



The Trash in *Trashed*: A critical study of trash, trash collectors and environmental justice

Tridib Khan

State Aided College Teacher, Department of English, Chandrakona Vidyasagar Mahavidyalaya, affiliated to Vidyasagar University.

ABSTRACT:

Dorf Backderf's *Trashed* brilliantly sketches environmental justice and socio-political neglect. The trash cleaners are engaged in trash collection, though they are denied in social and political discourse. The government is not concerned about their lives, though they take risks and clean the city. On the other hand, the privileged section always gets the profit of the city life. The trash-related politics and role of government have been sketched vividly so that readers understand the facts. The eco-critical discourse and ecological justice have become the central theme of this story and this paper tries to critically examine these aspects. This paper aims to study *Trashed* critically and explores the following aspects: The trash collectors and environmental justice, politics and governance related to trash collectors and trash, the impact of trash on society and the environment, and environmental equality and justice.

Keywords: Trash, environmental justice, eco-criticism, social exclusion, trash collectors, and politics and governance.

Dorf Backderf's *Trashed* sketches the stories of sanitation workers and the hazards they face due to negligence on the part of the government. It critically sketches the political dysfunction and social marginalization of the trash collectors who are engaged in the duty of keeping the city clean. This negligence can be marked as a consequence of political negligence that develops environmental negligence. The graphic representation of trash, trash collectors, and their stories clearly showcases a side of society that needs to be taken into account. The blend of satire, grotesque realism, and visual documentation has given this novel a new dimension that compels the readers to think about environmental justice, ecocriticism, and the impact of the government's negligence in the trash collectors' lives. This novel also shows how neglecting the government, bad politics, and social exclusion may trigger bigger effects in society. Backderf's *Trashed* is a good comic graphic description of eco-critical concern comedy and visual representation and documentation to depict a brutal reality. This brutal reality can be examined in the light of eco-criticism and environmental justice. This paper aims to study the novel *Trashed* on the following grounds: The trash collectors and environmental justice, politics and governance related to trash collectors and trash, the impact of trash on society and the environment, environmental equality and justice, and the esthetic and narrative techniques used to show ecological repentance. In the 1980s Environmental justice began as a grassroots effort to fix the unfair environmental problems that affect poor and minority groups more than others. Since then, this movement has developed into a strong field that includes many other areas of study, and critics and scholars have practiced their hands in this field. Robert D. Bullard, who is widely called the father of environmental justice, aptly says that "environmental justice embraces the principle that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations" (Bullard 15).

Nevertheless, Trash collectors, on the other hand, are still not part of the major discussion in Environmental Justice, even though they play a key role in managing and reducing environmental damage, thereby making society clean and habitable for all. In *Trashed*, the protagonist helps us comprehend what it's like to work with trash, as his condition in the workplace has been sketched and his experience has been depicted in a realistic way. Backderf's realistic representation of the trash and trash-related activities shows readers the daily insults and dangers that the sanitation workers confront, such as exposure to biohazards, physical injuries, and social humiliation. It is really a matter that should be studied well. The trash collectors, who are cleaning the trash taking life risks, are humiliated and there is no policy for them. The visual panels full of disgusting trash cans, pests, and poisonous spills make what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" worse. This kind of violence happens slowly, is hard to see, and is built into the system deliberately.

The way sanitation labor is sketched in *Trashed* also intersects with Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, which says that non-human agents can shape human networks. In Backderf's *Trashed*, trash is not just something that sits around; it is an active element of the social and political drama that affects people's health, how cities are run, and policies about the environment. Latour's theory helps us understand different aspects of trash and how it can affect people and the environment. Dorceta Taylor's research shows even further that "environmental workforces reflect existing social inequalities" (Taylor 103). *Trashed* gives a graphic presentation of how sanitation workers are marginalized and neglected in both civic discourse and occupational hierarchy. Neither the government nor the people see their problem. Actually, no one is concerned about their plight. The exploitative work practices continue deliberately. *Trashed* brilliantly sketches how this structure works and thereby *Trashed* has become a depiction of the struggle for Environmental Justice.

Waste management is a complicated mix of public policy, local rules, and social and economic factors. Backderf criticizes the institutional inefficiencies and political neglect that affect public cleanliness in the novel *Trashed* through the representation of trash and trash collectors' stories. Using political ecology, which looks at the power dynamics in environmental management, the book can be seen as a criticism of neoliberal urban government and its policies. City authorities are shown as distant and concerned with costs, putting budget limits ahead of worker safety or the environment. These depictions fit with David Harvey's criticism of neoliberal urbanization, which he says turns cities into "growth machines" where public services are surrendered to

market logic (Harvey 89). These neoliberal ideas are shown by the lack of money for sanitary services in *Trashed*. Also, *Trashed* fits with Laura Pulido's idea of environmental racism, which she defines as the intentional targeting of neighborhoods with people of color and working-class people for hazardous waste facilities (Pulido 122). Backderf's novel is mostly about white people in the Midwest, but the structural problems it shows, including the absence of political accountability and the invisibility of work, are also true of other environmental injustices. Backderf also uses parts of documentary comics, which are a type of comic that mixes journalism, ethnography, and visual narrative. He teaches the reader about the history and mechanics of trash management by adding facts and infographics to the story. This educational aspect strengthens the political critique by using real-world examples and historical studies.

