

## **GRAPHIC NARRATION OF ECOLOGICAL THEMES IN *GUN ISLAND* AND *THE MAN WITH THE COMPOUND EYES***

**C. Tak<sup>1</sup> and R. Arora<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Languages, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Manipal University Jaipur, RJ, India

<sup>2</sup>Department of Arts, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Manipal University Jaipur, RJ, India

<sup>1</sup>takcharu18@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

*A graphic narrative comprises an interaction between two intricately layered representational modes i.e. verbal and visual. This genre turns out to be meaningful and engaging especially with kids. However, lately engaging adults in communication via graphic narratives has started to gain traction where mere words have not received the desired response. The much talked about ecological and climate crises call for such immediate attention. In the wake of climate and environmental crises that reflect our cultural failure, there is a noticeable rise in non-fiction works based on climate change, conflict of interests, climate history, conservation, green energy- all promoting a green society. Also, in storytelling a shift in narrative from anthropocentrism to biocentrism has been witnessed. Some writers have consciously chosen to strike a balance between man and nature themes in their narratives. They have tried to interweave the ecological issues with other traditional themes in a local/remote realistic setting or a fantastical one.*

*This paper applies critical discourse analysis [CDA] methodology to examine the power dynamics within and across the plots specifically to evaluate the positioning of ecological issues. Further, this study graphically narrates the ecological themes as pervading the two Asian fictions – Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* and Wu Ming-Yi’s *The Man with the Compound Eyes*. *Gun Island* is rife with cross-cultural patterns and themes like migration, displacement, loss, climate change, cetacean stranding, man and nature conflict, quest for a bonding with nature. It spans across space with one of its stations being Sunderban mangroves. *The Man with the Compound Eyes* is a metafiction fanning from a fictional Wayo Wayo island far away in the Pacific to coastal Taiwan. It is a world of binaries -- indigenous and migrated, land and sea, mass/individual extinction and determination to survive; of ecological concerns such as the trash vortex in the Pacific, rising sea level, nuclear and other waste disposal, and marine ecosystem destruction.*

*The aim of this study is to propose that graphic narratives not only increase the visual appeal of a reading but also make it self-motivating. They enhance critical thinking, communicate with relevance in a compact manner and thus are considered more effective in sensitizing readers to ecological concerns when bound in a context or story.*

**Keywords:** *graphic narratives, environmental humanities, CDA, ecological concerns, semiotics, pragmatic relevance*

### **Introduction**

Our human mind is tuned to observing the world around; assimilate, arrange and accommodate the information into our mental schemas or representations. This helps us organize and store information in our brains.

The multimodality of human expression involves making utterances, moving bodies, creating graphic representations. These modalities are a blueprint of human communication inherited by children since their birth. Neil Cohn in his *The Visual Language of Comics* proposes that when any of these modalities is structurally sequenced ‘governed by rules that constrain the output— i.e. a grammar’, a type of language is yielded. This is how structured sequential images literally become visual languages. Visual languages are timeless by nature. They are dynamic as they can range from being concrete

to abstract; they can also range between being purely aesthetic and specifically educational. Further, human minds are naturally wired to observe, absorb and retain information that appeals to all their senses at once. One such medium of communication is imagery. The study of imagery lies at the heart of the two subject matters of cognitive psychology – memory and perception (Neisser, 1967).

### **Discussion and Analysis**

#### ***Text and Image***

The multimodal combination of text and image sometimes multiplies meaning termed as (Lemke, 1998) ‘meaning multiplication’ (Bateman, 2014). The idea here sounds gestalt meaning thereby that in apt conditions, the value of the combination of individual components or modes than the information gained from the modes when used in their own right. Thus, we could say that synthesis carries

more worth than combination often in the context of text and images. Text when multiplied by images can sometimes produce an exponential result. For such an effect it is integral to involve the reader into a potentially cohesive narrative having a long lasting impact. Therefore, context plays an important role in creating a tightly woven narrative.

### Context

Contextualization of a message to be conveyed is very important in communication. Storytelling uses this feature of context – binding in a cohesive and coherent manner. Narratives in all forms rely on context binding of setting, characters, dialogue for the message to be conveyed meaningfully. The communicative intent of a speaker loses its direction if the message is not bound in a relevant context. By relevant context we mean forming a practical association between the setting, characters, places, scenery, socio-economic and ecological issues.

