

Eco detective, Kinship and Multispecies harmony in Rohan Chakravarty's Naturalist Ruddy: Adventurer. Sleuth. Mongoose

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ABSTRACT

The research paper sheds light on the role of the eco detective in the work of non-fiction, Rohan Chakravarty's *Naturalist Ruddy: Adventurer. Sleuth. Mongoose*. The eco detective, Ruddy plays a pivotal role in educating young readers about the ecology and the more than human inhabitants of the ecology. The paper aims to unravel the artistic attempt of bringing out the eco noir of species endangerment in the age of the anthropocene through graphic panels, comic strips, engaging eco mysteries and humour. Its impact in the young readers is traced through its attempt in deconstructing anthropocentric ideologies and promoting kinship and multispecies coexistence. The text is also analysed as a medium that not only imparts ecological knowledge but also aids young readers in contributing to biodiversity conservation through positive action. The portrayal of the more than human species with agency, intellect and as beings that are co-agential in the narrative of life in the planet dismantles the anthropocentric hierarchy of species stratification and paves way for biocentrism.

The depiction of environmental themes in children's literature has mostly been restricted to genres such as comics, picture books, short stories, and other forms of fictions. Fictional representations have been popularised especially in portraying animals, forests and more than human entities due to their ability to derive humour through anthropomorphic treatment of the non-human characters. Despite fictional representations receiving vivid attention from critics and readers it has also endured "the dismay of biologists who feel that endowing animals with human emotions and motives presents misleading pictures of such creatures and may lead children to false impressions and expectations of real life animals" like the "Bambi syndrome" (Vogl 68). In the discourse of environmental literature for children lies two essential contradictions: firstly, literary representations are expected to preserve the ecological truth without yielding to features that make fictions entertaining and engaging, secondly, to produce literary representations that are engaging, entertaining and promote kinship through humour.

The genre of detective fiction or crime fiction have not centred on the portrayal of animality or animal characters as even *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* does not feature more than human characters. It is in the year 2020 that the *Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction* had included a chapter on "Crime Fiction and the Environment". Yet, not enough deliberations were included on crime fiction and ecology featuring eco detectives until the publication of the special edition of *Green Letters* on "Crime Fiction and Ecology" which explores how "generic features offer opportunities to reflect on the forms and functions of environmental criticism and ecological narratives", but is also devoid of discourses on the role of animals. (Hawthorn and Miller Animals 4) But such publications functioned as torchbearers to the growth of crime fiction or non-fiction featuring eco detectives and more than human characters.

Rohan Chakravarty's *Naturalist Ruddy* falls in the meeting point of these two contradictions as it is a work of non-fiction that caters to the enrichment and enhancement of the readership of children through a balance

between the text heavy information and the images in the panels, humour as well as education, and most significantly blurs the divides between the reader and the text by offering a participatory learning experience. It not only attempts to educate children about animals but can also be viewed as an attempt to “counter the possible misconceptions gained from early exposure to anthropomorphic tales.” (69) Most children’s tales have revolved around anthropomorphised animals that are treated as objects of entertainment and butts of ridicule rather than as subjects of a learning experience. Sonia Vogl in *Animals and Anthropomorphism in Children’s Literature* brings out how animals in literature widely belong to three categories: “1) those in which animals behave like human beings; 2) those in which animals behave like animals except that they talk and may wear clothes; and 3) those in which they behave entirely like animals.” (69) The first two categories not only feature anthropomorphism but also contain “disneyfication” of nonhuman characters. Such artistic representations create ambiguity as “humans often incorrectly perceive certain animal gestures due to frequent exposure to anthropomorphism. To illustrate, chimpanzees smile when they feel threatened. However, when humans see chimpanzees smile, they often mistake them to be expressing happiness, a reaction that anthropomorphism encourages.”

