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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Growing urban anxiety and eco-dystopia in Usha K. R.'s *Monkey Man*

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Abstract - Urban anxiety is the wretched condition people undergo due to urbanization, and they become apprehensive when thinking about a sustainable future. When a city becomes urban, some people are thrilled to explore the elevated opportunities it provides, while some fear the havoc of urbanization. The following research is based on Usha K.R.'s *Monkey Man*, which seeks to understand how Bangalore city witnessed a massive transformation due to urbanization from being a pensioner's paradise to India's renowned Silicon Valley and India's giant IT hub. The objectives of this research are two-fold (i) to understand how urbanization makes people's lives anxious, and (ii) to analyze how urbanization also causes environmental distress leading to eco-dystopia. *Monkey Man* has been the subject of urban studies, yet the notions of anxiety and dystopia are relevant today. It intends to remind the city dwellers that they can survive with minimal nature exposure but cannot live a wholesome life without it. The objectives of this research could be achieved by combining the idea of urbanization and eco-dystopia with ecocritical theory.

Keywords- Urbanization, Eco-dystopia, Urban-anxiety, Eco-anxiety, and Sustainability

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INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is converting rural places into cities or making cities more advanced to attract a colossal population to the city. During this process, the ecological landscapes are converted into malls, IT parks, extensive transportation lanes, and others for the use of developmental projects. One could wonder how these development initiatives that improve cities contribute to people's fear and anxiety. It is because the cons of urbanization surpass the pros. Urbanization threatens human sustainability and complicates and disrupts ecological balance, resulting in eco-dystopia. Urbanization leads to forest encroachment, loss of agricultural lands, species extinction, loss of fresh water, and other ecologically dystopic consequences which create anxiety about sustainability.

Dystopian literature emerged as a response to Utopian literature. However, dystopia is not the mere flip of utopia. The idealized utopia is something that has never existed and will never exist. On the contrary, dystopia portrays the chaotic, terrible future conditions that cause things to collapse. Moreover, dystopic societies are frightening and anxious, always posing a threat to sustainability. Hughes and Wheeler elaborate on the state of contemporary eco-dystopic societies,

In many contemporary eco-dystopias, technological progress means both a movement away from and simultaneously a movement into or towards nature-away from nature-as-wilderness, but towards nature-as-garden, a constructed, mediated, engineered nature that is still essential to

our definitions of urban space or technological utopia (2013, p. 03).

While eco-dystopia is the battle between natural and unnatural life forms, Eco-dystopia leads to urban anxiety. Urban anxiety is somewhat similar to terms like “eco-anxiety,” “ecological sadness,” and “eco-angst” (Coffey et al., 2021, p.1). All these terms refer to the stress and fright caused by deteriorating environmental conditions. It is pertinent to get acquainted with all these terms to analyze Usha K.R’s, *Monkey Man*. According to Analisa DeGrave, “For centuries literature has constituted a space upon which authors project their visions and hopes for a better world” (2007, p.89). To create a better world, Usha structured the plot in an urban context to raise awareness throughout the novel.

Usha K.R is a Bangalore-based fiction writer. Her works have been short-listed for many awards like DSC Prize and Commonwealth Prize. Her famous work *Monkey Man* is the epitomic portrayal and the fatal transition of Bangalore city. The novel is about the people of Ammanagudi Street spotting a strange creature, and that creature is said to be the metaphorical representation of the fear within people. Usha K.R paints the anxiety-induced urban intensities through her excellent characterization. The novel incorporates a plethora of instances and characters with its urban background, like call-center culture, IT culture, apartment culture, fast-food culture, and tech culture, to depict how Bangalore has been urbanized.

