

# **Challenging Material Progress: Postcolonial and Eco-critical Perspectives on Indigenous Identity in Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories***

## **Abstract**

This research paper critically examines the impact of materialistic progress on the decline of indigenous identity as depicted in Orijit Sen's graphic novel *The River of Stories*. Through a postcolonial lens, the study explores how Sen's narrative captures the adverse effects of modern developmental projects, particularly the construction of the Narmada Dam, on tribal communities. The paper argues that the pursuit of material development, rooted in colonial and neo-colonial ideologies, leads to the systematic marginalization and cultural disintegration of indigenous populations. By juxtaposing the indigenous worldview with the modern, urban perspective, Sen exposes the stark contrasts in attitudes towards land, community, and progress. This research identifies the novel as a significant contribution to postcolonial literature, emphasizing the need to rethink development models that prioritize economic gain over the well-being and preservation of indigenous cultures. The paper further highlights the relevance of Sen's work in contemporary discussions on sustainable development and cultural preservation, advocating for a more inclusive approach that respects and integrates indigenous knowledge and values.

## **Keywords**

Materialistic Progress, Indigenous Decline, Postcolonial Critique, Narmada Bachao Andolan

## **I. Introduction**

### **A. Background of the Study**

Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* is widely recognized as the first graphic novel in India, marking a significant milestone in the country's literary and visual storytelling landscape. Published in 1994, the novel is set against the backdrop of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement that arose in opposition to the construction of the Narmada Dam, which threatened to displace thousands of indigenous communities living along the Narmada River. The narrative intertwines the personal and collective struggles of these communities, portraying the deep connections they share with their ancestral lands and the devastating impact of forced displacement. Sen's work is a poignant exploration of the cultural and environmental consequences of development projects, highlighting the "imperceptible violence, both human and ecological, of modern developmental activities" rooted in traditional humanism's anthropocentric stances (Bera & Singh 2021:1). The Narmada Dam project, one of the largest in India, has been a subject of intense debate due to its far-reaching

consequences on the environment and the indigenous populations. While the project was hailed as a symbol of progress and development, it also resulted in the displacement of thousands of Adivasis (indigenous people) and the submergence of their lands. Sen's graphic novel offers a unique visual and narrative critique of this development, presenting a compelling case for the need to rethink the very concept of progress. By documenting the voices and experiences of those directly affected by the dam, *The River of Stories* serves as both a historical document and a call to action against the unchecked advancement of materialistic progress at the cost of indigenous rights and ecological balance.

## **B. Research Problem**

The core issue addressed in this research is the conflict between materialistic progress and the preservation of indigenous identities, a theme central to *The River of Stories*. The novel critiques the dominant development paradigm, which often prioritizes economic growth and infrastructure expansion over the well-being and cultural survival of indigenous communities. As the novel illustrates, the pursuit of such development projects not only disrupts the physical landscapes but also erodes the cultural and spiritual foundations of the communities that inhabit them. This research seeks to explore how Sen's graphic narrative articulates the tensions between modernity and tradition, and how it reflects broader postcolonial concerns about the legacy of colonialism in contemporary developmental practices.

## **C. Research Questions**

To address the research problem, this study is guided by the following questions:

1. How does *The River of Stories* depict the consequences of material development on indigenous communities?
2. In what ways does the graphic novel offer a critique of colonial and neo-colonial ideologies?

These questions aim to uncover the layers of meaning in Sen's work, examining how the narrative structure, visual elements, and thematic content collectively contribute to a powerful critique of materialistic progress. The study will analyze the ways in which the novel challenges the dominant narratives of development and progress, positioning the experiences of indigenous communities at the center of its critique.

## **D. Significance of the Study**

This research contributes to the fields of postcolonial discourse and graphic novel studies by offering a nuanced analysis of *The River of Stories* as a postcolonial text. By focusing on the intersection of material development and indigenous rights, the study highlights the novel's relevance to ongoing debates about the ethics of development and the need for more inclusive and sustainable approaches. Moreover, the research underscores the importance of graphic novels as a medium for social and political commentary, demonstrating how visual storytelling can effectively engage with complex issues of cultural identity, environmental justice, and human rights.