Rohan Chakrabarty’s work dismantles such ambiguities as he brings out instances wherein he justifies that mongooses do not usually climb trees and they tend to laugh when they copulate (80). Though anthropomorphism is said to raise “expectations of animal behaviour to a level that is impossible to achieve”, non-fictional texts like *Naturalist Ruddy* aims to direct the readers from such vague points of unresolved ambiguities towards proper ecological learning (Stanton 36). The eco detective quotes Sherlock Holmes: “guessing is a shocking habit, destructive to the logical faculty” (32) and abides by his words to gain the trust of the readers about the truth of the information that is provided through entertaining plot lines and humour.

The selected text for analysis belongs to the genre of realistic stories or non-fiction as it does not subjectively portray the animal experiences. The artist tries to employ detachment from anthropocentric perspective by attempting to leave out treating the environment as backdrops or yielding to the aesthetic portrayal of animals. The text is devoid of the use of “Sentimentality and melodrama” (Vogl 69) as the species are not framed as culprits but as kins in an interconnected ecology is brought out through the case of the Long-Tailed Shrike also called the ‘Butcher Bird’ that preys on species by jabbing “lizards, birds and rodents with their strong, hooked beaks, and then skewer them on thorns and even barbed wire.” Though perceived as predators that prey on other species they are not portrayed as culprits but “Their preference for prey animals that destroy crops also makes them valuable friends of farmers.” (14) The use of Sherlock Holmes references and Hitchcock not only categorises the text and the eco detective as part of detective fiction but also renders humour as Ruddy while resolving the mystery of the insectivorous plant, the Indian Sundew, says “‘Someone dialled M for Morning dew, and got Murder instead!’” (36) Though Ruddy mentions that detectives like Sherlock Holmes and Feluda smoked cigarettes, he doesn’t smoke. “He knows that smoking kills, even without the Indian Censor Board having to tell him that. But sometimes when he’s in one of his moods, he pretends to smoke with a neem stick and pay homage to his idols. Unlike actual smoking, this does him good, though. Neem keeps his teeth clean after all the meat-munching!” (75) Through such a rendering of characterisation, Chakravarty portrays Ruddy deserving of idolisation by young readers.

Most environment or animal centric narratives lose focus due to the artists’ lens of anthropocentrism through which themes of biodiversity or environmental conservation are handled. In most artistic depictions, “Nature is at most a passive backdrop – the scenery against which “real” stories unfold – not a central protagonist in the narrative.” (Horn 14) Such narratives neither portray the natural world with agency nor are inclusive of the more-than human and the assemblage. *Naturalist Ruddy* does not feature human characters and centres entirely on non-human characters and their lifestyle. The setting does not feature as a backdrop of human action but has relevance to the action and the plot. The case studies in the select work has settings of national parks or natural habitats that does not feature as backdrops but holds relevance to being the home of the species, the sustenance and support that it offers and information related to its endangerment and other ecological concerns. For instance, the mystery of the Lilac Silverline butterfly brings out awe in the readers. The mystery begins by Ruddy’s observation and raising a question on “How could this butterfly escape an ant’s nest alive? But more importantly, what on earth was the butterfly doing in there in the first place?” (49) Through an investigation, it is revealed that “This caterpillar begins life as an egg laid by its mother, a Lilac Silverline butterfly, near the ant nest. When the egg hatches, the caterpillar releases secretions and vibrations that communicates with the ants. This tricks them into believing that the caterpillar is their own larva, and they begin raising it as one of their own.” (51) Such eco

mysteries that when unravelled educates the readers on the marvel of each species' journey of life defines the eco detective's primary purpose.

The eco detective, Mr. Ruddy, the mongoose in the text is the only character that is anthropomorphised not with the intention of misrepresentation of the animal traits but to engage "the attention of young readers, serving as a vehicle for slightly veiled teaching about social relationships, and introducing young readers to fantasy and to humour in books." The comic panels are "deliberately designed to provide biologically accurate accounts of the lives" of wild animals found in Indian habitats. (Vogl 72) The artist's construction of the ecodetective marks a radical turn from anthropocentrism towards biocentrism. Despite anthropomorphising the mongoose, the artist does not make the animal function as the shadow of a human and does not "complicate conventional understandings of human-animal difference" like how animality is portrayed in most detective fictions. (Hawthorn and Miller 2) In critical studies on detective fiction, "little concerted critical attention has been paid to the genre's non-human creatures. (Hawthorn and Miller 3) By fully refraining from focussing on human characters in the literary work, artists like Rohan Chakravarty seek "to evoke or reinforce kinship with nonhuman organisms and environmental systems through the diverse media they work in – nature photography, documentaries, motion pictures, painting, sculpture, novels, and poetry – sometimes by expressing kinship feelings that they have first experienced through sensory encounters with other species." (Horn 32)