THE PERVASION OF URBANIZATION IN MONKEY MAN

Nicolas Kenny provides a detailed description of the city as follows:

It is difficult to conceive cities without imagining the multitude of emotions that animate life on their streets and in their buildings-the excitement of a crowded shopping district, ... the romance of an evening stroll when the shine of the streetlight glimmers in the falling snow, not to mention the frustrations of incessant traffic jams, ... the anger over the cruel displacements on which so much development has been and continues to be predicated, or fears of violence criminality that long lurked in many urban centers (2014, p.05).

Concurring with the description of Nicolas Kenny, the pervasion of urbanization could be traced from the cover page of the novel. The cover page depicts skyscrapers and multiple urban and cosmopolitan constructions. These architectural references represent “an increasing amount of land consumption – namely the transformation of green spaces to built-up areas, described as landscape urbanization” (Güneralp & Dahiya, 2020, p.25). The cover page is set in twilight, and it is the symbolic representation of the dusk of non-urban life. In addition, the cover page also depicts the

busy city with lights illuminating every corner of the city as G.S. Sujantha comments, “This tribe of young generation works while India sleeps” (2019, p.06).

A fleet of birds moves toward their nest in the twilight, whereas, on the cover page, only a few birds are spotted. It could be considered a severe threat to the ecosystem because of urbanization. Finally, a giant monkey-like creature appears on the page, and its representation is ambiguous. Does it allude to the city’s grotesque spirit, which is expanding quickly? or is it just a monster stranded in the city? Nitonde defines cities by “...its buildings, roads, infrastructure, and various materialistic aspects”. The entire illustrations seem to fit into the definition of the city by Nitonde and Nicolas Kenny. The cover page incites fear, leading readers to a traumatic circumstance because of urbanization.

URBAN TRENDS IN THE PROLOGUE

The prologue precedes the analysis of the cover page. The prologue’s commencement is bizarre because it begins with a description of the weird creature, “In the first week of the new millennium, the strange creature was spotted for the first time” (Usha, 2010, p. 03). Following that, Usha introduces Ammanagudi Street in Bangalore, where the entire novel takes place. The description of the street has some intangible qualities of urbanization because of the jam-packed traffic, utility holes, dirt, and pollution. As Niranjana Sahoo remarks, “By most indications, the future of India seems to be urban” (2017, p.01). Espousing to Niranjana Sahoo’s remarks, the state of Ammanagudi Street is an indication that Bangalore city is stepping into an urban era. From this analysis, it is deciphered that the urban process happens mainly on the spatial level.

DESCRIPTION OF ANXIOUS AND URBANIZED SOCIAL LIFE IN AMMANAGUDI STREET

Usha brilliantly propounded the invasion of urbanism in Bangalore city. Firstly, increasing plastic use is a sign of urbanization. Plastics are an inherent part of urban life. When Usha explains the packaging of cornflakes in the opening chapter of the book, she draws attention to the use of plastic: “And the flakes had come in plastic packets, manufactured by the same people who ran the distilleries for the local liquor company” (2017, p.09). True to the saying of Victoria Kwaka and Alfonso Gracia Mora reports that South Asians generate the most plastic pollution due to urbanization.

Secondly, there is a strong representation of the growing apartment culture. Apartment culture is the greatest hindrance for people to communicate and socialize. Furthermore, apartments restrict nature exposure. Shrinivas Moorthy’s family lives in a congested apartment. Shrinivas’s mother disapproves of the emerging urban culture. She is the character of condemnation towards urban trends. She dislikes everything from packed and processed milk in plastic covers and electronic mixer grinders replacing grinding stones to readymade dosa batter.

Shrinivas's mother's intense feeling about living in a naturally surrounded environment is highlighted when Usha says, "His mother has lived with him in the flat for a few years, bewildered, ill-at-ease in the confined space, before moving to Mysore to live with his sister in a house with a garden; she said her daughter needed help with her three small children" (2010, p.15). She yearns to live with her sister in Mysore, who has a spacious house surrounded by nature. She dislikes staying in the flat without communicating with people and dislikes the fact that their flat is not amidst the natural environment. This is a sign that she is suffering from 'nature-deficit disorder.

