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Animating Ecological Concerns: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Study of *Burka Avengers*

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Original Article

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Abstract

The posit article is a critique on anthropocentric attitudes in Burka Avengers to highlight how socio-political landscape as a legacy of colonialism in the present-day Pakistan presents environmental concerns. Primarily, the animated series postulates social justice and girls' education. However, deep embedded, it attempts to create awareness regarding community responsibility towards pollution and water scarcity. The researchers have selected specific episodes from the series to explore the mentioned issues by employing qualitative research paradigm. By applying Braun and Clarks' (2006) thematic analysis and postcolonial ecocritical perspective, the researchers found that there is a close connection between governance failure, systemic inequality, and ecological damage. The researchers argue that ecological conservation is not only the moral obligation but also the cultural necessity to stop exploitative practices embedded in neocolonialism and globalized consumerism. The paper argues that Burka Avengers resists Western homogenic ecological standards through localized eco-friendly discourse. Animated discourse like the mentioned series may prove to be a good resource for children and youngsters to create awareness regarding environmental concerns.

Introduction

The convergence of postcolonial studies with ecocriticism is one of the most significant theoretical tendencies in contemporary literature and cultural research, which provides fruitful methods for the analysis of the ecological discourses created in the postcolonial states. The point of intersection is particularly critical in the context of children's media in the Global South, where the environmental concerns are never disconnected from the cultural sovereignty, epistemic justice and anti-Western paradigm. One such intricate interconnection of ecological consciousness and postcolonial criticism is the Pakistani animated series *Burka Avenger*, which came out in 2013. The series has a significant environmental agenda, including pollution and water shortage, by its protagonist, Jiya (a schoolteacher

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who transforms into a burqa-clad superhero using books and pens), and at the same time, it is critical of existing systems of environmental regulation and representation. This research paper employs the thematic analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2006) to systematically examine how *Burka Avenger* is a symbol of environmental concerns, how local tales challenge the Western ecological standards and how the commentary of governance failure intersects with ecological devastation.

Postcolonial ecocriticism is developed on the premise that it is impossible to consider environmental violence in isolation from the violence of the past, in terms of colonization, and the contemporary systems of power. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) state that postcolonial ecocriticism is concerned with transversal relationships between humans, animals, and the environment and, simultaneously, poses topical questions of global warming, food security, and resource depletion when taking into consideration colonial legacies (p. 8). Their initial contribution is that postcolonialism and ecocriticism were both developed to oppressive systems of domination, and their convergence is not only convenient but also essential to the understanding of environmental crises in the formerly colonized regions. This analytical paradigm is needed in the Pakistani context of *Burka Avenger* since the series is shifting between the local environmental context, including excessive water shortage, urban pollution, and climate insecurity, and the global environmental discourse, which has the tendency of marginalizing or distorting South Asian experiences.

Nixon (2011) defines slow violence as the destruction of the environment, which is slow, invisible and a violence of gradual destruction over time and space. This model is particularly practical in studying the quality of environmental degradation in *Burka Avenger*, since the series has to make visible the manifestations of environmental degradation, including pollution accumulation, aquifer loss, and soil pollution, which grow over time and disproportionately affect disadvantaged populations. Nixon indicates that slow violence causes the ecosystem and individuals living in poverty, disempowered, and frequently displaced to be more vulnerable (pp. 2-5). It is one thing that rings with South Asian environmental realities, wherein the burden of ecological degradation is usually imposed on the powerless. The children animation media has therefore to navigate the thin line of dramatizing these attrition disasters in a manner that will attract the kids without instilling crippling eco-anxiety, and yet not undermining the actual environmental threats.

