

An Exploration of the Informal Waste Scavenger's Case as Reflected in Mirdula Koshy's *Bicycle Dreaming*

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ABSTRACT

*Literature thoroughly explores the physical milieu, encompassing settings, human-environment dynamics, and individual interactions within their surroundings. Given its crucial role in environmental preservation, waste picking commands significant attention in literary discourse. Both formal and informal waste pickers exemplify the complex interplay between humanity and its environment. This inquiry scrutinises the portrayal of informal waste scavengers in Mirdula Koshy's *Bicycle Dreaming*. Within the narrative landscape of *Bicycle Dreaming*, Koshy vividly investigates the plight of informal waste pickers living in an Indian colony, highlighting the harsh conditions they endure and the formidable challenges they face in their daily work. Through a critical lens, this study scrutinises the significance of informal waste scavengers in preserving a habitable environment for human existence. Grounded in Ecocritical, Cultural, and Marxian theories, the analysis discerns the nuanced interplay between societal structures, environmental stewardship, and the marginalised existence of waste pickers. Advocating for the formalisation of informal waste sector activities within a robust legal framework, this study posits that such regulation is essential to afford these workers the safeguards they require against the inherent adversities of their profession. By ensuring their welfare and stability, such regulatory measures are deemed imperative for upholding societal well-being and environmental sustainability.*

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Cultural Theory; Marxian Theory; Environmental Justice Movement; Informal-waste sector

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, critics, including Aristotle, have emphasised the significance of “setting” in literature. The complex relationship between humans and the natural world has, since the nineteenth century, been at the forefront of the modern environmentalist movement, giving rise to literature that tackles environmental concerns (Branch & O’Grady, 1994). This burgeoning literary genre gained substantial momentum in the 1960s and reached its peak in the 1990s. The study of this genre is classified under “ecocriticism” (Buell et al., 2011, p.417). Nasrullah Mambrol (2016), in “Ecocriticism: An Essay,” defines ecocriticism as an “interdisciplinary” study of literature and the environment, where various scientific fields collaborate to examine environmental issues and propose viable solutions. It analyses how environmental concerns, cultural issues related to the environment, and societal attitudes toward nature are represented in literature. Ecocriticism aims to scrutinise how individuals and society at large interact with nature and the “ecological aspects” within (Mambrol, 2016). Abdalaziz Jomah Al Fawareh et al. (2023) argue that ecocriticism has evolved into a “reformist trend” (p.783). This term reflects the field’s focus on highlighting neglected environmental challenges, such as the informal waste sector. This theme is notably addressed in Mridula Koshy’s *Bicycle Dreaming*, which portrays the lives of informal waste pickers. Furthermore, Al Fawareh et al. (2023) highlight two waves of ecocriticism, noting how the scope has expanded to include diverse environments—suburban, agricultural, and heavily managed wild spaces—beyond the focus of first-wave ecocriticism, which concentrated on entirely wild ecosystems (Al Fawareh et al., 2023, p.784). Consequently, the impoverished backdrop in *Bicycle Dreaming* is also seen as an environment where informal waste pickers interact.

Bicycle Dreaming traces the life of a family within the informal waste-picking community in Delhi. Jandira Morais et al. (2022), in their study “Global Review of Human Waste-Picking and Its Contribution to Poverty Alleviation and a Circular Economy”, conclude that waste-picking provides impoverished individuals who lack formal education and commercial skills with essential opportunities for economic survival. However, waste pickers continue to endure poor living conditions, and their work environment remains hazardous due to exposure to “hazardous waste” (Morais et al., 2022, p.1). The protagonist, Noor, a 13-year-old girl, dreams of becoming a kabadiwali (female waste picker). Her ambition is revealed in a conversation with her friend Haseena, and she expresses her ambitious enthusiasm through her relationship with her customers: “I will be a kabadiwali. And I will call my customers. ‘Kabadi’” (Koshy, 2016, p.19). This dialogue illustrates Noor’s initial naivety about the social stigma attached to waste-picking, which she does not yet fully comprehend. She longs to create her social disposition as an influential person regardless of her gender attributes. Therefore, she could establish her socioeconomic equilibrium by reinforcing strong social ties with her customers. Her job, sustained by her ambition, exemplifies her class struggle to be a person of great value to her society by dint of successful economic pursuits.