Thirdly, Usha emphasizes Bangalore's IT industry invasion and call center culture. The goal is to show that the negative aspects of urban life outweigh the positive aspects, not to incite animosity toward urban life. One might gauge how urbanized Bangalore has become by looking at the changes Ammanagudi Street has experienced—comparing Ammanagudi Street before and after urbanization is painful. When Shrinivas Moorthy was a youngster, Ammanagudi Street was not as urbanized as it is now. When he was a child, "The Ammanagudi Street of his boyhood was a nice mix of cows and men, and of course, the goddess after whom the street was named" (2010, p.13). Now, Ammanagudi Street is crowded with software firms and IT parks. IT sectors attract people from various places as they provide huge income. Even though IT firms pay well, there are still drawbacks to working there, including long hours and job uncertainty (Tacoli et al., 2015). The advent of the IT sector is one of the reasons for growing anxieties and stress.

There is a significant allusion to the 'flour mill' in historic Ammanagudi street. Everyone in the Ammanagudi household used to bring wheat and rice to be processed in the flour mill when Shrinivas was young. The area is now filled with fast-food restaurants, and even instant idli batter is sold. Usha always manages to highlight the novel's urban undertones, and this time, she dragged up the supermarket culture. The next-door Kirana business used to be frequented by customers. Nowadays, individuals bring their trollies to upscale stores. Though supermarkets benefit from no customer-goods separation, people often buy optional things. Most significantly, supermarkets are threats to local retailers and hawkers. Hamil Atham researched to examine the threat that supermarkets provide to suburban shops. He reports that

The supermarket made an adverse impact on the sales and profit of small retailers. The impact is invariably on all formats of small retailers. There is a reduction in the customer base for small retailers. Suburban small retailers feel that the solid capital base, Mega size appearance, and the all under one roof are the main features that lure shoppers (2011, p.67).

These urban trends pose tension and anxiety among characters. This discerning street shift is agonizing and replete with emerging urban trends. Though urbanization

provides multiple benefits, many people still struggle to adapt to urban trends and lifestyles, resulting in anxiety.

ECO-DYSTOPIA DUE TO URBANIZATION

Dystopia, in general, is a circumstance where the happenings are utterly chaotic. Dystopian novels are futuristic, and it warns the readers about the cataclysmic happenings of the future. Dystopias are the sequela of the actions that are done being inconsiderate of the impending out-turns. On the same token, eco-dystopia depicts the chaos and imbalances in the environment and the critique of apocalyptic possibilities in the environment due to human flaws in embracing inappropriate trends. According to Kerim Can Yazgünoğlu, eco-dystopian texts "... sets out to rethink the narrative texture of the present, in the shadow of ecocatastrophe" (2020, p.89).

Eco-dystopia criticizes the human relationship with nature and the natural environment. Humans regard nature as a separate entity, and this idea of considering nature as a distinct entity is one of the reasons for eco-dystopic scenarios. Another potential cause of eco-dystopia is urbanization. It is complex to decipher the interconnected consequences of urbanization on the environment. Additionally, inhumanity towards nature is one of the prominent traits of people currently obsessed only with urban trends that ignore nature from spatial, temporal, and mental perspectives of life. These aspects are evident in the illustrations in *Monkey Man*.

The Urbanized state of Bangalore can be visualized when Usha describes the traffic congestion, life in compact apartments, IT firms, supermarkets, call centers, plastic litter, maintenance holes, substantial construction sites, pollution, and the other ongoing developmental projects in the city. Usha K.R deliberately minimizes depiction and narration of nature to expose to the readers that nature is at the fringes of the cityscapes, or the natural scapes are manicured in the form of lawns, parks, tamed gardens, and pot plants. Therefore, it indicates that Ammanagudi Street in Bangalore is nature deprived.