In the context of contemporary discussions on sustainable development, this study argues that *The River of Stories* offers valuable insights into the consequences of development models that prioritize economic growth at the expense of ecological and cultural sustainability. By

drawing attention to the voices of marginalized communities, the novel advocates for a reimagining of progress—one that respects and integrates indigenous knowledge and values, ensuring that development benefits all members of society rather than a select few.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **A. Postcolonial Perspectives on Development**

Postcolonial critiques of development have consistently highlighted the ways in which colonial and neo-colonial ideologies continue to shape modern developmental projects. Scholars like Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have argued that the legacy of colonialism persists in contemporary development practices, which often prioritize the interests of the global North over those of the global South. Said's concept of Orientalism reveals how the West constructs the East as an "other," a space to be controlled and developed according to Western standards (Bera & Singh 2021). Similarly, Spivak's (1985) notion of the "subaltern" underscores the marginalization of indigenous voices in global development discourses, emphasizing how these voices are often excluded from decisions that directly impact their lives. In the context of postcolonial development, scholars have critiqued the imposition of Western models of progress on non-Western societies. James Ferguson (1990), in his work *The Anti-Politics Machine*, argues that development projects often serve as tools for extending state control and perpetuating economic inequalities rather than genuinely improving the lives of marginalized communities. Ferguson's analysis highlights how development rhetoric masks the continuation of colonial power dynamics, where the "civilizing mission" of the past is repackaged as the modern-day pursuit of economic growth and infrastructure expansion.

In India, the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects like the Narmada Dam has been scrutinized through a postcolonial lens, with critics arguing that such projects replicate colonial patterns of resource extraction and land dispossession. As Diptarup Ghosh Dastidar (2021) notes, the rhetoric of development often justifies the displacement of indigenous populations in the name of national progress, disregarding the deep cultural and spiritual connections that these communities have with their land. This critique is central to understanding how *The River of Stories* engages with the ongoing conflict between materialistic progress and the preservation of indigenous identities.

### **B. Indigenous Representation in Graphic Novels**

Graphic novels have emerged as a powerful medium for representing marginalized communities, particularly indigenous groups who have historically been underrepresented in mainstream literature. The visual and narrative flexibility of graphic novels allows for a more nuanced exploration of indigenous identities, often challenging stereotypes and offering alternative perspectives on history and culture. In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized the potential of graphic novels to portray the complexities of indigenous experiences. Hillary Chute, in her work on graphic narratives, argues that the combination of visual art and storytelling in graphic novels provides a unique platform for addressing issues of trauma, memory, and identity. Chute notes that graphic novels "open up new ways of seeing" by juxtaposing images and text to create multi-layered narratives that engage readers in both cognitive and emotional ways (2008: 453). This is particularly relevant in the

portrayal of indigenous communities, where graphic novels can convey the deep connections between people, land, and culture in ways that traditional prose might not capture.

In the context of Indian graphic novels, works like Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* have been pivotal in bringing indigenous issues to the forefront. The novel's depiction of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the displacement of tribal communities has been analyzed as an important contribution to the genre of historical trauma literature. Scholars have praised Sen's ability to represent the voices of marginalized groups, particularly in his use of real-life testimonies and the incorporation of indigenous art forms into the visual narrative. However, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the specific critique of materialistic progress in these representations, which this study aims to address.

### **C. Previous Studies on *The River of Stories***

Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* has garnered significant scholarly attention for its portrayal of historical trauma and environmental justice, particularly in the context of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The novel is often cited as a pioneering work in Indian graphic literature, with critics highlighting its role in documenting the struggles of indigenous communities against state-imposed development projects.

Much of the existing scholarship focuses on the novel's depiction of trauma, both personal and collective, as it relates to the displacement of tribal communities. Jignesh M. Chavda (2024), for instance, discusses how *The River of Stories* serves as a significant contribution to historical trauma literature by capturing the lived experiences of those affected by the Narmada Dam project. Chavda notes that the novel's visual and narrative structure effectively conveys the sense of loss and dislocation experienced by the indigenous population, while also critiquing the broader social and political forces responsible for their plight.