Animation has proven to be among the best means of environmental education and raising children's awareness. Korfiatis et al. (2020) discovered that animated materials have meaningful effects on children in terms of their conceptualization of the environment, and children who are younger tend to have more environmental perception changes than those who are older after viewing environmentally related material (p. 381). Their research demonstrates that the aesthetic component of animation allows the representation of complicated ecological concepts in easy-to-understand formats and can be helpful in delivering environmental problems and potential solutions. However, Korfiatis et al. (2020) also add that children are not just consumers of social messages or representations, but they process them based on the interpretative lenses that constitute the results of the current worldviews or experiences (p. 381). This fact is central to the discussion of the *Burka Avenger* as the series needs to find the balance

between the knowledge of the surroundings that Pakistani children learn in school and family life, and the environmental messages the series aims to convey.

Pedagogical features of environmental animation are not confined to simple delivery of facts but also to the perception of young audiences as to their relation to the environment and the way they can contribute to the resolution of environmental problems. Guryel and Oze (2023) note that animation is especially suitable in environmental communication since it may be used to reduce the distance that exists between the scientific and the real world, allowing the audience to feel less distant from the environmental concern. This skill of creating emotional and cognitive linkage is especially useful in the postcolonial setting, where Western ecological discourse might not apply to the local ecological requirements or culture of the environment. The animated works of South Asia, including the *Burka Avenger*, can promote alternative ecological epistemologies based on specific ecological and cultural settings to disrupt the monopoly of Western scientific knowledge in environmental decision-making and representation.

The meaning of *Burka Avenger* is not limited to entertainment but also to cultural work that conserves and transmits information about the environment and shapes modes of civic action in response to ecological problems. The innovative mode of environmental representation in the series makes it a worthwhile place to study how the media of South Asian children balance between local and global environmental discourses. The main character of the series represents various forms of resistance: against gender-based educational exclusion, against local corruption, and against environmental exploitation. This polyvalent opposition indicates that, in postcolonial settings, environmental politics cannot be detached from the wider struggle for social justice, political engagement, and cultural independence.

The study will add to the ever-expanding literature on postcolonial ecocriticism by focusing on media portrayals of environmental concerns by South Asian children in specific cultural and political contexts. Although the literature has examined Western environmental animation in detail, very little has been done on the Global South productions that could present other environmental epistemologies and governance critiques. Through a systematic study of the environmental representation of *Burka Avenger* within a postcolonial ecocritical framework, this paper sheds light on how animated media can be used as a source of environmental education, cultural preservation, and political activism. The results will show how the series explores the tricky ground between building environmental awareness, making local environmental knowledge central, and criticizing systemic failures in environmental governance.

Based on the above discussion, the study focusses on the following three questions:

1. How does *Burka Avengers* represent environmental issues such as pollution and water scarcity?
2. In what ways does the series resist Western ecological standards through localized narratives?
3. How do governance failures and systemic inequalities intersect ecological damage in the series?

Literature Review

Huggan and Tiffin (2015) state that postcolonial ecocriticism should take into consideration the functioning of developmental agendas imposed by external actors, as well as the types of neo-colonial practices that tend to ignore local knowledge systems and environmental priorities. The research question, therefore, examines how the series could present Pakistani views on the environment, stewards, community-based resource management, and indigenous ecological knowledge in ways that undermine the universalization of Western environmental paradigms.

According to Guryel and Öze (2023), animation is an especially appropriate medium in environmental communication, as it can help bridge the gap between scientific concepts and real-life scenarios, enabling viewers to engage more with environmental issues. The medium's flexibility allows it to depict both realistic environmental degradation and imaginative solutions, enabling the audience to envision other possible futures. This ability is particularly valuable in postcolonial settings where environmental discourses must balance global environmental discourse with local ecological realities.

The media portrayal of pollution to children has a special implication in the development of environmental awareness. Landrigan et al. (2018) found that children are disproportionately affected by environmental pollution due to their developing bodies and longer exposure times, leading to long-term health effects. In portraying pollution in children's media, it should strike a balance between raising awareness without causing paralyzing eco-anxiety, while avoiding the downplaying of real environmental hazards.

Environmental justice models demonstrate that disadvantaged groups disproportionately bear the burden of pollution. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2024), the failure of environmental governance systems to address environmental crises has been accompanied by consistently low representation of marginalized groups in decision-making. The animated stories that address pollution should thus not only focus on the technical problem of environmental degradation, but also on the social, political, and economic systems that generate unequal environmental costs.