Following this, obsession towards urbanization could be observed when Jairam, a friend of Shrinivas Moorthy, bought an expensive and modern duplex flat. This flat is contradictory to the conventional Indian housing system that is usually with "... relatively small front yards and huge backyards" where the backyards are allocated for cattle sheds, plantation, wells, toilets, and compost pits, and front yards contain Holy basil and small temple structure that is accessed by anyone (Kotharkar & Deshpande, 2012). Nature was primarily ignored by the modern housing system or the expanding apartment culture, and in some homes, nature is manicured in the guise of gardens, lawns, and potted plants for aesthetic reasons. This is called an aesthetic revolution in urban spaces. Although the displacement of nature in the houses may appear inconsequential, it could result in catastrophic ramifications. This decline of nature consciousness among city dwellers is a catalyst in making the ecosystem dystopic.

Additionally, the incident of a snake entering the office where Neela works vividly indicates the ongoing encroachment and excessive urban interference that disrupts the order and balance in the ecosystem. The fascination towards urban trends is because people believe that it can make the place utopic, but the results are not desirable and as expected and believed by the city dwellers. These situations mark the beginning of ecologically chaotic (dystopic) scenarios that put people in an anxious living environment.

ECO-ANXIETY AND URBANIZATION

“Eco-anxiety” is the term coined by Glenn Albrecht, and it is defined as an “... anxiety experienced in response to the ecological crisis” (Coffey et al., 2021, p.01). Urbanization causes eco-anxiety and results in ecologically dystopic scenarios. The peril of excess urbanization is elaborated as it is “... the imagination of a critical dystopian future, extrapolated from our contemporary liquid modernity, in which the posthuman has become a tangible reality that is trying to establish a position in the ‘natural order’ and ultimately ends up threatening to replace the human completely” (Tanritanir & Karaman, 2021, p.49). Urbanization and technological advancements are close associates. *Monkey Man* has sufficient evidence to support the claim that urbanization, industrialization, and technological progress have both benign and malignant effects.

Usha vividly describes the transformation of Ammanagudi Street then and now. The street has become an IT hub from a serene, rustic culture. The first evidence is that every Indian has basic Santro and Maruti to contemporary SUVs (Usha, 2010). “The stench of cow excrement was usually present in Ammanagudi Street” (2010, p. 13); there is no longer any indication of cattle because IT firms line the street. People’s fascination with hedonistic lifestyles is the primary driver of the stressed and ecologically dystopian society. Urbanization and technological development promote this affluent way of living. This is one of the main reasons for urban sprawl, and by 2050, 80 percent of people will be living in urban spaces, as stated by Katy Dartford (2022). Without question, urbanization accelerates a country’s economic standing, which is why it is referred to as an “engine of economic growth” (Dadi et al., 2016). People failed to integrate nature into their life because it was pushed to the periphery in an economic battle.

Sarawut Kururatphan observes that men have other objectives beyond their concern for nature. He continues, “Consequently, money and affluence become the ultimate indicator of one’s social status as well as a guarantee of a contented life by a consumerist standard” (2022, p.06). The second evidence is when Shrinivas Moorthy retrospects the bungalow that his grandfather had with fruit-bearing sapota and mango trees. Every traditional Indian home was built with a backyard set aside for creating a kitchen garden. His mother is the significant character who explicitly refutes the urban changes, especially concerning the ecosystem. People cannot connect with nature because of the expanding

apartment culture. These are the grave, ecologically dystopian situations that Usha fears.