The texts focus on the wild species found in Indian habitats by opening up the readers' consciousness "affectively and rationally, to an understanding of the exotic intelligences of nonhuman species, it will be easier for us to grasp our kinship with all living beings." (Horn 46) The artist sheds attention on the endangered species from the Indian habitat like the mystery of the "endemic and endangered Water Drop Frogs". The particular frog species bypasses the tadpole stage as the eggs "develop entirely within the shell directly into tiny mosslike froglets" (18). The species that are not popular and renowned like the "Rufous-Bellied Woodpecker": "Asia's only sap-sucking woodpecker" (62); "Indian Crested Porcupine": the herbivorous species that picks up on bones to "gnaw on them and supplement its diet with calcium" (12) and the "Ant Mimic Crab Spider" that "has evolved to look like weaver ants to go undetected in their company and prey on unsuspecting ants!" (10) By bringing to light the mysterious and spectacular lifestyle of such unknown species, the eco detective centres the attention on the agency of the more than human.

Each detective case opens up with a real setting of a national park or a natural habitat wherein the species is found. The eco detective, Naturalist Ruddy observes an event that is a mystery, in order to solve the mystery; the eco detective collects hints, clues and traces left behind by the species to solve the case. Throughout the cases, the approach taken up by the eco detective does not involve culprits or victims but involves the joy of learning through the solving of mysteries and a widening of ecological awareness of the lifestyle and sustenance of various species within and far from reach for the common people. For instance, the mystery of the "THE UFLS-UNIDENTIFIED FLYING LEAVES" raises a wide range of questions: "Is this leaf really flying? Or is this a leafy alien spaceship?" (5) It is later found out by the detective that it is "a Leafcutter Bee! These solitary bees do not make hives, but nest in cavities and hollows." (6) The female bee slices leaf pieces and carries them to store nectar, pollen and later lays egg. The setting of each case aids in the learning process of the readers and in rendering an ecological reading of the cases as it provides answers to the plethora of possible questions like "What forms of knowledge are best suited to excavating obscured histories of a landscape, and how are past transgressions built into the fabric of a place? Is the environment active or passive, and what kinds of relationships do characters and other agencies form with the world in which crimes are commissioned, investigated and solved?" (Walton and Walton1)

The information regarding the habitat and the environment in the cases does not feature as backgrounds in the comic panels but are vital core elements in the reading of the text. As Walton brings out, "Reading ecological crime fiction and reading crime fiction ecologically demands a shifting of focus to features of a text often dismissed backdrops to human activity: rivers, forests, landscapes, climate, or the planetary ecosystem. It provokes an adjustment of temporalities, urging students to situate human activity in seasonal, anthropological, evolutionary and deep time scales." (Walton and Walton 1) The artistic rendering of the ecological message is crafted in a way that it inculcates participatory reading by taking into account the more than human characters as beings with agency and intelligence. It is an attempt to subvert tendencies of anthropocentrism by restructuring the hierarchy to view the intelligence and marvel at the capabilities of the more than human beings. The readership aimed at children is of significance as before their vision gets bridled by anthropocentric pride or avarice, it is

widened to marvel at the more than human world with awe and spectacle. The text functions as an abyss aiding in the unlearning of anthropocentric ideologies thereby promoting kinship and coexistence.