Bera and Singh's (2021) study on Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* offers a posthumanist critique of traditional humanism, highlighting the ecological and human violence perpetrated by modern developmental activities. Their analysis underscores the graphic novel's call for sustainable alternatives and posthumanist perspectives, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life forms in the Anthropocene. The study also discusses how Sen's narrative exposes injustices faced by indigenous communities and urges readers to rethink concepts of ethics, justice, and rights, making a compelling case for reimagining development through a more inclusive and ecologically sensitive lens.

Despite the extensive analysis of trauma and environmental justice in *The River of Stories*, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the novel's critique of materialistic progress. While some scholars have touched on the themes of development and displacement, there has been little focused attention on how Sen's work specifically challenges the dominant narratives of progress and modernity. This research seeks to fill that gap by offering a detailed examination of how *The River of Stories* critiques the underlying ideologies that drive development projects like the Narmada Dam, highlighting the novel's broader implications for postcolonial discourse and sustainable development.

## **III. Theoretical Framework**

### **A. Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens through which the dynamics of power, culture, and identity are analyzed, particularly in contexts where colonial legacies continue to shape societal structures. Central to this theory are concepts such as Orientalism, hegemony, and resistance, each of which plays a crucial role in understanding the relationship between colonizers and the colonized.

**Orientalism**, as defined by Edward Said (1978), refers to the Western construction of the East as the “other,” an exotic and inferior counterpart to the West. This concept is instrumental in understanding how colonial powers justified their dominance over non-Western societies by framing them as backward and in need of Western intervention and development. In *The River of Stories*, Sen’s depiction of the Narmada Dam project can be seen as a modern manifestation of Orientalism, where the indigenous communities are marginalized and their ways of life are dismissed as obsolete in the face of so-called progress. The project embodies the continuation of colonial attitudes, where the developmental desires of the state override the cultural and spiritual values of the Adivasis. In the travelling the people are talking about natives and the problems caused by the construction of the dam. One of the passengers further said that, “According to official figures, the dam’s reservoir will submerge land and forests, affecting about 100,000 people” (Sen, 2022, p.40). Their discussion has the colonial dominance where western development has more value than the natives or Adivasis. “No! Enough of this nonsense. The forest is not your father’s property to use as you please” (Sen, 2022, p.21). This reflects the colonial mindset of imposing external control over indigenous lands, a core aspect of Orientalism.

**Hegemony** is another key concept in postcolonial theory, referring to the dominance of one group over others, not just through direct force but also through cultural and ideological means. Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) notion of cultural hegemony is relevant here, as it explains how the ruling class maintains power by shaping societal norms and values to align with their interests. In *The River of Stories*, the hegemonic power of the state is evident in its ability to impose development projects like the Narmada Dam, despite widespread opposition from the affected communities. “Despite your lack of cooperation, we are on the fast-track of development. Nothing can stop us now, as we zoom into the 21<sup>st</sup> century!” (Sen, 2022, 10). This shows the dominance of the state’s narrative of progress over the local communities, enforcing its control through development rhetoric. The novel also critiques this hegemony by giving voice to the indigenous people who resist the project, thereby challenging the state’s narrative of progress and modernization. Here in the novel the Thekedar Aggarwal and the liquor shop owner Gupta have that hegemonic power as they use all governmental powers and are playing with the emotions of Adivasis. In one interaction of the Thekedar Aggarwal with the district forest officer, he further said to the DFO (District Forest Officer): “It’s better to take some strong action now, before such ideas start to spread...you know? Show them who’s boss” (Sen, 2022, p.25).

**Resistance** is a fundamental aspect of postcolonial theory, highlighting the ways in which oppressed groups push back against colonial and neo-colonial forces. In Sen’s graphic novel, the indigenous communities’ opposition to the Narmada Dam is depicted as a form of resistance against the state’s hegemonic power. This resistance is not only physical, as seen in protests and activism, but also cultural, as the novel emphasizes the importance of preserving indigenous traditions, beliefs, and connections to the land. By portraying this resistance, *The River of Stories* aligns with postcolonial theory’s emphasis on the agency of marginalized

groups in challenging dominant power structures. Here in the present novel the man Anand who is working with Andolan, he said to Vishnu the journalist from the Voice that, “We oppose all those who, in the name of development, commit crimes against our mother! We will face them with the courage of truth and Non- violence!”(Sen,2022, p.50). This illustrates a collective act of defiance by indigenous communities against state-led projects that threaten their land.