The effects of garbage on society go far beyond landfills. In *Trashed*, trash stands for systemic neglect and the excesses of capitalism, it also symbolically presents the politics behind it. Backderf critically points out the impact of trash that affects city life, city planning, workers' condition, public health, and the environment through graphic representation of the trash and the trash collectors. For the working class, especially those who work in sanitation, trash is both a source of income and a problem. The book shows how garbage work may be bad for the trash collectors' mental health because it's boring, they have to deal with degradation, and they feel like their jobs will never end. These depictions are similar to Jason Moore's world-ecology concept. He rightly says that capitalism makes workers and the environment pay for ecological costs (Moore 54). Apart from issues with workers, *Trashed* looks at how consumer culture affects the environment. People say that landfills are ugly memorials of how wasteful we are now. The damage to the environment includes methane emissions; leachate seepage, and alteration of ecosystems. According to Timothy Morton, hyperobjects are things that are so spread out in time and space that people can't understand them (Morton 130). In this way, trash becomes a hyper object: always there, impossible to understand, and strongly connected to capitalist modernity. Backderf mixes stories with factual breaks that talk about the environmental impacts of recycling systems that don't work well. If the recycling system works well then also there will be a good opportunity. Besides, the trash could be removed from the earth. These teaching aspects ground the story in environmental science, turning *Trashed* into more than just a memoir; it's also a work of eco-critique and public education. Through the graphic presentation, *Trashed* has clearly tried to draw the attention of the readers regarding the impact of trash on society. The readers are forced to think about the impact of it, thereby the ecological justice-related thought automatically becomes the central discourse.

As depicted in the novel *Trashed*, the benefits go to a community and another community suffers due to the accumulation of trash. The trash collectors face danger and problems in their workplace but there is no such good policy for them. On the other hand who are responsible for the trash remain safe. Hence the benefit of the environment is not spread equally. Researchers like Pellow and Brulle have shown that underprivileged groups frequently suffer the most from environmental damage because of unfair housing, job, and political representation systems (Pellow and Brulle 12). In *Trashed*, this unfairness shows itself not only in the poor working conditions of sanitation workers but also in how society as a whole doesn't care about environmental damage. Backderf's village is a small example of environmental injustice, where rich neighborhoods stay clean at the cost of overworked landfills and underpaid laborers. On the other hand another group i.e. underprivileged remains in the dark, after cleaning the neighborhood of the privileged people. Through the graphic presentation, Backderf talks about the politics of space when it comes to trash, as rural and low-income areas are often used as dumping sites. Edward Soja's theory of spatial fairness says that the way space is organized reflects and strengthens social hierarchies (Soja 56). This idea fits with Soja's thesis. The book also shows how environmental inequality affects people of different generations. Landfills are shown as scars on the terrain that endure for a long time and have effects on the environment that last longer than human life spans. This fits with the idea of intergenerational justice, which says that people living now should be responsible for the people who will live on Earth in the future (Barry 45). In this way, *Trashed* is not just a criticism of current faults, it is also a challenge to rethink how we take care of the environment.

Backderf's distinctive style of art is very important for showing how rubbish affects people and the environment. His drawings go back and forth between funny caricatures and sad reality, showing how silly and sad it is to work with trash. He shows how trash workers feel and how bad for the environment unchecked consumption is by using expressive lines, exaggerated facial features, and realistic drawings of waste. The color, shading, and panel design in *Trashed* are not just for looks; they also have a point. Scott McCloud says in *Understanding Comics* that in comics, form and substance are two sides of the same coin; the pictures are a language in and of themselves (McCloud 12). Backderf uses this visual language to show trash not just as a background element, but as a main character whose presence affects how people act and the environment. Also, *Trashed* does what Hillary Chute calls "graphic witnessing," which is when visual stories show societal inequalities (Chute 135). Backderf makes readers face the effects of their consumption patterns by showing sights of overflowing landfills, rotting trash, and tired labor. So, the graphic form provides a way for people to repent for their environmental sins—an encouragement to think about the moral aspects of waste and come up with other options.

Trashed is an amazing graphic novel that is both a memoir and an environmental critique. By showing in detail how trash workers are treated, how the system ignores them, and how rubbish destroys the environment, it brings to light the world of trash that is typically hidden and its far-reaching effects. The book makes readers think about how they deal with trash, recognize the work that goes into keeping cities clean, and join the fight for environmental justice. Using ideas from environmental justice, political ecology, spatial justice, and eco-criticism, this paper has illustrated how *Trashed* helps us better understand the politics of trash and environmental inequity. It has brilliantly sketched the issues related to trash and the politics behind it. The trash collectors are presented as a community that is really in trouble in spite of their dedication and the duties they perform for the well-being of society. But the society forgets that they are also a part of the society and they also must have the same rights as those of the privileged community. It also brilliantly shows how graphic literature can use simple, powerful stories to deal with complicated social and environmental problems.

Works Cited:

1. Barry, Brian. *Sustainability and Intergenerational Justice*. Elgar, 2009.
2. Bullard, Robert D. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Westview Press, 2000.
3. Chute, Hillary. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Belknap Press, 2016.
4. Harvey, David. *Spaces of Hope*. University of California Press, 2000.
5. Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, 2005.

6. McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Harper Perennial, 1993.
7. Moore, Jason W. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso, 2015.
8. Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
9. Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.
10. Pellow, David Naguib, and Robert J. Brulle, eds. *Power, Justice, and the Environment: A Critical Appraisal of the Environmental Justice Movement*. MIT Press, 2005.
11. Pulido, Laura. *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest*. University of Arizona Press, 1996.
12. Soja, Edward W. *Seeking Spatial Justice*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
13. Taylor, Dorceta E. *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600s–1900s: Disorder, Inequality, and Social Change*. Duke University Press, 2009.