Poverty forces Noor’s father to work as a kabadiwala, an informal male waste picker. In “The Informal Waste Sector: A Solution to the Recycling Problem in Developing Countries”, Siddharth Hande (2019) elaborates that the informal waste sector is stratified into levels. He explains that “Level 0 aggregators,” which collect waste directly from households, landfills, and garbage bins at no cost, are integral to this study. These individuals often use bicycles or tricycles, known as itinerant buyers, to increase their efficiency (Hande, 2019, p.30). Therefore, the study’s objective is to explore the physical milieu, encompassing settings, human-environment dynamics,

and individual interactions within their surroundings through the portrayal of informal waste scavengers in Mridula Koshy's *Bicycle Dreaming*. It follows a critical framework which allows for a nuanced understanding of the informal waste sector and its representation in *Bicycle Dreaming*, particularly in terms of how it reflects ecological wisdom and the exploitation inherent in the informal waste collection process through the lens of ecocritical, Marxian, and cultural theories.

The study's theoretical framework is interdisciplinary, involving Ecocriticism, Marxism, and Cultural Theory. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) outline key questions ecocritics consider when analysing a literary work: "how is nature depicted in this literary piece? What role does the physical setting play in the plot? Are the values presented consistent with ecological wisdom? To what extent is the environmental crisis integrated into contemporary literature and culture?" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p.xix) By examining *Bicycle Dreaming*, these questions will be addressed, as Koshy's work vividly illustrates the intersection of ecology and society. Koshy, an Indian writer and activist for the free library movement, is well-regarded for her narratives about the working class. In works like "Not Only the Things That Have Happened," she tackles social struggles and inequality. Matthew Beeber (2017), in "What Is Working-Class Literature?", posits that working-class literature, or "proletarian literature," champions the rights and struggles of the proletariat (2019).

Ecocriticism investigates the relationship between individuals, the environment, and the cultural issues related to the environment. Accordingly, cultural Theory can be applied to analyse texts that engage with environmental concerns. Olivier Serrat (2008) defines cultural Theory as an interdisciplinary field that draws on anthropology, semiotics, political economy, sociology, and communication (p.1). Cultural Theory scrutinises the cultural attitudes of individuals within a specific context. Stuart Hall (2020) emphasises that all narratives are influenced by the specific time, place, and culture from which they originate, underscoring the importance of context in shaping cultural identity (p.222). Angela McRobbie (2020), furthermore, reiterates the interdisciplinary nature of cultural studies, which embraces the lived experiences of ordinary and marginalised people. *Bicycle Dreaming* presents the lives of marginalised Indian waste pickers, making it an ideal subject for analysis through both ecocritical and cultural lenses.

Marxism, particularly its critique of capitalism, provides a valuable framework for understanding the environmental movement and its connection to social inequality. Karl Marx (1867) argued that capitalism thrives on the exploitation of both labour and natural resources, leading to environmental degradation and deepening class divisions. This perspective aligns with the concerns of environmental justice movements, which highlight how marginalised communities disproportionately suffer from ecological harm; Marx (1867) states, "Capitalism thrives by exhausting the worker just as it exhausts the soil; and if neither is restored, both will lose their ability to produce" (Marx, 1867).

The current study, therefore, pursues this concept as being reflected in *Bicycle Dreaming*, where Indian waste pickers are forced into precarious labour that sustains the capitalist system while exposing them to environmental hazards. They work in harsh conditions without protection, mirroring how capitalism depletes both human and natural resources without replenishing them. By weaving together ecological and social struggles, the novel underscores the intersection of Marxian critique and environmental activism, making it a compelling study in both economic and ecological oppression.

As for the methodology, the paper applies an interdisciplinary critical approach to interpret the selected novel through employing ecocritical, Marxian, and cultural theories to explore the environmental representation, societal attitudes, and values depicted in *Bicycle Dreaming*, while also utilising close reading for deeper textual analysis. The study applies a qualitative textual analysis of both the characters and their social and environmental milieus. In this respect, it follows a textual analysis of the main characters who embody the notion of waste pickers. It will also apply a close reading of these characters and their socioeconomic relationships to unravel the novel's depiction of ecological struggles created by class divisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous scholars have rarely tackled Koshy's *Bicycle Dreaming* due to its novelty and recent publication. Nevertheless, it has received meagre critical attention within a limited theoretical space. Vanessa Guignery (2023) argues that the novel abounds with insights into poverty. She (2023) contends that the novel's plot hinges on fictional accounts about the author's personal experience in harsh living conditions. As such, Guignery (2023) reveals that Koshy's own experiences in a poverty-stricken neighbourhood and her work as a menial labourer during her college years have deeply influenced her writing. Koshy's commitment to empowering workers, including her involvement in creating a "free community library," demonstrates her alignment with the working class (Guignery, 2023, p. 243). Therefore, Koshy's *Bicycle Dreaming* firmly belongs to the genre of working-class literature, standing in solidarity with the proletariat. In this sense, these thematic insights exemplify the author's individual experience as it unfolds throughout the narrative, reflecting the essence of the theme of working-class life.

