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## **Shared Stewardship and Ecological Resistance: Reading Ashish Kothari's Illustrated Fable *Shero to the Rescue* through Elinor Ostrom's Theory of the Commons and Rob Nixon's Slow Violence**

**Dr Tuhin Majumdar**

**Assistant Professor of English, Khatra Adibasi Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India**

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### **Abstract**

Children's literature occupies a significant place within popular literature owing to its wide circulation, accessible narrative strategies, and ability to communicate complex social, ethical, and ecological concerns through engaging and comprehensible narratives. Often dismissed as naive, it nonetheless provides a meaningful space where questions of ethics, ecology, and politics converge. Ashish Kothari's *Shero to the Rescue* (2015), an illustrated fable set in the grasslands of Kachchh, Gujarat, India, exemplifies this potential through the story of Shero, a spirited hedgehog who mobilizes the animals of the grassland to defend their shared habitat against human exploitation. By foregrounding collective resistance, the text critiques dominant models of development that reduce land and water bodies to lifeless resources available for extraction. Drawing upon Elinor Ostrom's concept of the commons, this article argues that Kothari reimagines the grassland as a shared ecological space sustained through reciprocity, cooperation, and collective stewardship, thereby challenging anthropocentric approaches to environmental governance and resisting neoliberal practices of privatization. Furthermore, the gradual degradation of the grassland ecosystem and the displacement of its nonhuman inhabitants resonate with Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, exposing the often-invisible ecological consequences of developmental interventions. Through these theoretical frameworks, the article demonstrates that *Shero to the Rescue* functions as an ecological manifesto that reimagines sovereignty, agency, and environmental justice beyond the human. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary scholarship in the environmental humanities and popular children's literature by illustrating how illustrated fables can cultivate ecological consciousness, collective responsibility, and ethical engagement among young readers.

**Keywords:** Children's Literature, Illustrated Fable, Shared Stewardship, Commons, Slow Violence.

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## Introduction

Children's literature occupies a significant position within the broader domain of popular literature because of its wide circulation, accessibility, and enduring cultural influence. Although often associated primarily with entertainment and moral instruction, popular children's literature has increasingly emerged as a vital site for negotiating complex social, ethical, political, and ecological concerns. Its narrative simplicity, visual appeal, and imaginative storytelling enable it to communicate sophisticated ideas to diverse readerships without diminishing their intellectual depth. Consequently, contemporary literary scholarship has begun to acknowledge children's literature not merely as a pedagogical tool but as a legitimate field of critical inquiry that shapes public consciousness and cultural imagination. In particular, illustrated narratives, picturebooks, comics, and graphic storytelling have expanded the expressive possibilities of children's literature by integrating visual and verbal modes to address pressing issues such as environmental degradation, climate change, social justice, and coexistence between human and nonhuman worlds. Situated within this evolving tradition of popular children's literature, Ashish Kothari's *Shero to the Rescue* is examined in this chapter as an illustrated fable that reimagines ecological stewardship through Elinor Ostrom's concept of the commons and Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence, revealing how accessible narratives can challenge anthropocentric models of development while fostering environmental consciousness and collective responsibility.

## Children's Literature in the Popular- Elite Divide

Despite these developments, children's literature has long been approached with condescension because it is directed at young audiences. Traditionally, it has been dismissed as a vehicle of moral instruction, characterized by didactic simplicity and sentimental escapism, rather than recognized as a form of serious artistic expression. In this hierarchy, children's books, along with comics and cartoons, have often been marginalized as popular or easily consumable, and thus considered culturally inferior. Modernist literature, exemplified by figures such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, celebrated opacity and complexity as hallmarks of artistic seriousness, turning difficulty into a marker of cultural worth. Raymond Williams observes that such perspectives "divide culture into the cultured few and the uncultured many" (Williams, 1989, p. 243), reinforcing the idea that literature for children is less worthy because it prioritizes clarity and engagement over intellectual opacity. Within this framework, children's literature has been viewed less as art and more as a tool for shaping morality, a judgment that continues to influence academic attitudes toward visual and accessible forms, including graphic novels and digital storytelling.

## Beyond the Canon: Visual Narratives and Popular Literature

This long-standing hierarchy has, however, been increasingly unsettled by the critical acceptance of multimodal and graphic narratives, which have demonstrated that visual storytelling can possess the same intellectual and aesthetic complexity traditionally reserved for canonical literature. The entry of graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* into the literary mainstream challenged these entrenched hierarchies. Such works address subjects of immense historical and ethical gravity, including genocide, war, and political exile. Critics initially accused these works of trivializing serious subjects; however, the combination of image and text creates what Hillary Chute (2010) describes as a "complex visual-verbal interplay that creates a new literacy of witnessing" (p. 3). Similarly, children's literature, when read attentively, demonstrates that accessibility and visuality do not diminish artistic or ethical power. Instead, these forms enable readers to engage deeply with ethical, emotional, and political questions, thereby challenging

established cultural hierarchies.