Donna Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto* brings to light the category that is “a bigger and more heterogeneous category than companion animal” (14) and the eco detective carries forth the same ideology of picking out mysteries and solving them with the purpose of bringing out the marvels of the wild species or “Companion species” as part of the learning of kinship. Patrick Murphy “urges scholars to study “nature-oriented mystery novels—with or without detectives, and perhaps even without murders—in order to understand the degree to which environmental consciousness and nature awareness has permeated popular and commercial fiction.”” (Walton and Walton 6) Naturalist Ruddy does not feature crimes or murders, and the detective does not establish a code of morals or seek justice but the case studies delve into propagating kinship and ecological consciousness to the readers.

The literary representations of the contemporary period bring out how humankind have been living “an Eco Noir existence” not only in terms of the crises caused to humans but also signifies how “the actual presence of animals – which used to be at the centre of our existence – is now marginalized, replaced and reduced to a spectacle.” (14) The plot of Naturalist Ruddy is not a direct reflection of Eco Noir as it does not delve into the criminality or the politics of injustice towards the non-human. Eco Noir with reference to the text calls for an approach “for a deeper, emotional understanding of interspecies relations” (15) and brings out the larger contexts circumscribing ecological degradation. The turn towards anthropocentric portrayal in art calls for the production of “environmentally engaged art” as it “*bears the potential to both rethink politics and politicize art’s relation to ecology, and its thoughtful consideration proves nature’s inextricable binds to economics, technology, culture, and law at every turn.*” (14) Naturalist Ruddy, the eco detective of the text aims to bridge “new alliances and commonalities” between the encounters of the species in the comic panels and the readers thereby welcoming “constructive, unexpected discourse and contemplation”. The medium through which the author conveys the theme of multispecies kinship opens up “possibility for the reader to journey through a diverse constellation of textual visions and captivating imagery” and comprehend the ecological thought of interconnectedness. (Faber and Shraer 16)

In the anthropocene fictions or non-fictions, the detective often a scientist or an environmentalist or a researcher is in charge of deciphering the issue and offering timely solutions to minimise damage. The recent trend registers the shift from police, journalists, and other institutions that are usually “the subject supposed to know” (Walton and Walton 12) and are in charge fail to offer tangible solutions due to the magnitude and the unpredictability of the upsurge of ecological issues. This contributes to an ecological turn, wherein the people who have acquired ecological awareness are agents of positive action and are more agential in the formulation of effective coping strategies. The eco crime fiction that features environmental awareness involves a glorification of the eco detective who unravels mysteries in the environment and the choice of a non-human character to play the role of a glorified detective who is often looked at in awe by the readers is a reflection of the artist’s ability to evade not only from anthropocentrism but also from species aesthetics.

The Eco Noir that is dealt within the text through an exploration of the existence of the multispecies communities bears a close semblance to the notion put forth by Timothy Morton in *Dark Ecology*: “The darkness of ecological awareness is the darkness of noir” and he considers the detective as criminal as well as a person. The human detective in eco noir fiction performs the roles of a detective, a criminal as well as a “part of an entity that is now *a geophysical force on a planetary scale.*” (Morton 9) Such a dilemma of performance and the human centred nature of the plot have been evaded by Chakravarty by choosing a mongoose to perform the role of being the perpetrator of ecological awareness. The non-fiction performs the dual role of registering in the young readers that nature, landscapes and the non-human are not mere backdrops of the plot or character or genre but are co-agential in the formulation of life and history, and also educates the readers on the multifaceted perspectives from which any artistic representations can be read, thereby raising questions on “what fictional forms, understandings of genre, or reading strategies can ecological awareness give us? What might it mean for noir to be green?” (Hollister 1013)

Heymans in *Animality in British Romanticism : The Aesthetics of Species* brings to light how a few species “by virtue of its aesthetic appeal that the animal ranks so high on the agenda of conservationists and that it has become a powerful symbol of our ruthless exploitation of wildlife” (24). It also proceeds to probe into how the anthropocentric tendency plays a pivotal role in the attention given to a particular species which thereby also

impacts conservation and sustenance of the same. The choice of the mongoose as the detective battles with this anthropocentric aesthetic appeal as well as makes the young readers marvel at the species' intelligence.