Toivanen and García (2024), furthermore, study Koshy's *Bicycle Dreaming* as a bildungsroman, highlighting the protagonist's adolescent maturity. Toivanen and García (2024) argue that the novel's narrative episodes embody the core of the protagonist's psychic and social development. Consequently, the narrative structure carries out this development via a coming-of-age style. The protagonist's transitional periods are associated with the broader social atmosphere of Delhi. The plot's narrative point of view, consequently, appropriates the protagonist's psychic growth to elaborate on contemporary social and familial responsibilities. Being so, the novel "narrates the strain and stress on the familial lives and livelihoods of informal workers in contemporary Delhi. A partial bildungsroman of a teenage girl, Noor, as she negotiates adolescence and familial responsibilities, *Bicycle Dreaming* is situated wholly within the heart of informal Delhi" (p.57). As such, the novel's psychological aspects are of paramount importance for grasping the core essence of social and familial responsibilities that need to be properly attained by adolescent characters.

Though previous studies approach the novel from different perspectives, this study will conduct a textual and contextual analysis of the novel's thematic peculiarities regarding informal waste pickers. By applying Ecocritical, Marxian, and Cultural Theories, this study argues that *Bicycle Dreaming* poignantly illustrates the problematic lives of informal waste pickers. It highlights the polluted environment they work in and the significant health risks they face due to exposure to hazardous waste. Additionally, the novel draws attention to the social degradation and systemic exploitation these individuals face. Ultimately, this study aims to raise awareness of the invaluable yet underappreciated role that the informal waste sector plays in society.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The novel's title, *Bicycle Dreaming*, stands for the protagonist's longing to own a bicycle to be a Kabadiwali and to help her father gather waste:

'You never asked your father for a bicycle?' 'How can I ask? Maybe some other time when things are better with Baba's work.' {...} 'The green bicycle. I dreamt I was riding it last night. {...} Noor felt uncomfortable. She had been congratulating herself for not asking for what her father could not afford.

(pp.17-18)

The simplicity of Noor's dream is the first proof in the novel of the difficult living conditions and the suffering that those who work in garbage collection face, which is depicted in a fictional recount. Though owning a bicycle is not a complex matter, it remains a dream for a working-class girl. Unlike other kids, she does not want a bicycle for fun; she wants one to help her father sustain the family. In her book review, Karishma Attari (2016) explains that Noor's dream reflects her loyalty to her bicycle-riding kabadiwala father and his profession.

The novel begins with a realistic narrative description of the setting where the waste reclaimers work. It depicts the polluted environment of the Koordan, an area filled with garbage, and the place where the informal waste scavengers work. The depiction of the landfill reveals how it is an unfit environment to work in:

Landfill was the wrong word for it. This was no modest depression at the edge of the town, filled with garbage and covered over with soil, green grass over the top of that. {...} The stench was not the lesser stench of Delhi's Naalas, those creeks and rainwater runoffs smothered with garbage and rooted over by translucent-skinned pigs. This was the septic scent of faecal matter dredged from the sludge at the bottom of the Naalas and transported in tankers to the landfill.

(p.1)

The initial description of the "Koordan" features two types of imagery: visual and gustatory. First, the visual imagery shows Koordan as a dirty place, full of garbage that leads to depression. Second, the gustatory imagery exposes the unbearable stench of the Koordan, which smells like the Naalas and sewerage. The novel portrays the setting in a way that exposes the potential hazards that informal waste sector workers are likely to encounter while collecting garbage:

Now there was a high shine to the road's black surface, but the tinsel effect when the sun struck and broke elsewhere on the mountain's sides was not from the sludge; it was from the thousands upon thousands, from the hundreds of thousands upon hundreds of thousands, from some incomprehensible number of hundreds of thousands of halved and discarded razor blades aglitter underfoot in the soft dust. There were no pigs. There were dogs. ... Two children descended the mountain. ... They appeared to have had no luck today; they trailed deflated bags.