It is within this broader revaluation of visual storytelling that illustrated fables such as Ashish Kothari's *Shero to the Rescue* demand critical attention for their capacity to negotiate complex environmental and socio-political concerns. Ashish Kothari's *Shero to the Rescue*, published by Kalpavriksh in 2015 and illustrated by Anusha Menon, is a small book with ambitious vision. Set in the grasslands of Kachchh, it tells the story of animals banding together to confront human encroachment, a scenario familiar in eco-fiction. Yet what appears at first as a simple tale for children carries a deeper message: a careful reflection on ecological balance and a subtle critique of unbridled development. Kothari, a committed environmentalist and founder of Kalpavriksh, an Indian environmental NGO; draws on his extensive experience with conservation and sustainability to shape a narrative that speaks to young readers while resonating with broader theoretical concerns.

### **Ethics of Shared Stewardship**

The environmental vision articulated in *Shero to the Rescue* invites a theoretical reading that foregrounds the ethics of shared stewardship, a concept that stems from collaborative approaches to urgent land management challenges such as wildfires, drought, and invasive species. Through this initiative, the U.S. Forest Service partners with Tribal governments, state agencies, and other organizations to enhance forest health and resilience, building on a long tradition of cooperative resource management (U.S. Forest Service, n.d.). This idea of collectively managing the commons resonates deeply when *Shero to the Rescue* is read alongside Elinor Ostrom's theory of the commons, as both emphasize shared responsibility, cooperation, and sustained collaboration in caring for ecological systems.

### **The Commons as Ecological Governance**

Before engaging with Ashish Kothari's *Shero to the Rescue* (2015), it is vital to understand the philosophical and ecological implications of the commons. The concept encompasses collectively shared resources—such as land, forests, water, and even knowledge—that are managed through community participation and reciprocal responsibility rather than through state or private control. Rooted in cooperation and ecological balance, the commons foreground collective stewardship over competitive possession. In *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Elinor Ostrom (1990) contests Garrett Hardin's deterministic argument in "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968), which posits that individuals, driven by self-interest, inevitably deplete shared resources unless restrained by privatization or state coercion. Hardin (1968) argues that when a resource is "open to all" (as cited in Ostrom, 1990, p. 2), each individual "herder," pursuing personal benefit, will continue to add more animals to a grazing site because the individual receives the full benefit while the costs of overgrazing are shared collectively. The result, Hardin contends, is the inevitable overuse and degradation of the resource unless private property or centralized coercive authority limits access and use. Furthermore, Ostrom (1990) cites William Ophuls's notion of the "tragic necessity of a Leviathan" (pp. 7–8) as another justification for centralized authority to avert ecological collapse. Rejecting both premises, Ostrom (1990) demonstrates through extensive empirical research on common-pool resources (CPRs)—including forests, irrigation systems, and fisheries—that communities frequently develop effective systems of self-governance based on trust, reciprocity, communication, and locally evolved institutions to achieve the sustainable management of shared resources (pp. 88–89). This theoretical framework finds an imaginative parallel in Kothari's *Shero to the Rescue* (2015), an illustrated ecological fable for children set in the grasslands of Kachchh, where Shero the hedgehog unites a diverse community of animals against the threat of environmental excavation. Both Ostrom's scholarship and Kothari's illustrated storytelling thus advance a vision of the commons not as

a site of inevitable tragedy but as a living space of coexistence, solidarity, and shared stewardship, where ethical imagination becomes the foundation for ecological balance.

### Slow Violence and Ecological Resistance

Ashish Kothari's *Shero to the Rescue* can be meaningfully situated within Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, which "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all," often targeting ecosystems and marginalized communities that remain outside immediate visibility (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). The industrial intrusion into the Kachchh grasslands in Kothari's story embodies this insidious form of ecological harm that unfolds silently yet relentlessly. Shero, the hedgehog protagonist, becomes both a resister and a whistleblower, exposing the veiled costs of human greed while inspiring the collective defense of the commons. Kothari's narrative thus transforms a slow and often imperceptible environmental crisis into an ethical act of resistance grounded in cooperation and empathy. In this sense, the illustrated fable exemplifies what Nixon (2011) describes as the work of "writer-activists" whose "imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear" and "challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts," offering "a different kind of witnessing" that renders distant or imperceptible destruction emotionally and politically tangible (p. 15).