The contextual theorists assert that ‘concepts precede percepts’ (Childs, 2006) and so all discourses can churn multiple meanings unless determined by some stipulated associations restrained by a context. An utterance is interpreted through the knowledge of contexts in which it occurs (Childs, 2006). It is true that we intellectually and communicatively gravitate towards a message that holds relevance, for our cognition works on the principle of cognitive economy i.e. maximizing relevance with less mental processing cost. Thus, a context not only defines the meaning of an utterance but also brings all associated links afloat on the surface of our conscious mind. As Halliday and Hasan (*Cohesion in English*, 1976) rightly claim that discourse analysis aims also to show how knowing about conventions in order to establish links between the sentences and with the context is integral for a successful communication. The communicative use of discourse analysis lies in its conceiving a literary work as an institution (Bateman, 2014) that mediates relations between reader and writer in order to convey the power dynamics as it exists or has existed or might exist in future within societies.

Additionally, the vastness of a discourse that holds multiple facets just like climate change

and ecology, it is essential to limit the periphery of meaning with the help of a context. When a potential discourse handles a small array from the exhaustive list of connecting links, delimiting becomes meaningful.

Hence, this study chooses two different narratives that have consciously pulled in the contemporary contexts concerning our ecology calling for immediate attention like global warming, rising sea levels, cetacean stranding, dead zones in oceans and rivers, wildfires, man-nature conflict, polluted waters inter *alia* in their plots and themes. The criss-crossed lives of the characters heavily rely on the intersecting climatic events in both the texts.

*Gun Island* (2019) [GI] is a historical fiction where nature acts as a driving force determining the direction of the lives of its characters while being in conflict with and also providing for them in general. Here, the physical boundaries between land and water are blurred within the coastal settings of Sunderbans and Venice mainly, both being archipelagos. Spreading spatially between West Bengal in India, Venice in Europe, Los Angeles in USA the present gets one with the past more than once. By the end it already connects the seventeenth century with the 21<sup>st</sup> century historically in terms of climatic events of droughts, floods, famines and epidemics leading to starvation, deaths, battles, trafficking and migration. The symbolism of supernatural powers gets associated with the characters –in dream or reality or prediction- especially to warn, direct or strike a fine balance between nature and commerce. Further, Ghosh has also delicately touched upon the disturbed ecological balance where the non-human entities are at the receiving end of human greed. In return, just like disoriented Irrawaddy dolphins rush aground, several natural events intersect at the same time for which there could be clear anthropogenic evidence.

In a similar payback, the trash vortex in the Pacific in *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011) [MCE] hits the east coast of Taiwan in which people can find all the once thrown away articles of no use which apparently the sea has refused to accept. In this dystopian fiction, nature holds space as a protagonist. From a remote Wayo Wayo Island to the urban

locality of Haven, Atilé'i had covered miles from indigeneity to the non-indigenous contemporariness. On the other hand, Alice moves from the desolation of committing suicide to wanting to save her own life. In a comparable state of being lonely, Hafay means to survive on her own terms. The supernatural and mythological entities are there to guide to the primitive yet virtuous path of living a minimalist life.

The converging theme of nature in both the narratives emphasize on the rising sea levels, marine litter, cyclones, marine life destruction, disturbing the ecological balance for man's amusement. Both the works give ecology and environment a deliberate upper hand over human existence. We can very well term them to be ecocentric in nature.

### *Communication of relevance*

Cognitive theory of communication- The theory of relevance: Relevance Theory as proposed by Dan Sperber and Dierdre Wilson (1986) aims to explain that the communicators usually convey much more information than the literal sense of their utterances. The theory contends that the acts of human verbal communication are ostensive in drawing attention of the addressee to the relevance of the information conveyed. The relevance of an utterance in this technical sense is one from which many conclusions can be drawn at a low processing cost or, in other words, the relevance of the address can be maximized with relatively less mental processing effort (Clark, 2013).