## **B. Environmental Criticism**

Environmental criticism, or eco-criticism, is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between literature and the environment, focusing on how literary texts represent and engage with ecological issues. Eco-criticism is particularly relevant to the study of *The River of Stories* as the novel is deeply concerned with the environmental and cultural implications of development projects like the Narmada Dam.

Eco-criticism challenges the anthropocentric worldview that places human interests above those of the natural world. This perspective is crucial in analyzing *The River of Stories*, where the Narmada Dam symbolizes the broader environmental destruction caused by unchecked industrialization and development. The novel critiques the environmental consequences of such projects, depicting how they not only displace human communities but also disrupt entire ecosystems. This critique aligns with eco-critical concerns about the sustainability of development practices that prioritize economic gain over ecological balance. When Vishnu the reporter was travelling to Ballanpur he had a dialogue with technical supervisor and he in his further discussion said that, “Around 375 square kilometers offorest and farmland will go underwater... Even if you add another lakh of people to be displaced by the irrigation canal network, it’s still nothing compared to the benefits the project will bring”(Sen,2022,p.40).

Furthermore, eco-criticism also emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and the importance of recognizing the intrinsic value of nature. In *The River of Stories*, Sen illustrates the deep spiritual connection between the indigenous communities and their natural surroundings, particularly the Narmada River. This connection is portrayed as being under threat from the forces of modern development, which view the river and the land as mere resources to be exploited. By highlighting the cultural and spiritual significance of the environment to these communities, the novel calls into question the legitimacy of development projects that fail to consider the holistic implications of their actions.

In conclusion, the application of postcolonial theory and environmental criticism to *The River of Stories* allows for a comprehensive analysis of how the novel critiques both the cultural hegemony of the state and the environmental degradation caused by development. These theoretical frameworks provide a deeper understanding of the novel’s exploration of the conflicts between materialistic progress and the preservation of indigenous identities and ecosystems.

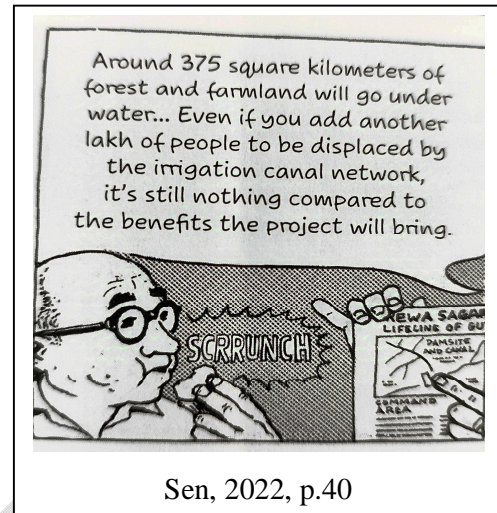
## **IV. Analysis of *The River of Stories***

### **A. Narrative Structure and Themes**

Orijit Sen’s *The River of Stories* is a pioneering work in the Indian graphic novel genre, utilizing a unique narrative structure that intertwines multiple perspectives and timelines to tell the story of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The novel’s plot revolves around the lives of

the indigenous communities in the Narmada Valley, who are facing displacement due to the construction of the Narmada Dam. Sen masterfully weaves together the voices of these communities with those of urban activists, journalists, and government officials, creating a rich tapestry of narratives that explore the complex dynamics of development and resistance.