### Reimagining Ecology through Character and Landscape

The choice of a hedgehog as the main character in Ashish Kothari's *Shero to the Rescue* is both deliberate and meaningful. Hedgehogs are small, quiet, and burrowing animals that often go unnoticed in conversations about conservation. By focusing on Shero, Kothari reverses the usual pattern in environmental narratives, where attention is typically given to large, charismatic animals such as tigers or elephants. Instead, he demonstrates how strength and resistance can emerge from seemingly ordinary lives. Shero's burrow, hidden and close to the earth, becomes a symbol of a marginalized or subaltern position. It is vulnerable yet capable of powerful action and awareness, even from an underground space.

The setting of Kachchh, Gujarat, is equally significant. Often described as dry, remote, or suitable for industrial development, Kachchh is reimagined by Kothari as a vibrant ecological and cultural landscape. The opening of the story presents a rich tapestry of grasslands, wetlands, and interdependent relationships among diverse species. This portrayal challenges developmental discourses that construct such regions as "empty" lands available for industrial expansion and extractive projects. Significantly, the threat remains deliberately ambiguous, represented only as "people never seen before" carrying "strange things" (Kothari, 2015, p. 4). By refusing to identify these figures explicitly, Kothari destabilizes the authority of technocratic and development-oriented language while inviting readers to question dominant narratives of progress. For young readers, this ambiguity heightens both the sense of danger and the narrative suspense.

### Becoming-With and Multispecies Kinship

The vision of the commons articulated through shared stewardship in *Shero to the Rescue* is further enriched by a posthuman ethic of multispecies coexistence, inviting a reading through Donna Haraway's concept of *becoming-with*. Donna Haraway's concept of *becoming-with*, articulated in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), offers an alternative mode of coexistence that rejects human exceptionalism and embraces multispecies entanglements. Haraway introduces the term *Chthulucene* to describe a new epoch in which humans must learn to live responsibly within a web of earthly relations rather than viewing themselves as separate from or superior to other forms of life. As Haraway (2016) writes, "we

require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations... We become-with each other or not at all" (p. 4), suggesting that survival depends on the capacity to build collaborative, symbiotic relationships across species. This ecological imagination finds a striking expression in *Shero to the Rescue*, where Shero, the hedgehog, unites the animals of Kachchh to defend their shared grassland from human encroachment. In this narrative, *becoming-with* takes the form of collective resistance and care, where every creature's role, however small, contributes to the preservation of the commons. Shero's actions embody Haraway's (2016) insistence that to "make kin" (p. 102) is to widen the circle of belonging and responsibility beyond the human. Kothari's illustrated fable thus transforms Haraway's theoretical vision into a living narrative of ecological kinship, inviting readers to imagine coexistence as both an ecological and an ethical necessity.

Haraway's notion of *becoming-with* finds its most compelling narrative expression in Shero's response to the encroachment which is not one of solitary heroism but of coalition-building. Rather than turning inward, she reaches outward, seeking the wisdom of others- not to act alone but to listen, collaborate, and connect. She first consults "Gho Uncle," the monitor lizard who "knows the land through his roaming" (Kothari, 2015, p. 5). Gho, in turn, approaches Saslu, the Indian hare, who overhears men discussing "the building... the parking lot... and also something about a pipe leading off into a nearby lake" (Kothari, 2015, p. 8). This fragment of conversation is further developed through Bagla, the migratory bird "whose flock travelled far and wide," whose alarm at seeing "huge four-legged beings with massive jaws, with men riding them" (Kothari, 2015, pp. 9- 10) expands the threat from a local disturbance to a wider machinery of industrial invasion. Their circle extends to Kalo Pado, the gentle black buffalo, whose quiet companionship with Bagla- who "often [sat] on his back to pick off ticks and insects" (Kothari, 2015, p. 11)- embodies the reciprocity that sustains the grassland. Pado's human companion, Sulemankaka, reveals the larger threat: a factory project, mining operations, and waste disposal that will devastate both the lake and the surrounding desert. In response, an "emergency conference" brings together Shero, Gho, Bagla, Saslu, Pado, Oondardo the desert gerbil, Shahudi the porcupine, and Oont the camel (Kothari, 2015, p. 14), exemplifying the cooperative vitality that Donna Haraway (2016) describes as *becoming-with*, an ethic that moves beyond hierarchy through kinship and shared responsibility (p. 4). Shero urges the gathering, "Friends, if the factory comes, there will be no playgrounds left for us, we will lose our homes! And maybe some nasty humans will catch us and take us away... away from our homes and our parents!" (Kothari, 2015, p. 16), thereby assuming a leadership role that guides the others toward collective action. Soon, the network widens further: Maggar the crocodile, fish, turtles, butterflies, and dragonflies rally to defend the lake, while Gho's message reaches the desert, where Varu the Indian wolf and Ghudkhar, leader of the wild asses, also pledge resistance. Kothari thus envisions what Haraway (2016) calls "promising patterns for multispecies response-ability," an ethics of care rooted in listening across species rather than asserting control (p. 16). This collective mobilization culminates in a communal ecological awakening.