Water scarcity in South Asia is a multi-layered environmental, political, and social phenomenon that extends beyond mere resource availability. According to Hanasz (2014), the greatest challenges of water scarcity in South Asia are essentially governance issues, not a lack of physical availability. The distribution of finite water resources among competing uses, industrial development, environmental flows, fishing revenues, and hydroelectricity production shows how deeply political water distribution is.

Lee and Tan (2021) discuss water literacy in Southeast Asia, where water conditions have shifted toward relative scarcity, and traditional management strategies focused on supply provision are insufficient to ensure long-term sustainability. The numerous administrative units involved in managing water issues often generate conflicting and contradictory claims, thereby weakening the effectiveness of environmental governance. These system failures lead to situations in which communities develop alternative approaches to water security beyond formal institutional frameworks.

The Pakistani animation industry has become a major player in media production in South Asia, producing works that address not only local but also universal issues. Khan (2024) traces the history of Pakistani animated movies, from the early years of animation, such as the 3 Bahadur series, to more

recent environmentally oriented films, such as *Allahyar* and the *Legend of Markhor*, that merged a positive environmental message with high-quality animation. These works show a desire to make the Pakistani culture, landscapes, and social issues central to the stories that child viewers can enjoy.

According to Rashid (2015), *Burka Avenger*, which debuted in Pakistan in August 2013, received international recognition, including the Peabody Award and the Asian Media Award, and addressed topics such as the education of girls and environmental pollution. The protagonist of the series, a teacher named Jiya who transforms into a burqa-wearing superhero with books and pens as weapons, is a creative response to various forms of oppression, yet she is not out of place in the local cultural setting. This regional treatment of superhero texts is quite different from the content of Western environmental education, which tends to homogenize environmental issues without paying close attention to historical and political context.

Bhattacharya et al. (2020) discuss how animation studios in South Asia are promoting localized narratives that establish a sense of belonging to a particular cultural landscape rather than repeating Western animation tropes. Other studios, such as Ghost Animation in India and Mano Animation in Pakistan, have focused on original scripts that capture local environmental concerns, architectural themes, and social dynamics. This adherence to cultural particularism is a kind of opposition to the homogenizing nature of global media markets.

Syed (2017) points out that digital animation offers a channel for storing and transmitting South Asian cultural heritage to younger generations who may not be connected to traditional storytelling methods. The continuity between the past and the present is achieved through animation that retells folk tales, documents historical events, and addresses issues in modern society, making cultural knowledge accessible through modern media formats. This cultural piece is especially significant in situations where colonial education systems undermined the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and local histories.

Bhambra and Newell (2023) state that climate colonialism is used to refer to the ways Global North climate policies perpetuate colonial dynamics of extraction by exploiting Indigenous territories, excluding Indigenous rights and knowledge, and imposing conservation and renewable energy policies without their consent. This structural analysis demonstrates how supposedly progressive environmental campaigns can recreate the colonial relations of power when they do not make the agency and knowledge of impacted communities central. Decolonizing environmental action does not just entail incorporating diverse voices but also reorganize the nature of decision-making authority and the knowledge systems that are valued.

Localized environmental discourses have the potential to disrupt the Western environmental paradigm by foregrounding epistemologies produced by specific ecological and cultural settings. Clapperton (2016) explores Indigenous ecological knowledge and claims that these knowledge regimes are complex conceptions of human-environment relations that have been systematically undermined by colonial education and resource management regimes. The acknowledgment of the Indigenous ecological knowledge as valid and valuable poses a challenge to the monopoly of Western scientific knowledge in the making of environmental decisions.

Indigenous knowledge systems provide alternative frameworks for understanding the relationships between humans and the environment that defy Western environmental standards. Young (2019) shows the effects of climate change on Indigenous people because of colonialism and a continuation of colonialism, where Western policies of community adaptation frequently leave unchanged the underlying social logics that generate ecological devastation. The diminishing of Indigenous knowledge to traditional ecological knowledge is a kind of epistemic violence that limits these holistic worldviews to small and manageable categories within Western science.