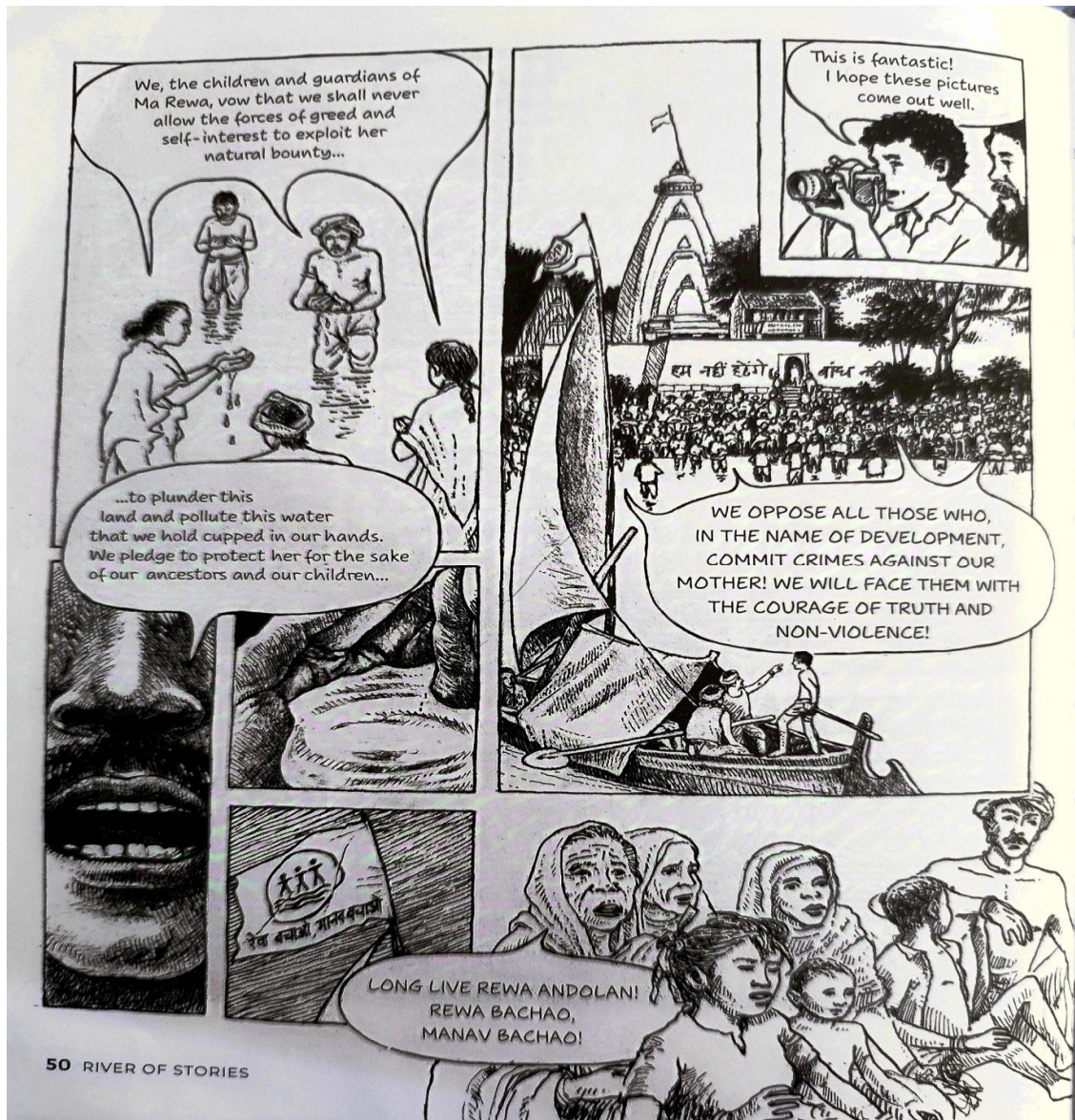
One of the key themes in the novel is **displacement**. The forced relocation of the tribal communities from their ancestral lands is depicted as a profound violation of their rights and way of life. Sen portrays displacement not merely as a physical uprooting but as a deeper existential crisis that threatens the very fabric of these communities' cultural identities. The loss of land in *The River of Stories* symbolizes the erosion of cultural memory and heritage, as the tribal people are severed from the spaces that hold their histories, traditions, and spiritual connections.



Sen, 2022, p.40

Another central theme is the **loss of cultural identity**. Sen illustrates how the displacement caused by the Narmada Dam project disrupts the cultural practices and social structures of the indigenous communities. The novel emphasizes the intimate relationship between land and identity, showing how the destruction of the natural environment leads to the disintegration of cultural norms, rituals, and community bonds. This theme is poignantly expressed through the character of Malgu, a village elder, who laments the loss of his community's way of life and questions the meaning of progress that comes at such a high cost. **Khursheo, a tribal peasant from Umargaon, spoke, "The government says they will resettle us. But our community will be broken up. Our music, our festivals, our gatherings, will all come to an end..." (Sen, 2022, p.60).**

**Resistance** is also a prominent theme in the graphic novel. Sen highlights the various forms of resistance employed by the indigenous communities and their allies, from organized protests and legal battles to the preservation of oral histories and cultural practices. The novel celebrates the resilience of these communities, portraying their struggle not just as a fight against physical displacement but as a broader resistance to the cultural and environmental degradation imposed by the state. Through these narratives of resistance, *The River of Stories* advocates for a more just and inclusive approach to development, one that recognizes and respects the rights and identities of indigenous peoples.