To infer conclusions from a communication, the addressee uses the information contained in the utterance together with his expectations about its relevance, his real-world knowledge, as well as sensory input. Here, differences in cultural, educational background as well as intelligence can affect the inference drawing process of communication. Therefore, the addressee can draw more conclusions if the utterance contains information that they already know or believe in. Such literal meaning is a mere part of the entire inference process. Sperber and Wilson characterize these features of verbal communication as ostensive-inferential communication comprising of a double layered intention, such as:

- a. The informative intention: the intent to inform an addressee of the communicative content.
- b. The communicative intention: the intent to inform the addressee of one's intention to communicate some information is termed as the communicative intention.

The theory of relevance calls for maximizing the relevance of an observed phenomenon by involving less mental processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1996). In other words, the extent of relevance of a communicative activity for an individual is defined by its larger positive cognitive effects (value addition to one's representational world) and low processing effort. This is similar to the mental strategy termed as cognitive economy where our cognitive capacities do the cost benefit analysis for an utterance.

Thus, this study engages into finding relevance in the multimodal communication of graphic narratives picked out from the ecological themes of the two contextual readings.

### *Categorization of ecological graphic narratives*

The graphic narratives for this study are chosen on the basis of select themes that present the ecological perspectives in the above mentioned two texts. Further, the informative intent of the selected graphic narratives is then classified on the basis of the structure of their content. The explanation for each category elicits their communicative intent, respectively.

#### *1. Comparison*

The communicative intent in these graphic narratives draws a comparative between different situations or scenarios. The two states could be of haves and have-nots, past and present (or future), ought to be and reality, and others.

Starting in the late 1990s warning systems for storms had been put in place across the region so there was plenty of time to prepare. Mass evacuations had been planned in advance and millions of people were moved to safety, in India and in Bangladesh. As a result the casualty count was surprisingly low, at least in relation to the cyclone of 1970. (GI, 2019, p. 52)

Figure1 (Chakravarty, 2020) draws a comparative between the two scenarios calculating the average cost of cyclone management plans – one where man spends crores of rupees on relief measures, and another, where conservation of mangroves and wetlands naturally protects the residents without incurring any heavy expenditure. This word-specific word-image relation casts a satire on the symbolic institution appointed for disaster relief actions in India. The trees shown in the last two frames are iconic of the mangrove trees with fractured knees. The last sequence animates a mangrove tree with its arms akimbo and calls for granting NDRF an abstract fund instead of a material one.

AVERAGE COSTS OF CYCLONE MANAGEMENT PLANS



COASTAL EVACUATION:  
> ₹ 1000 CRORE



RELIEF PACKAGES:  
> ₹ 1000 CRORE



CONSERVING MANGROVES AND LETTING THEM DO THEIR JOB: ₹ 0.



PLEASE DONATE SOME COMMON SENSE TO THE NATIONAL DISASTER RELIEF FUND.

www.greenhumour.com

Figure 1. Note. About Cyclone management and mangroves. From Green Humour, by Rohan Chakravarty, 2020, Greenhumour.com. CC-BY 3.0. Reprinted with permission.

“i[sic]t’s not parasites we got inside of us, it’s greed! If that’s what a demon is, there’s no way it’s imaginary. Shit no! We’re all demons.” (GI, 2019, p. 121)

HOW THE ENVIRONMENT MINISTRY SHOULD OPERATE



HOW IT OPERATES



www.greenhumour.com

FWW

Figure 2. Note. Satire on the operations of Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests Conservation [MOEFC]. From Green Humour, illustrated by Rohan Chakravarty for The Hindu Blink, 2017, Greenhumour.com. CC-BY 3.0. Reprinted with permission.

In figure2 (Chakravarty, 2017) shows a stark contrast between what ought to be and the reality as it is. The building is indicative of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) office.

Reader’s attention is caught by the labeling on the top of each of the two sections of the frame here which themselves inform about the difference between ‘should operate’ and ‘how it operates.’ The intent here is to communicate the difference between how things work at the government offices, unfortunately not in favour of the environment. The luring notifications issued from the building in the bottom section are symbolic of the greed and apathy of the government offices.