Through such crafting of the plot through choices in characterisation and eco mysteries focussing on diverse landscapes and species, the artist seeks to evoke Morton's theory of "ecological enmeshment, in which the human is connected to and co-constituted with non-human nature; living, dead and synthetic matter; environmental processes; and each other." Exposing young readers to environmental texts like these, helps them read the text ecologically by raising questions on "How will the detective sift through connected and disconnected material to determine a clear chain of effect and responsibility when ecological entanglement proves that we are all enmeshed?" The concept of ecological interconnectedness challenges the homogenous nature of most representations that tend to ostracise the representations of the non-human whereas in the select text, the more than human assemblages inclusive "of heterogeneous elements" like "bodies, energies, acts and intentions—come to take the place of the traditional criminal genius". The select text does not revolve around crimes in actuality but are rather mysteries that feature as avenues for vast vistas on ecological learning. The select text is enmeshed ...into dialogue with ecocriticism, ecological philosophy and the current conditions of our environment crisis tests the capacities of the genre as a form dedicated to examining transgression, knowledge, justice, and the possibility of a different future. It will be challenging, but it will ultimately engage students in some of the most demanding ethical, aesthetic and political questions of our times. (Walton and Walton 12)

An extrapolation of intrinsic, shared connection and "feelings of kinship with species other than our own often animate behaviors that promote environmental health and the conservation of biodiversity" (Horn 30). The setting and the landscape amidst which the action takes place in the text "is not merely a collection of objects but "a communion of subjects" (Horn 3). The genre of comics, graphic fiction and illustrated non-fiction is a potent tool in enhancing the engagement of children and a reiteration of their responsibility as participants not only in solving the eco mysteries in the text but also in creating a sustainable future for all species. The select text encourages children to not only consume the content but also take up responsibility as environmental stewards who advocate for biodiversity conservation and coexistence.

Detective fiction like other genres of literary endeavours has been "Sensitive to the shifting nature of capitalism and the state system, writers of detective fiction have also responded to new forms of political and social organisation, and to demands for representation emerging in postcolonial and post-industrial contexts." In the present age of the anthropocene and "wide scale environmental crisis, the detective's reassuring and restorative functions must, once again, be reconsidered." (Walton and Walton) The role of Naturalist Ruddy emerges from this context of a careful re-evaluation of the role of the detective to lead to ecological awareness and unity. The eco detective of the select text is not ostracised from the cases but is enmeshed and imbibed amidst the environmental changes occurring around him.

The eco detective protagonists extend educational content to the target readers of the select text, children. Through the environmental settings, representations of the diverse and their life and through a portrayal of everyday ecological events as mysteries that require the unbinding of anthropocentric gaze to be able to resolve the mysteries are potent ways of helping the young readers to consume educational content with awe and curiosity. The young readers by "Becoming familiar with the narratives of natural history, with the plots and protagonists that shaped and continue to shape Earth, engenders a feeling of affinity with everything on the planet." (Planet 18) "TEAM-UP WITH RUDDY" section is inclusive of reader participation, wherein the clues are provided and the reader has the opportunity of unravelling the mystery with the eco detectives. Such a textual space of interaction and interrogation limns the formulation of a space of ecological learning and kinship. The readers especially the target audience, children do not merely consume the content but raise questions, observe, and participate in the inquiry and the learning process.

Shobha Ramaswamy puts forth on the significance of how young readers must be exposed to environmental education from a young age as

Children who are not exposed to the natural environment and its concerns at an early age never succeed in acquiring the respect for nature ecological concerns that society deems appropriate. Though there are prescribed textbooks for inculcating these values of ecopedagogy, it is an undeniable fact that light reading in the form of fiction creates indelible impressions on the young mind. (4)

Engaging non-fiction that includes graphic panels, comic strips, and engaging plot lines, sections of

participatory readership and messages of ecological kinship with children as the target audience is an urgent artistic turn that is required in the epoch of the anthropocene. Through each eco mystery resolution, and each comic panel, the artist unbinds the veil of anthropocentrism that children of the young age are exposed to due to the societal upbringing, and it opens up to an ecological thought that is inclusive of multispecies inhabitants as co-actors who are co-agential in the narrative of life on the planet.

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