Sen, 2022, p.50

## B. Depiction of Indigenous Communities

In *The River of Stories*, Sen offers a nuanced portrayal of the tribal communities living in the Narmada Valley, emphasizing their deep cultural and spiritual connections to the land. The novel presents these communities as custodians of a rich cultural heritage, with their lives intricately tied to the natural environment. As appears in "Over the years, they managed to drive the adivasis into the hilly and forested tracts, and settled themselves into the more fertile valleys and plains..." (Sen, 2022, p.48). Sen's depiction challenges the stereotypical representations of indigenous people as primitive or backward, instead highlighting their sophisticated understanding of the ecosystem and their sustainable ways of living.

Sen uses detailed illustrations and narrative techniques to convey the spiritual significance of the Narmada River and the surrounding landscape to the tribal communities. The river is

depicted not just as a source of water but as a sacred entity, integral to the community's rituals, stories, and identity. This connection is exemplified in scenes where the characters engage in ceremonies that honor the river and the land, illustrating the profound respect they have for their environment. The novel contrasts these practices with the utilitarian view of the land held by the state, which sees the river merely as a resource to be harnessed for economic gain.

Furthermore, Sen's portrayal of the indigenous characters is marked by a deep empathy and respect for their resilience and dignity in the face of adversity. The novel brings to the forefront the voices of individuals who are often marginalized in mainstream narratives, allowing them to articulate their fears, hopes, and resistance in their own terms. This portrayal underscores the human cost of development projects like the Narmada Dam and calls attention to the need for more equitable and culturally sensitive approaches to progress.

### **C. Critique of Materialistic Development**

*The River of Stories* offers a scathing critique of materialistic development, particularly as it pertains to the Narmada Dam project. Sen portrays the dam as a symbol of modernity's destructive impact on both the environment and indigenous cultures. The novel depicts the state's relentless pursuit of economic growth and infrastructure development as being fundamentally at odds with the well-being of the indigenous communities who are displaced by such projects.

Sen critiques the notion of progress that underpins the Narmada Dam project, questioning the ethical implications of a development model that prioritizes economic gains over human and ecological considerations. The novel illustrates how material progress, as conceived by the state, leads to the exploitation of natural resources and the marginalization of vulnerable populations. This critique is particularly evident in the dialogues and interactions between the characters, where the indigenous people express their bewilderment and anger at being sacrificed for the sake of a development agenda that offers them no benefits.

The novel also highlights the environmental degradation caused by the dam, depicting the flooding of forests, the destruction of wildlife habitats, and the submergence of sacred sites. As Sen has pointed out that, "The tribals of the Rewa Valley are fighting to preserve their ecosystem from destruction by our flawed development policies..." (Sen, 2022,p.40). Sen uses powerful imagery to convey the scale of the environmental destruction, contrasting the thriving, diverse ecosystem of the Narmada Valley with the barren, lifeless landscape that emerges in the wake of the dam's construction. Through this critique, *The River of Stories* aligns itself with broader environmental movements that challenge the sustainability and ethics of large-scale development projects.

### **D. Urban vs. Indigenous Worldviews**

One of the most striking aspects of *The River of Stories* is its juxtaposition of urban and indigenous worldviews. The novel contrasts the modern, urban perspective that views development as synonymous with progress, with the indigenous perspective that values sustainability, community, and spiritual connection to the land. This juxtaposition is central to the novel's critique of the dominant development paradigm.