Environmental media for children are not only pedagogical in terms of mere information delivery but also influence how young viewers perceive their connection to the environment and their role in solving environmental issues. The European Commission's Eco-Animation project (2011) illustrates that there are deliberate attempts to use animated material to increase environmental awareness among children aged 5-8. The project was supposed to demonstrate that small steps, such as saving water, recycling, and switching to energy-efficient appliances, could enhance the quality of life and the future of the environment. Nevertheless, the project also highlighted conflicts between communicating with children about the environment and avoiding being overly didactic or preachy, so as not to turn young viewers off.

The anthropomorphizing of characters in environmental animation raises concerns about how it shapes children's perceptions of nonhuman nature. Kumaravelu and Christopher (2024) found that anthropomorphic media help children acquire realistic information about real animals and facilitate conceptual reasoning. They, however, observe that an anthropomorphic presentation can undermine information about true differences between species, especially behavioral dispositions. This conflict is indicative of wider debates over whether anthropomorphism can help people empathize and connect or misrepresent knowledge of nonhuman life.

Based on the above cited literature, the current body of knowledge has made significant contributions to thematic analysis techniques, environmental modeling in children's animation, and the development of South Asian animation industries that threaten the hegemony of Western media. Nevertheless, there remains a significant gap in understanding how certain South Asian animated works combine localized environmental discourses with cultural opposition to colonial structures. Although researchers have considered overall trends in environmental messaging in children's media and reported the emergence of culturally specific animation in Pakistan and India, very little research has been done to undertake thematic analyses of specific productions to understand how they both endorse local pressing environmental problems, such as water scarcity and pollution, and oppose Western ecological norms and knowledge regimes. Also, despite studies recognizing South Asian animations as producing alternative narratives grounded in cultural landscapes, little research has been conducted on the narrative strategies, visualities, and character development techniques these works use to foster environmental consciousness that challenges global North environmental governance strategies from indigenous perspectives. This is a critical gap, especially given that the water governance challenges in South Asia are rooted in political and social systems, not merely in resource scarcity. We do not have

detailed studies of how animated media render these systemic failures to young people in ways that foster agency without causing despair.

Significance of Study

This study is significant in three aspects. First, it expands the limited literature on environmental themes in non-Western children's media, thereby extending the ecocritical analysis beyond the Euro-American focus of the study. Second, it demonstrates that postcolonial ecocriticism may help discuss cultural products from regions where acute environmental crises result from colonial history and contemporary neo-colonial relations. Third, the study of how *Burka Avenger* delivers the message about environmental problems to the younger Pakistani audience helps to understand the capacity of the local media to introduce ecological awareness and a vision of the ecological future in the context of local knowledge and values rather than Western paradigms. As global climate change and biodiversity worsen, it is increasingly important to understand how different cultures respond to environmental problems through their own media.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Naeem and Ozuem (2023) build on thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) by highlighting the need to avoid preconceptions when establishing important themes, a goal-free evaluation described by Scriven (1991) as more consistent with inductive research, in which theories are formed by data rather than imposed on it. This method is especially useful for analyzing media used by children, where embedded messages can operate at multiple levels simultaneously. Thematic analysis is iterative, which enables the researcher to switch between the explicit content of the semantic content, what is said, and latent meanings, which are the underlying assumptions and ideologies that organize environmental representation.

This study conducts close readings of two environmentally focused episodes—"Protecting the Environment" and "Burka Avenger vs. The Smog Rocket"—as representative texts, supplemented by series paratexts (press, interviews, synopses) and reception materials. It interprets characterization, visual rhetoric, and plot mechanics through ecocritical and ecofeminist frameworks, attending to postcolonial political economy (industrial patronage, rural-urban divides) signaled by the villains' roles and the town's infrastructure. Episode selection is motivated by publicly available summaries and clips that foreground pollution, toxicity, and air quality, ensuring verifiability and enabling intertextual comparison.