URBAN VS NON-URBAN

With the support of the many incidents and characters, Usha skillfully contrasted urban and non-urban lifestyles to illustrate how dystopic the city has become. There are concrete depictions of the emerging urban culture. There is a frequent reference to the use of plastics, urban constructions like IT firms, constant traffic congestion, excessive pollution, digging trenches and utility holes for construction projects, condominiums, fast-food chains, and supermarkets. The urban illustrations in the novel are reminiscent of Nissim Ezekiel’s poem “Urban,” in which he describes the collapsing society in metropolitan Bombay and the urban culture and ethos of its inhabitants. Ezekiel dejectedly draws attention to the changes that Mumbai underwent, and it is evident in the poem. He comments on mountains that have gone far, damaged roads, dry rivers, traffic, and a city that never rests. The city does not provide space for nature and natural happenings. Therefore, nature is at the fringes of the cityscapes, and the situation turns dystopic. Removing nature from our lives is going to create an utterly dystopic situation.

On the other hand, Pushpa Rani is a non-urban character with a rural upbringing who transforms into an urban figure as the story progresses. Pushpa Rani is a typist who works for daily wages. Pushpa is a native of Sundarapalaya, a rural outpost far from the metropolis. Her mother looked after the vegetable garden, while his father used to sell vegetables in the market. The entire family had a happy and fulfilling life surrounded by the natural environment. Pushpa Rani’s non-urban existence is described differently than the other characters’ lives. In her village, there are no apartments; they only have sparsely located hut houses; instead of tar roads, they only have mud tracks, and agricultural fields exist near the landlord’s farmhouses. However, as the novel proceeds, Pushpa sprawled to Ammanagudi Street as her village lacked the basic facilities.

Urbanization in Bangalore was significantly spatial. It means fertile lands, forest areas, and other green spaces are utilized for economic and aesthetic developments. It is remarked by Zuhail that “...these lands are important for the sustainability of agriculture of the country. However, this sustainability is endangered as urban sprawl increases, and agricultural land is lost (2016, p.817). In addition to the remark of Zuhail, Rehman and Khan state, “The fertile agricultural land is continuously converting into built-up areas reducing the capacity of food production and bringing down the livelihood opportunities associated with agricultural land” (2022, p.01).

Nature has lost its sense both spatially and temporally because of urban development. If at all nature is positioned in an urban setting, it is positioned in the form of a perfectly tamed garden or a park devoid of wilderness. Usha’s condemnation of encroachment is apparent when she describes an instance of a snake entering the office where Neela worked. This occurrence is a clear example of how

encroachment leads to ecological imbalances, which in turn cause catastrophic environmental disasters that endanger people's quality of life. Individuals are hesitant to jeopardize the urban amenities to tackle ecological issues. The reason behind people detesting jeopardize is that cities provide better opportunities than rural places. Cities feed people's hedonistic and affluent urges. People's hedonistic and wealthy impulses are satiated by urbanization.

Although a city has everything, it needs more room to accommodate nature. City dwellers failed to embrace nature while experiencing the urban amenities. These ecologically dystopic situations scare the urban inhabitants, but some characters in the novel are unbothered by the consequences. Few characters lament over the city's transformation as a result of urbanization. The characters are caught in a dilemma of whether to accept the modern trends or manage to live with their urban uneasiness.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis, it is comprehended that the majority of the urban footprints significantly occur on the geographical level around the world; urban rates are accelerated in India's most significant cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Chennai. They are now the leading metropolis of the country. On the one hand, urbanization opens numerous opportunities and contributes to the growth of a nation. On the other hand, it threatens the sustainable condition of people in an utterly dystopic condition posing a stressful and anxious living atmosphere.

No one method can be used to address the effects of urbanization. The solutions need to be configured to the changing problems. Despite this, well-known strategies have been shown to reduce the adverse effects of urbanization. First, the compact city idea is an earlier idea that generated the best outcomes, such as reduced urban sprawl, low energy usage, restricted land use, and intended use of natural spaces. Second, research recommended keeping a solid connection to nature by planting trees in urban areas as a coping mechanism for anxiety. It assists in reducing urban anxiety spurred on by nature deficit disorder. *Monkey Man* is a more socially and environmentally conscious novel because it leaves a social or ecological message to the future.

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