(pp.1-2)

The above quote serves as a literary demonstration of garbage, which can contain sharp tools, such as razors, which might cut the limbs of garbage scavengers while they pick it up. Moreover, these blades may be contaminated with blood, potentially leading to infections. In her article "Dirty Secret: I Borrow My Boyfriend's Razor," Shelley Levitt (2012) assures that razor blades can transform infections even without cutting the body, such as "warts (caused by a virus), folliculitis (typically caused by staph bacteria), or jock itch (fungal infection)" (Levitt, 2012). Animal faeces can also transmit these infectious diseases. In their study "Exposure to Animal Faeces and Human Health: A Systematic Review and Proposed Research Priorities," Gauthami

Penakalapati et al. (2017) ensure that animal faeces participate in conveying diseases, which results in detrimental effects upon the environment: “Humans can be exposed to pathogens from poorly managed animal faeces, particularly in communities where animals live near humans. Exposure to animal faeces has been associated with diarrhoea, soil-transmitted helminth infection, trachoma, and environmental enteric dysfunction” (Penakalapati et al., 2017). Informal waste recyclers are vulnerable to these risks without having health insurance. The novel explains that some of the rag pickers are children. Accordingly, this portrayal of nature in *Bicycle Dreaming* reveals how such work endangers children’s lives. Children waste pickers can specifically be exposed to catching diseases such as “typhoid fever, malaria, tuberculosis, cholera, which sometimes can be mortal” (Jandira Morais et al., 2022). In their study “Waste Management, Informal Recycling, Environmental Pollution, and Public Health”, Yang et al. (2018) argue that the health hazards faced by the informal waste sector can be classified into five key categories: chemical, hygienic, disease, accident, and psychological hazards. Toxic hazards arise from exposure to substances such as heavy metals, while hygienic hazards stem from inadequate hygiene measures and inadequate sanitary facilities. Diseases often encompass respiratory and dermatological problems as well as eye infections, high blood pressure, and musculoskeletal injuries due to the fact that the environment is no longer “a healthy elevated site” for workers (Guha, 1989, p.28). Moreover, accidents include fires, explosions, falls, and other incidents that can lead to cuts and broken bones. Finally, the psychological damage is often associated with shame and humiliation linked with this profession (Yang et al., 2018). Thus, the literary portrayal of the setting in *Bicycle Dreaming* serves as secondary evidence of the poverty experienced by informal waste scavengers.

The novel also depicts the negative impact of incinerators on waste pickers and their labour duties in the natural environment. Ash produced by incinerators harms the environment and poses health risks. Hence, incinerators endanger the informal waste sector:

He said this dump used to be good until the incinerator plant was built down the road, and they started dumping the ashes from it here. No, the sludge did not do the damage that the ashes did. The sludge was confined to the road. Malba, that fine dust left over from the city’s constant reconstruction, fogged the heap, but it did not do the damage the ashes did. Books could survive malba, but not ashes. ... You know the trouble we are in? They are putting an incinerator in. This will burn plastic, yes, and it will burn our business with it. What will be left for us to buy and sell? You can’t recycle ashes, can you?

(pp. 3-113)

Incinerators not only produce ash that pollutes the environment but also cause many health problems for those living or working nearby, posing another threat to waste pickers. In their book **Incineration and Human Health**, Michelle Allsopp et al. (2001) list many diseases that result from incinerators:

A broad range of health effects has been associated with living near incinerators as well as with working at these installations. Such effects include cancer (among both children and adults), adverse impacts on the respiratory system, heart disease, immune system effects, increased allergies, and congenital abnormalities. Some studies, particularly those on cancer, relate to old rather than modern incinerators. However, modern incinerators operating in the last few years have also been associated with adverse health effects.