Setting of the Story

Halwapur is a microcosm of a pedagogical microcosm: schools, markets, waterways, factory outskirts create a small geography where children can see the cause-effect relationships, as waste dumped - river contamination - plant death/animal mutations. This didacticity typical of edutainment is congruent with the ecocritical goals of making abstract harm and nonhuman agency material. The show makes literalist toxicity by turning fauna into mutants and a four armed plebeian who is forcibly turned into a waste-sucking mutant so that the elite violence against both labor and nature is on display to a child audience.

The twofold nature of industrialist and political fixer of Vadero Pajero is the concentration of the postcolonial nexus of capital and government that smooths the environmental externalities. Once the

toxic discharge is normalized, ecological damage ceases being an aberration but a governance issue. Baba Bandook is an opportunistic polluter (e.g., smog schemes) when it comes to enhancing his power, indicating that environmental degradation is not accidental but a tool that elites use to give order, make money, or exercise power. These character roles reflect broader media analysis of how mainstream stories talk about pollution, resource scarcity, and crisis politics.

Jiya, in her teaching of pedagogy, by day the figures knowledge, by night the figures knowledge, thus in both respects knowledge is preventive and reparative. The non-violent means of her arsenal (pens, books, schoolbags) turn power out of the masculinist violence of masculinity into communal care and learning. Ecofeminism understands this as a rejection of domination: Jiya struggles to shield the vulnerable groups and the more-than-human world without creating parents and offspring cycles of degradation, thus binds the women to ecological care in a way that children can understand. This ethics is framed by critical treatments of the gender politics of the series to reductive burqa discourses, which are used to understand the series.

This paper reads *Burka Avenger* through a postcolonial ecocritical lens: (1) Ecocriticism interrogates how cultural texts conceptualize nature, nonhuman life, and environmental ethics; (2) a postcolonial emphasis situates environmental narratives within histories of imperial extraction, uneven development, and representational politics; and (3) ecofeminism illuminates how the series binds care for nature to women's agency, opposing patriarchal and capitalist logics that devalue both. While academic and para-academic commentary has examined gender politics and Western gazes on Muslim women, the show's ecological pedagogy merits deeper attention.

Episode I: Protecting the Environment

The episode focuses on the factory of Vadero Pajero that was dumping toxic waste into a river, and it caused plants to die and animals to mutate; a peon was under the pressure to drink the waste and turned into a monster with four arms. Kabbadi Jan prepares a remedy; *Burka Avenger* has to stop the factory and to fight with the mutated worker. The storyline reveals a sequence of guilt (elite order - forced labour - ecological destruction - collective risk) which is broken by the heroine

The choreography of toxicity revolves in the episode as a social relation and not as a state of being a chemical. The metamorphosis of the peon allegorizes the process through which workers are made the initial flesh upon which the risk of the environment is taken, which in many cases involves coercion, as seen in the industrial South Asia with regard to work in terms of occupational exposure. Externalization is visualized by the contamination of the river: profit is privatized; expenditures are moved to the environment and poor people. To the child audience, the mutation effect makes the pollution of morality violent. To academics, it preconditions environmental justice: distribution of harm is imbalanced and hierarchical.

The antitoxin by Kabbadi Jan and the intervention of Jiya are indicators of community awareness and concern as restorative ecologies. Although superhero stories tend to reinstate a precarious status quo without altering the system (which is a frequent ecocinema critique), the pedagogy of *Burka Avenger* encourages children to see both the upstream (greedy factory, negligent governance, etc.) and downstream (cleanup, antidotes) solutions, a balance between immediate action and critical perspective of the system.

Episode II: Burka Avenger vs. The Smog Rocket

In a subsequent plot, Vadero Pajero is economizing by using plastics that are cheap, which creates a lot of smog in the chimneys, which Baba Bandoon then weaponizes as a smog rocket. It connects the manufacturing decisions to the security and health risk to the population using the plots of quality of industrial inputs, regulatory failure, and weaponized smog. The visual indicator grey skies, choking visibility makes the urban air legible to children, and this is reflected in the real experiences of most South Asian cities.

