni's response to Bhura was instrumental in the formation of "The Silver Lining Abhiyan (TSLA)", a movement organised by the children of Mumbai to fight for environmental justice (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 124).

Like Amni, several characters within the novel demonstrate the presence of eco-consciousness. Amni, along with her friends Tammy, Mithil and Andrew, prove to be a formidable force in initiating and implementing the different quests of TSLA. Their commitment to restoring ecological health was evident even before the formal establishment of TSLA, through their meeting with journalist Urmi Sheth, their attendance at the press conference addressing Bhura, and their friendship with Mayuri, a member of the Astronomical Astronomy Association (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 29), and Dr. Vidisha, the climate scientist.

The climax of the novel saw the city's children taking matters into their own hands. This indicates a readiness to shoulder responsibility rather than waiting for institutional solutions. They filed a public interest litigation (PIL) against the state of Maharashtra, dragging the government to court for its "affirmative actions in causing pollution and not restricting companies...from actions that...cause climate change" (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 159). This display of youth-led environmental activism is a powerful assertion of eco-consciousness, with children emerging as agents of change in the face of systemic inaction and environmental negligence.

Dr. Vidisha's persona is earmarked to describe a high level of ecological consciousness. Her character as a climate scientist and activist is deeply concerned about the ecological disruptions, noting that "for decades, scientists and activists had been trying to raise awareness about extreme weather conditions...Few had listened to them, and now here was this cloud that proved them right" (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 37). As a member of the climate coalition, she further reinforces her allegiance to climate change by submitting a comprehensive report to the head minister's office, detailing the causes behind the emergence of Bhura.

Alongside climate change activists, the plot also illuminates the presence of 'climate change deniers' in its midst, thereby uncovering the ideological tensions that shape public responses to the environmental crisis. Mota Bhai or the head minister of the state, epitomises the role of a climate change denier driven by economic self-interest. "This Bhura bugger formed because of polluting factories, cars, all this construction activity... What rubbish!" (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 93). He downplays the implications of anthropocentric activities which led to the abnormality of Bhura, all the while displaying an attitude of willful ignorance towards inconvenient truths.

Furthermore, the government in the novel seems to be morally corrupt and incompetent to deal with Bhura, as is evident from the following excerpt. "Bhura Cloudus has hung over our city for months now. It is creating a bad reputation for Mumbai across the world. From its very nature, we can tell the cloud is anti-national. We are now confident this is an international conspiracy to undermine our glowing economic success" (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 65). The head minister's reaction to the crisis exposes a narrative of climate change denial rooted in nationalism and political deflection, wherein Mota Bhai is trying to shift public attention away from acknowledging domestic responsibility for the appearance of Bhura.

Lastly, the utter failure of the flamboyant, elephant-sized vacuum cleaner called 'SUK-UP9' (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 95) further ridicules the hollowness of technocratic quick-fix solutions in the face of a systemic environmental crisis.

Another personality characterised by environmental apathy in the book is that of Dr. Bidisha, the

ideologically opposed counterpart to Dr. Vidisha. Dr. Bidisha is also a climate scientist, albeit a climate change denier with a developmentalist ideology and utilitarian worldview. “Sacrifices have to be made, so what if a few trees fall? It’s for the greater good” (Vachharajani, 2019, p. 73). Her words trivialise ecological destruction in the name of economic progress and positions her as an embodiment of the broader cohort of climate change deniers within the novel.

Conclusion

Ecocriticism and cli-fi together mark a significant shift in literary studies by bringing active attention to the urgent realities of environmental crisis and reimagining the relationship between humans and the non-human world by narrativising climate change in ways that are immediate, affective, and accessible. Bijal Vachharajani’s work *A Cloud Called Bhura* is a testament to literary activism and is an ecological tale marked by an acerbic satirical commentary on insatiable capitalism, unproductive government policies, self-indulgent bureaucrats, apathetic climate change deniers and nonchalant adults who have normalised the consequences of environmental crisis. The novel serves as a critical intervention for both children and adults alike, evoking Eco-consciousness among its readership.

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