(p.6)

Ecocriticism suggests that literary scholars must play a role in preserving the environment, as environmental problems result from human actions and are cultural products (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, xxi). Correspondingly, *Bicycle Dreaming* addresses several environmental issues, including the impact of plastic incinerators. The novel’s fictional plot highlights how plastic incinerators negatively affect the air and, consequently, our lungs. In addition, it underscores the

environmental harm caused by plastic bags, which not only choke cows but also disrupt natural decomposition processes because plastic is not biodegradable. The novel advocates for the use of paper bags instead of plastic, as one character says:

‘Ma’am, but the plastic incinerator is not good for us to have next to the maidan. Some people are saying it is bad for the air. And since the air goes into our lungs, that’s bad too.’ {...} ‘Ma’am, we have to eliminate the use of plastic bags because cows are choking on these bags and dying. We should not use plastic bags for this reason. And if any plastic bags are used, then afterwards they should be burnt so they don’t lie around to choke cows.’

(p. 138)

As the quote suggests, the novel offers an implied literary message concerning how these incinerators could be mitigated. In this regard, Environmental justice, as defined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, refers to “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin, or income concerning the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (Jones, 2024). This concept of fair treatment emphasises that no group should bear a disproportionate share of the negative policies resulting in “insecurity” (Shyam et al., 2025, p.69). By the same token, the Indian concern with consequences of environmental hazards arising from industrial, governmental, and commercial activities or environmental safety manifest in ensuring health and stability for people in their surrounding ecosystem; or as Madhav Gadgil (2014) puts it simply: “India’s local communities, the subjugated ecosystem people, have a genuine stake in preserving the health of their own ecosystems, in safeguarding their local environments and should rightfully serve as its stewards. With a strong motivation, and in constant touch with the ecosystems in their day-to-day pursuit of livelihood activities, they can effectively guard against environmental abuses” (p.21). As such, health factors are highly needed to enhance the economic and social protection of waste workers.

The narrative in *Bicycle Dreaming* highlights the fundamental principles of environmental justice. The speaker articulates concerns about the proximity of a plastic incinerator to the maidan, emphasising the detrimental effects on air quality and, subsequently, human health. This situation exemplifies the heightened exposure marginalised communities face to environmental hazards, such as pollution from industrial facilities, which is often the result of systemic inequalities. Furthermore, the mention of cows choking on plastic bags underscores the broader ecological impacts of inadequate waste management—impacts felt more acutely by vulnerable populations lacking sufficient infrastructure. This perspective aligns with findings from the United Nations Environment Programme, which notes that “plastic pollution disproportionately affects marginalised communities and communities living in proximity to plastic production and waste sites, constituting an environmental injustice” (Nairobi, 2021). The contradiction in the speaker’s remarks—acknowledging the harms associated with plastic incineration while suggesting incinerating plastic bags to mitigate harm to cows—highlights the limited options available to disadvantaged communities. These communities frequently find themselves forced to choose between harmful alternatives due to systemic neglect and resource scarcity—a situation that environmental justice advocates have tirelessly highlighted. By addressing these challenges, the narrative underscores the lived experiences of marginalised individuals and reaffirms that environmental justice is essential to achieving social equity as a form of environmental justice (Skelton & Miller, 2023). It underscores the necessity for inclusive environmental policies that effectively address the disproportionate burdens faced by vulnerable communities.

In addition to the health risks faced by informal waste scavengers, there are risks arising from the lack of a legal framework to protect them, as fictionalised in the novel. In their paper “Role of informal sector recycling in waste management in developing countries,” David C. Wilson et al. (2006) confirm that informal pickers sometimes have to pay to collect waste (p.801). *Bicycle Dreaming* assures this point by exposing what happened to Noor’s father and the gangsters. Gangsters hit Noor’s father to force him to pay *hafta*, protection money paid to gangsters. Gangsters coerce waste pickers to pay money to have access to the waste from a particular area:

‘So the municipal worker has asked you to pay hafta to keep your route at Panchsheel, and you decide to point a finger at us? Do you see us getting rich on hafta? If we are getting rich, then what are we doing here buying garbage from you?’ ‘We have only one piece of advice for you: if you don’t want to pay hafta, then make way for those who will. The man you are complaining about has a family to feed. As for paying us, that’s not hafta. That’s just the rising cost of doing business.’

‘But I paid you,’ Mohammad cried out.

The man who had complained about the plastic incinerator put his hand on Mohammad’s shoulder. They looked for a moment like two friends conferring over something mundane. He sent Mohammad sprawling to the street.

(p.114)

In *Bicycle Dreaming*, the conversation between Mohammad and the waste traders illustrates the systemic exploitation inherent in capitalist structures, aligning closely with Marxian Theory. The demand for hafta (bribes) by municipal workers, coupled with the subsequent extortion by waste traders, demonstrates the pervasive nature of corruption across various levels of the informal economy. This scenario reflects Marx’s concept of class struggle, in which individuals within the working class may exploit one another to survive in a capitalist system that prioritises profit over human welfare.