2. Elaboration

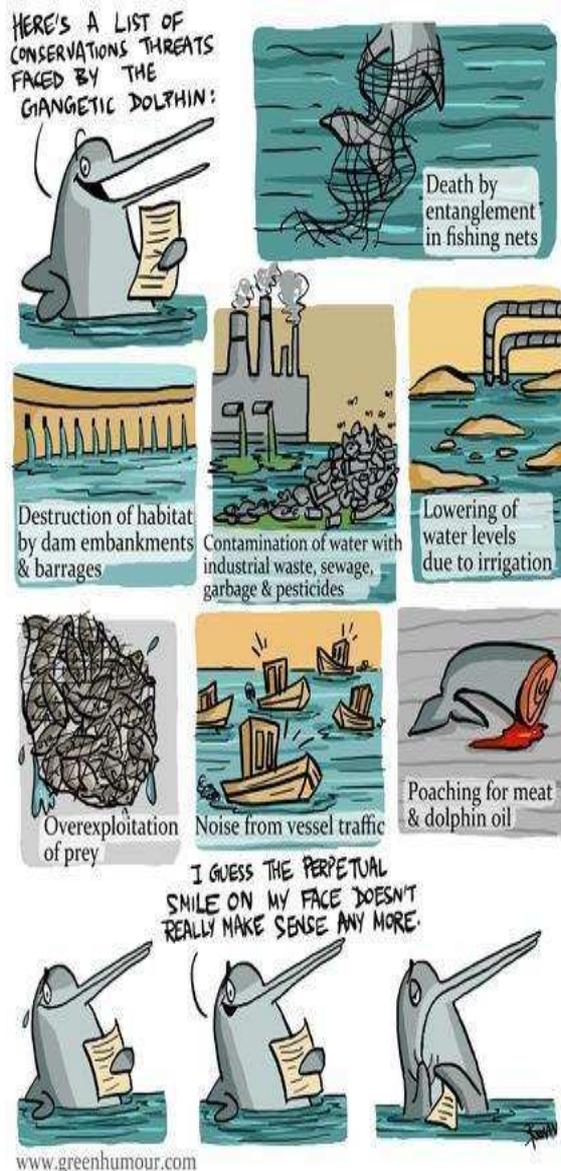


Figure 3. Note. . From Conservation threats to the Gangetic Dolphin, illustrated by Rohan Chakravarty for his Mid-Day column, 2016, Greenhumour.com. CC-BY 3.0. Reprinted with permission.

‘What’s a fish kill?’ ‘It’s when you find thousands of dead fish floating on the surface or washed up ashore. It’s happening all round the world with more and more chemicals flowing into rivers.’ (GI, 2019, p. 105)

Graphic narratives in a sequential comic strip form allow a detailed explanation of a topic, causes and consequences of a situation. Fig 3 (Chakravarty, 2016) is an exhaustive list of the reasons why the conservation measures for Indo-Gangetic dolphins are immediately called for.

The visual prompts alongside a related text amplify the effect of a narrative manifold. Interestingly, a comic strip can engage a combination of text-image relationships. Ranging from being word specific to picture specific to duo-specific and to being interdependent, figure 3 serves an edutaining message to the reader (McCloud, 1994).

3.Language



Figure 4. Note. A thought about wetland conservation on World Wetland Day. From World Wetland Day, by Rohan Chakravarty, 2017, Greenhumour.com. CC-BY 3.0. Reprinted with permission.

“If so, she might be able to prove her hunch about animal die-offs in the Sundarbans being linked to the dumping of toxic effluents. And that in turn might help to shut down the refinery.” (GI, 2019, p. 193)

The content in figure 4 (Chakravarty, 2017) and figure 5 (Chakravarty, 2012) bring meaning mainly by attracting reader’s attention to the linguistic spell-check . The communicative intent of the graphic narratives lies in the play of language. Both the narratives use elision of vowel phonemes to be precise. Thus, /e/ in ‘wetland’ and /əʊ/ in ‘mangrove’ are elided.



Figure 5 Note. About the fragile ecosystem of Sunderbans in India and Bangladesh. From *The Green Humour of Rohan Chakravarty*, illustrated by Rohan Chakravarty for *A Passarinhóloga*, 2012, (<http://apassarinhologa.com.br/en/the-green-humor-of-rohan-chakravarty>)

Further, in both the cases epenthesis (Crystal, 2008) is used as a linguistic device. Epenthesis is an addition of one or more sounds to a word (Crystal, 2008). In figure 4, after eliding the monophthong a diphthong /ei/ and a consonant /s/ are added thus converting 'wetland' to 'wasteland'.