Sen portrays urban characters, such as government officials and city dwellers, as being largely disconnected from the realities of rural and indigenous life. He has rightly pointed out that, "If only these bankers and ministers would get off their motors and walk through our forests and villages with us, they'd be deeply ashamed of what they've done" (Sen,2022,p.56). These characters often express views that are dismissive of the concerns of the tribal communities, seeing them as obstacles to development rather than as people with legitimate rights and needs. The urban perspective is characterized by a belief in the inevitability of progress and a willingness to sacrifice the well-being of a few for the greater good of economic growth.

In contrast, the indigenous characters in the novel are depicted as having a holistic understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment. Their worldview is grounded in a deep respect for nature and a recognition of the interdependence of all life forms. Sen uses this contrast to critique the reductionist and exploitative nature of the urban development agenda, which fails to account for the social, cultural, and environmental costs of its projects.

The novel's exploration of these contrasting worldviews underscores the need for a more inclusive and balanced approach to development, one that incorporates the knowledge and values of indigenous communities. By highlighting the limitations of the urban perspective, *The River of Stories* calls for a reimagining of progress that prioritizes the well-being of people and the planet over the pursuit of material gain.

## **V. Discussion**

### **A. Implications of the Novel's Critique**

*The River of Stories* reveals the profound and far-reaching impacts of development on indigenous communities, highlighting how such projects often lead to the displacement and marginalization of these groups. The novel demonstrates that materialistic development, while beneficial to certain segments of society, frequently comes at the expense of those who are most vulnerable. Sen's narrative exposes the disconnect between the state's vision of progress and the lived realities of the tribal communities, showing how the imposition of modern development disrupts their cultural and spiritual connections to the land. This critique underscores the need for development policies that are more inclusive and sensitive to the rights and traditions of indigenous peoples.

### **B. Relevance to Postcolonial Studies**

*The River of Stories* contributes significantly to postcolonial studies by challenging the dominant development paradigms that are often rooted in colonial and neo-colonial ideologies. The novel critiques the continuation of colonial practices in the guise of modern development, where the exploitation of land and resources mirrors the extractive practices of colonialism. By centering the voices and experiences of indigenous communities, Sen's work offers a powerful counter-narrative to the mainstream discourse on progress and modernization. This aligns with postcolonial theory's emphasis on giving voice to the marginalized and resisting hegemonic power structures.

### **C. Reflection on Sustainable Development**

Sen's novel calls for a fundamental reconsideration of development models that prioritize economic growth over cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. *The River of Stories* advocates for a more holistic approach to development, one that respects the rights of indigenous communities and values their knowledge and traditions. The novel's depiction of the environmental and cultural consequences of the Narmada Dam project serves as a stark reminder of the dangers of pursuing development without regard for its broader impacts. This reflection on sustainable development is particularly relevant in the context of global discussions on how to achieve economic progress without sacrificing cultural and ecological integrity.

#### **D. Addressing the Research Gaps**

This study addresses several gaps in the existing literature on *The River of Stories*, particularly regarding the novel's critique of materialistic progress. While previous scholarship has focused on themes of historical trauma and environmental justice, this research provides a more focused analysis of how Sen critiques the underlying ideologies of development. By applying postcolonial and environmental criticism, the study offers new insights into the ways in which the novel challenges dominant narratives of progress and advocates for more equitable and sustainable approaches to development.

#### **VI. Conclusion**

The analysis of *The River of Stories* reveals that Orijit Sen's graphic novel is a powerful critique of materialistic development and its impact on indigenous communities. The novel highlights the displacement, loss of cultural identity, and resistance experienced by these communities in the face of modern development projects like the Narmada Dam. Through its narrative structure and thematic focus, *The River of Stories* challenges the dominant development paradigms and calls for a more inclusive and sustainable approach to progress.

This research contributes to the fields of postcolonial studies and graphic novel scholarship by offering a nuanced analysis of *The River of Stories* as a postcolonial text. The study highlights the novel's relevance to contemporary discussions on sustainable development and the importance of integrating indigenous perspectives into development policies. Furthermore, the research underscores the value of graphic novels as a medium for exploring complex social and political issues.

Future research could further explore the intersection of material development and indigenous rights in literature, particularly in the context of other graphic novels and postcolonial texts. Additionally, there is potential for comparative studies that examine how different cultures and regions address similar themes of development, displacement, and resistance in their literary and visual narratives.

#### **Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)**

Authors) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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