The waste trader’s rhetorical question, “If we are getting rich, then what are we doing here buying garbage from you?” underscores the illusion of upward mobility, revealing that even those who wield power over others remain ensnared in a cycle of exploitation. This situation serves as a notable example of the Marxist critique concerning capitalism’s propensity to commodify human relationships and sustain systemic inequality. Furthermore, as highlighted in the article “Invisible Exploitation” (Swidler, 2018), the Marxist perspective on labour under capitalism emphasises the commodification of work, which leads to exploitation across both formal and informal sectors, reflecting the challenges concerning social and natural quandaries, including ecological crises (Izzah et al., 2025, p.53).

The government, which should have been responsible for the well-being of informal workers, has failed to protect the people working in the informal waste sector. This leads informal workers to depend on mafia groups or criminal gangs to guarantee the survival of their Trade. In her paper, *Waste Pickers as Criminalised and Marginalised Groups*”, Jandira Morais et al. (2022) explain that waste pickers have been criminalised, marginalised, and ignored by authorities:

But each year, the police want more, the municipal workers want more, and even his contractor at the kabadi market wants him to pay all over again for his route and protection. It seems his contractor got greedy and offered Baba’s route to another man... And after I pay, I still have to come when he tells me to come, go when he tells me to go. This asserts that there must be a legal framework that protects informal waste gatherers from exploitation and other kinds of harassment and enhances their socioeconomic conditions.

(p.178)

In this way, the novel uses literary parallels to describe how waste pickers face detrimental treatment. Other aspects that define the informal waste sector are poverty and poor education. Informal waste scavengers are poor and socially stigmatised groups who resort to scavenging/waste picking to get their basic daily needs. In addition, scavengers may be unable to enter the formal sector of employment due to poor education (Wilson et al., 2006). In Delhi, waste pickers are often at the poorest rank in society. They belong to a “lower caste” status (Morais et al., 2022). *Bicycle Dreaming* sheds light on two characteristics of informal waste scavengers: low levels of education and poverty. The novel portrays the informal waste gatherers as poorly educated. The residents of Panchsheel Colony, the place from which the informal refuse collectors operate, take advantage of their lack of education by withholding payment for their service:

If he quoted Rs 18—a fair price for a good-sized load that would earn him at least five rupees more when resold to the recycling factory—they would pocket his twenty and shake their heads ‘no’. They didn’t have two rupees in change for him.
‘Sorry, no change today. Adjust it against the next time you buy from us.’ Next time would not roll around for at least another two weeks. And they would make certain to forget what they owed him by then.
Her father would often remark to Noor that if he had even a small part of her education, he would have forced the householders to sign a piece of paper promising to pay the amount owed to him.

(p. 7)

Moreover, the novel highlights the harsh conditions of schools for children of the informal waste sector. These schools lack the necessities for children, such as access to clean water and adequate playgrounds. Through this depiction, *Bicycle Dreaming* exposes the social injustice these children face. In contrast, the children of Panchsheel Colony residents receive proper education and enjoy their right to play:

Indeed, if he had the money, she would go to a school with a proper playground and not one with a dirt compound. This proper playground would have football in it.
‘for girls?’
‘Yes, why not. I have seen girls playing in that Panchsheel colony. Football and what other things? Why shouldn’t you play?’
‘But first, your school should do something about that water problem it has. It is a shame to take fees from us and then run a school in which every other week the motor pump breaks and children come home having soiled their clothes. Forget teaching you English. Just water in the bathrooms so children can go when they need to go.’

(pp. 30-31)

Another trait that defines the work of waste picking is the social stigma it carries since ecocritical literature portrays the “stigmatised as aberrant and filthy, the picaro embodies everything the socially remote privileged classes, with their ornate rhetoric and social etiquette, seek to contain, repress, and eject” (Nixon, 2011, p.55). In this sense, stigma refers to a social and/or individual feature that is devalued and discredited in a specific social context (Kusow, 2007). Societies degrade informal waste scavengers and consider waste picking a humiliating job. In some cases, informal waste scavengers are subjected to verbal and physical harassment due to their profession and “they both concern social and natural worlds” (Parmar & Babu, 2025, p.122). In his study “Challenges in the Informal Waste Sector: Bangalore, India,” Sharavanthi Kanekal (2019) demonstrates that in India, occupations related to waste picking have traditionally been associated with the “lowest castes.” This caste system within Indian society significantly impacts the country’s waste management system, exacerbating social stigma against those involved in the informal waste sector (Kanekal, 2019). Furthermore, research indicates that waste pickers are often viewed as criminals or social outcasts rather than contributors to environmental sustainability