In figure 5 (Chakravarty, 2012), the word 'MANGROVE' has been edited to 'MANGRAVE' by eliding the diphthong /əʊ/ and then adding the diphthong /ei/ to the spelling. This kind of misspelling is called satiric misspelling. However, as one notices the mangrove indicated in the backdrop of the narrative has not only linguistically but also literally turned into a man-grave.

#### 4. Motion

The graphic narratives which are dominated by motion of some kind- slow or fast, fall into this category. The two categories of motion considered are cyclic and acyclic.

##### a. Cyclic

"Dr Eriksen said that what goes into the ocean goes into these animals and onto your dinner plate. It's that simple." (MCE, 2011, p. 122) The content in fig 6 (Chakravarty, 2017) is structured in a cyclical way indicating the process or movement from one point or stage to another. The picture-specific feature of the narrative makes it more interesting where the plastic waste thrown away unabashedly as garbage gradually enters the food cycle of the ecosystem only to be consumed by him again though internally now as food.



Figure 4. Note. From *Water and plastic waste*, illustrated by Rohan Chakravarty for NDTV's *Cleanathon*, 2017, *Greenhumour.com*. CC-BY 3.0. Reprinted with permission.

##### b. Acyclic

"The news channels adopted a tragicomic tone, declaring that in the vortex, almost everyone would be able to find almost everything he'd ever thrown away in his entire life." (MCE, 2011, p. 75) In figure 7 (@Hemant Moraparia, 2018) shows the acyclic return of garbage from nature and it looks like an *action-reaction play*. The graphic narrative comically stages a payback from nature for all the garbage humans have treated it with. In MCE, a huge trash vortex in the Pacific Ocean breaks up and ends up hitting coastal Taiwan bringing back with it stuff that people all over the world had thrown away as trash that landed up in the seas.



Figure 7. Note. From climate change from 2008: Nature’s revenge, now even more furious, by Hemant Morparia (@Hemant Morparia), 2018, (<https://twitter.com/hemantmorparia/status/1018441380828467203/photo/1>). Copyright © 2021 Twitter, Inc.

### 5. Collated Info-graphics

The collated information in the form of graphics can communicate at various levels in a concise manner. These can have icons, indices and symbols as well; however, a single sign can predominantly rule the sign-object relationship in such info-graphics.

a. Iconic Collated Info-graphics: According to Peirce, some signs derive their meaning by resembling what they mean. Such signs are called icons, hence iconic.

‘The Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that’s exactly where the war between profit and Nature is fought. What could be a better place to build a shrine to Manasa Devi than a forest teeming with snakes?’ (GI, 2019, p. 8)