Air pollution is infamously invisible, and thus politically slippery. It is in a way literalized into spectacle with the so-called smog rocket, which makes one pay attention. Although other ecocinema critiques suggest that spectacles can reduce eco-messages to a trifle, in this case, it serves a pedagogical purpose: children are taught the cause and effect relationships (cheap plastics - dirty combustion - smog) and the social decision that underlies them. This is in line with the literature that has highlighted how mainstream entertainment can obstruct or clarify the ecological messages, depending on how the narrative is framed.

The episode exemplifies youth environmental citizenship by granting child sidekicks with agency and insight: they observe change, seek further knowledge, rejecting elite narratives (unavoidable costs of development), and collaborate with the heroine. The call is townish and practical: it wants to stop bad things, punish the polluters, and not resisting the immigrant savior motives. It also wants people to get involved in community.

Discussion

The most radical feature of *Burka Avenger* can be the narrator of the environmental damage. The series puts in the spotlight a local teacher-superheroine and village children, instead of Western NGOs or expatriate experts, and in the process, re-signifies agency and expertise. This is in line with postcolonial critiques that warn against depoliticized green humanitarianism that misunderstands structural factors and is excessively moralistic and individualistic. Villains in the series are not humans personified as humanity, but rather local elites, a politically savvy option.

The burqa is commonly fetishized by international discourses as being oppressive or exotic. The costume in *Burka Avenger* is not only functional and practical disguise that allows acting in the open but also not a symbol of inferiority, whereas Jiya, in her daily role, is already uncovered, professional, and respected. This resignification opposes securitized readings and does not conform to the sexualized superhero costuming that is popular in Western media, which places environmental and gender justice into aesthetically legible locally specific contexts.

Global superhero series often incorporate ecological fears of scarcity, overpopulation, apocalypse and can even promote authoritarian or Malthusian solutions, as in issues of interpretation of Thanos and resource politics. *Burka Avenger* offers an anti-grammar: democratic, restorative, and pedagogical, but not sacrificial or technocratic, and based on community knowledge and not on cosmic exceptionalism.

The series uses comedy and appearances of pop music to minimize the fear and still maintain the moral seriousness; environmental destruction is obviously bad, and children can make it better. This form of affective pedagogy has been supported by research results that effective, emotionally stimulating

storytelling can help young audiences learn about the environment. The theme of the Lady in Black and repetitive motifs provide the eco-ethical lessons with the mnemonic scaffolds.

Ecological health is monitored through color palettes, lush green gives way to sickly colors during pollution and returns to healthy colors after interventions. This semiotic arc illustrates resilience but does not reject any damage that is a fine line in the media of children. The air of the smog episode is oppressive because the greys in the air change the burden of the particulate into the touchable ambiance, making aesthetics associated with the embodied urban life.

Like most children ecodrama episodes, they usually end with restoration, which runs the risk of an infringement of the reset effect. However, the series repeatedly refers to reasons, sloppiness, patronage pushing the audience to structural knowledge instead of clean morality. This distinguishes it from blockbusters where ecological crisis becomes backdrop to heroism with little systemic critique.

Conclusion

Burka Avenger animates ecological issues in a media ecology and political economy register that is specific to Pakistan. The series performs ecofeminist ethics and models postcolonial environmental citizenship by relating the education of girls to the knowledge of their community, and the environment. Its villains bring into existence the unions of capital and force that create toxicity; its protagonist, pedagogy, care, and action in opposition to them. Throughout the global community in which ecological messages in popular media culture are mostly ambivalent or authoritarian, *Burka Avenger* proposes an alternative that is decidedly democratic and is rooted in the local contexts. Further research may combine textual interpretations with audience research in the different parts of Pakistan, draw comparisons with South Asian versions of the series (e.g., Indian environmental cartoons) and can be done on transnational reception research to understand how environmental pedagogy is transportable across languages and contexts.

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