(Dias, 2016). A study by Wilson et al. (2006) emphasises that negative public perceptions hinder waste pickers from improving their working conditions and integrating into formal waste management systems. By employing a realistic style, *Bicycle Dreaming* further highlights this societal divide, showing how individuals engaged in waste picking occupy the lowest ranks of the social hierarchy, perpetuating marginalisation and discrimination (Wilson et al., 2006):

‘But only some Hindus can become kabadiwalas?’

I see what you are asking me. Hindus from certain castes can do this work. Mind you, it is not work some high-up type wants to do. But yes, the Hindus who do my work have some caste. Not a lot, but some. Those who have no caste do the lesser work. You see them going through the Naalas, looking through the koordan. It is why your mother objects to my work.

(p. 203)

Besides, *Bicycle Dreaming* conveys a fictional manifestation of waste pickers’ harsh experience via showing how people mistreat informal waste scavengers and their family members, which is inherently a literary embodiment of class division. Morais et al. (2022) reinforce this idea, stating that “civil societies” treat waste pickers as “criminals, failures,” and people of no value (18). Noor’s classmates humiliate her because her father is a kabadiwala. They (2022) see his profession as degrading and beneath their social standards:

‘Noor’s father is a kabadiwala, Ma’am.

Noor whipped her head around to see who dared speak of her father. From elsewhere in the class, someone else called out, ‘Kabadi, kabadiwala.’

It was an accurate imitation of her father’s call. ... ‘My father is a kabadiwala. This is not a laughing matter.’ Of course, the class viewed it as an invitation to laugh again.

(p. 38)

Shilpa Ma’am, Noor’s teacher, responds to this humiliation by asserting the importance of waste pickers’ roles. This emphasises the urgent need to raise social awareness about waste picking, which is a crucial service in the community:

‘You must be very proud of the good work your father does?’

Noor looked at her teacher in surprise. No one had ever invited her to take pride in her father. ... ‘Yes, I am proud of my father,’ but was confused about what good work her father did. ... ‘Noor, your father does a very needed service in our community. You must be proud. Very proud.’

(pp. 38-39)

Despite Noor’s teacher emphasising the significance of waste picking, social stigma profoundly impacts both Noor and her father. Mohammad Saidullah discourages his daughter from pursuing a career as a kabadiwali, leading to the novel’s conclusion, where she reluctantly abandons her dream, influenced by her father’s belief that she deserves a better job:

‘Baba, when I grow up, I am going to be a kabadiwali. I am going to be the first kabadiwali in Delhi. I will make it so everyone in the colony will give their kabadi to me instead of to the incinerator.’

‘Noor, you will do no such thing’

‘... We didn’t raise you to turn you into someone who gathers other people’s garbage, their rubbish. Do you think we want our light to turn into a kabadiwala?’

(pp. 201-202)

The novel’s narrative incidents, consequently, accentuate social stigma, which not only results in Noor giving up her dream of becoming a *kabadiwali*, but also causes her family to break apart. Noor’s brother, Talib, decides to live away from his family, and his mother follows

him. He does not want to help his father with his job, and his father does not allow him to participate as he did with his sister:

How had she failed to see that her mother's longed-for return home would result in her own banishment from home? And that her brother's restlessness in her father's too-small house would also be her restlessness? And was her restlessness only the result of confinement in too small a house? Was it not also the result of confinement in her loyalty to him?

"But her father had released her from this loyalty. He had said she was not to learn to ride a bicycle just so she could become a kabadiwala, like him. But if her father could release his daughter from the expectation of loyalty, why couldn't he do the same for his son?"