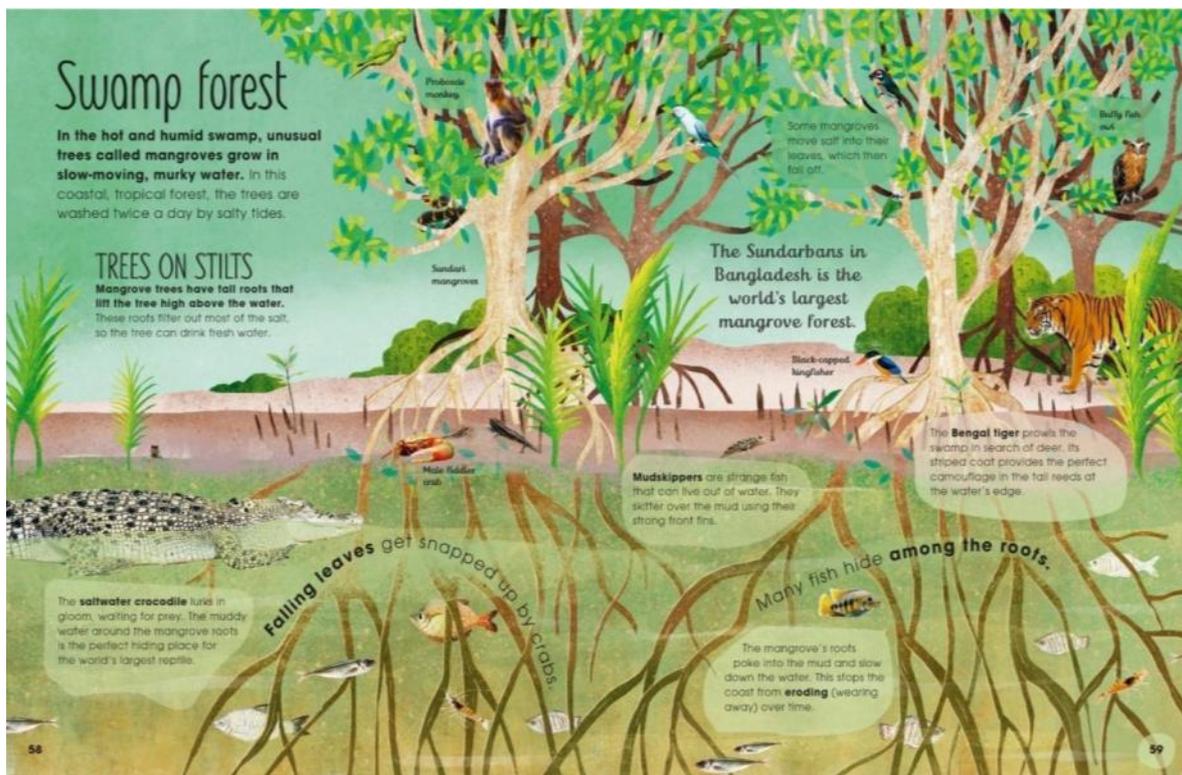


Figure 8 Note. From Swamp forest in *The magic & mystery of trees*, by Jen Green, 2019. DK PRH. Copyright © 2019 Dorling Kindersley Limited.

In figure8 (Green, 2019, p. 58) narrative the explicit iconic details of a swamp forest in association with Sunderbans is a visual feast to a reader’s eyes. Here, in addition to being inter-dependent and containing additive words, the

text-image relation runs parallel many a time which means that (Bateman, 2014) “words and pictures follow different courses without interacting.”

b. Indexical Collated Info-graphics: In Peircean semiotics, some signs derive their meaning by causing or indicating meaning in something else and are called Indices. The indexical collated info-graphics in Figure 9 (French, 2019, p. 34) is principally in the form of maps with locations pinned and other physical events and motions indicated over it.

Once a friend, the sea will become a foe. It once gave but now it will take. Yet you must still rely on it, trust in it, worship it. Hearken, ye people, my song will turn to rain, my gaze to lightning, as my mind is all-pervading like the water of the sea. The words I utter will become the spirits of the deep. They will watch over you and edify you. (MCE, 2011, p. 156)



Figure 9. Note. From Save our seas! in *What a waste: Rubbish, recycling, and protecting our planet*, by Jess French, 2019. DK PRH. Text copyright © Jess French 2019.

### Conclusion

Human cognition is greatly affected by the sensory perceptions received from their surroundings. A communicative act where the visual, auditory perceptions are involved catch immediate attention of the human eye. Observations that positively impress upon the cognitive faculties sustain longer in our memory. Thus, when our interaction with the surroundings leaves a positive impression on our cognition and memory rather than provoking fear and anxiety, our response becomes more action or solution oriented. As a corollary, a multimodal interaction method involving text and image that is informative, thought-provoking and not fear-generating can be useful in attending to the pressing ecological concerns.

Ecocentrism as a philosophy, if made the core context around which a major proportion of our learning is centered, we will certainly be able to develop pro-ecology attitudes in our generations to come. These pro-green mindsets energize the central conceptual structures of a person's mind generating awareness, empathy and drawing connections with the surroundings and beyond. The importance of a learning in which human life becomes a subsystem in the larger scheme of nature than the other way round can be a major breakthrough in changing the mindsets. When people learn to correlate the impact of human actions, they become conscious of their choices. This is a way forward to turning our mindsets green. Graphic narratives help us learn in a most engrossing and informative way that all biotic and abiotic constituents of nature have their own intrinsic

value rather than just being instrumental in fulfilling human needs.

The paper studies some select eco-graphic narratives classified on the basis of the structure present in their content. The informative intent of these narratives thus can be related to comparison, elaboration, language, motion, collated info-graphics. The study therefore concludes that the

communication about ecological issues that otherwise apparently needs a scientific expertise, can be simplified and made available to the general masses –young and adults in the form of contextual eco-graphic narratives. This approach not only helps ease eco-anxiety but also allows the readers to be pro-active about changing their attitudes in favour of going green.

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