(p.226)

As a result, the social stigma surrounding informal waste scavengers creates family challenges and significantly affects their behaviour and decision-making. To address the hardships these workers face, it is essential to integrate them into a system that provides sufficient protection and support. The proper inclusion of the informal recycling sector begins with a significant shift in the public perception of the workers in this field. Informal recycling must be recognised as an occupation that addresses the ever-growing waste challenge in developing countries. The economic conditions of scavengers can be improved by enhancing individual workers' access to markets and establishing public-private partnerships (PPPs). However, such partnerships need to be carefully designed to avoid interfering with formal waste management activities. Furthermore, establishing associations for waste scavengers can enhance both their economic and social conditions (Ahmed & Ali, 2004; Medina, 2008; Tilaye & Van Dijk, 2014; Wilson et al., 2006).

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the multifaceted challenges encountered by informal waste scavengers in Panchsheel Colony, India, by applying Ecocriticism, Cultural Studies, Marxian theory, and the Environmental Justice Movement as a conceptual framework. It reveals that informal waste workers not only face direct health risks associated with exposure to hazardous substances, but they also lack legal protections, rendering them susceptible to exploitation and social marginalisation. In this respect, the analysis of *Bicycle Dreaming* highlights the pressing need for enhanced social awareness and legal safeguards to protect the dignity and welfare of these workers. The novel's narrative poignantly illustrates the significant toll of these challenges on individuals and community dynamics, as evidenced by the protagonist's abandonment of her dreams and the disintegration of her family unit. Nevertheless, within these adversities resides potential for positive transformation. The study's main contribution lies in integrating informal workers into formal waste management systems through inclusive policies and collaborative public-private partnerships, which can foster improved socioeconomic conditions while promoting environmental sustainability.

This study, furthermore, advocates dismantling the pervasive stigma surrounding informal waste scavengers to cultivate empathy and understanding within the community. It further paves the way for emphasising the necessity of a comprehensive approach to waste management that prioritises the rights, health, and dignity of all involved stakeholders, thereby contributing to a more just and sustainable future. Effectively incorporating informal workers into the official waste management sector not only has the potential to enhance their socioeconomic conditions but also to provide them with increased security. This can be realised through public-private partnerships

that facilitate market access and elevate economic returns for individual workers. By integrating waste pickers into a structured system that protects their rights and economic welfare, society can enhance waste management practices and promote a healthier environment.

The application of Ecocriticism enriches this discussion by exploring the representation of the relationship between humans and the environment within the text. In *Bicycle Dreaming*, the environmental degradation caused by waste incineration and improper disposal underscores the broader ecological repercussions of industrialisation, being literarily depicted in the novel. This connects to Ecocriticism, which interrogates the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources and the neglect of environmental health in the pursuit of economic advancement. The labour of waste pickers, often obscured from public consciousness, symbolises the continual exploitation of both nature and human labour. Recognising the interdependence of human and environmental health, ecocriticism provides a critical framework for understanding the correlation between environmental degradation and the marginalisation of communities.

Cultural Theory sheds light on the social and cultural dynamics that shape public perceptions and treatment of waste pickers. The stigma associated with informal waste workers is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs regarding class, purity, and social hierarchy. Cultural Theory examines how these attitudes are reinforced by prevailing narratives and societal norms, thereby perpetuating the exclusion of specific groups that are depicted through the fictional recounting of a realistic matter. By challenging these cultural misconceptions and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable framework, we can begin to dismantle the barriers that contribute to the marginalisation of informal waste workers.

The application of Marxian theory reveals the systemic economic exploitation faced by informal waste workers, akin to that faced by other marginalised populations. These workers navigate a system that prioritises profit over human welfare, which is illustrated in *Bicycle Dreaming*. This aligns with Marx's critique of capitalist structures that perpetuate class struggle and inequality. That is, individuals engaged in low-paying, informal employment remain ensnared in cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement tackled within the novel's literary appropriation of the sufferings of waste pickers.

Likewise, the Environmental Justice movement provides a lens through which to understand the disproportionate burdens borne by waste scavengers who are subject to environmental degradation. The marginalisation of these workers in the informal sector, coupled with their exposure to harmful pollutants, reflects the principles of environmental justice, which seek to rectify the unequal distribution of environmental harms across social groups.

By incorporating these diverse perspectives into waste management policies, we can effectively address the economic and environmental inequities faced by informal waste workers. Being so, the study highlights the narrative depiction of these workers, ensuring they receive the same rights and protections as those employed in the formal sector. This dual approach, grounded in Ecocriticism, Cultural Theory, Marxian Theory, and Environmental Justice frameworks, not only fosters fairer working conditions but also contributes to the formation of a more sustainable and equitable society.

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