### **Animals Alliance: Defender of the Earth**

In the climactic movement of the narrative, the animals' alliance becomes a vibrant enactment of multispecies resistance and ecological solidarity. When "the men driving the vehicle with the big jaws revved up its engine" to begin excavation, the grassland itself, aided by its smallest inhabitants, rises in revolt (Kothari, 2015, p. 22). Shahudi the porcupine becomes the first defender of the earth, having "placed her quills at the perfect spot," bursting the tyres of the monstrous machine (Kothari, 2015, p. 22). What follows is an elemental retaliation: "the vehicle had started sinking into the ground," as if "the earth ate up half the vehicle, so to speak, very soon only the top part and the huge jaws were sticking out!" (Kothari, 2015, p. 23). This moment literalizes the agency of the land itself, exemplifying what Haraway (2016) describes

as the earth's "response-ability," in which the terrain, animated by its dwellers, resists extraction through coordinated interspecies effort (p. 16).

The driver and his assistant, who had called their company office for help after the tyres burst and the vehicle began to sink, find themselves helpless, unable to receive assistance because the resistance has already reached the human administrative sphere. In the office of Reldani Industries, a crocodile with a "mouth wide open showing his wicked teeth" and a wolf "grinning as devilishly" block the exits, preventing any intervention and effectively holding the factory's managers hostage (Kothari, 2015, p. 24). The human agents of extraction are thus immobilized by the very creatures they had sought to displace, reversing conventional hierarchies of power and affirming the collective agency of the more-than-human world.

Mr. Jagdamba Nidani, the factory owner, gathers his men and sets out in trucks to "teach those animals a lesson," nature's second wave of defense unfolds spectacularly (Kothari, 2015, p. 25). On the road to the grassland, a "thick fog, twinkling and moving and made of dozens of colours" appears, revealed to be "a swarm of thousands and thousands of butterflies and dragonflies and damselflies," obstructing visibility and halting the convoy's progress (Kothari, 2015, p. 26). This shimmering barrier dramatizes the aesthetic dimension of protest, as beauty itself becomes an instrument of resistance. When the swarm disperses, Nidani and his men are confronted by "a procession advancing towards them. Not of people, but of animals!" (Kothari, 2015, p. 27).

This living pageant, described as "a storybook of A to Z animals come alive," becomes a powerful tableau of ecological unity (Kothari, 2015, p. 27). Ghudkhar, the Indian wild ass, leads the procession with his herd alongside Oont's camels and "a dozen buffaloes led by Pado," carrying on their backs "a few turtles" kept moist by "Bagla and her egret and stork and crane friends dripping water on them from above" (Kothari, 2015, p. 27). The image fuses grace and solidarity, as species that would rarely coexist in such close cooperation move together in harmony, protecting one another's vulnerability. The young animals, who had gathered the previous day to hear Shero's speech, ride "on the buffaloes' backs" (Kothari, 2015, p. 27), symbolizing intergenerational continuity, ecological inheritance, and hope.

Behind them march "Varu's wolf friends... desert foxes and jackals," their teeth bared in defense, followed by "Saslu and many other hares," who, "keeping a wary distance," nonetheless align with predators in a fragile truce forged by a shared ecological threat (Kothari, 2015, p. 28). At the rear, "Gho and other monitor lizards, Shahudi and her porcupine family, [and] hedgehogs other than Shero" close the procession, joined by "grasshoppers leaping from one animal back to another" and "several snakes slithering along on the road" (Kothari, 2015, p. 28). The aerial cohort of "eagles and harriers" maintains vigilance, "scanning the horizon for any sign of danger," while suspending their own predatory instincts for the sake of the collective (Kothari, 2015, p. 29). Although the narrative foregrounds ecological kinship rather than social identity, this temporary solidarity in the face of a common threat resonates with the strategic logic underlying Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism, whereby diverse groups unite around a shared objective despite their internal differences.

### **From Resistance to Ecological Justice**

Shero, positioned "right at the front with Ghudkhar and the other big animals," is honored for having "sounded the alert in the first place," embodying the leadership that catalyzed the movement (Kothari, 2015, p. 29). Her parents, "sleepy and a little worried... but also proud," witness their daughter's transformation from an anxious hedgehog into a figure of moral and ecological courage (Kothari, 2015, p. 29). When Ghudkhar spots the company truck, he calls to Shero, "Hey Shero... do you still have those quills that Shahudi had donated?" Without hesitation, she signals Bagla, who delivers the quills, puncturing the truck's tyres "with bangs

as loud" as before (Kothari, 2015, p. 30). The gesture, both practical and symbolic, affirms that resistance relies not on brute force but on coordinated intelligence, embodying an ethic of cooperation in action.

The comic flourish that follows, with Oont the camel "grinning... and politely asking, 'Would you like to join our procession... anyway now you'll have to walk home!'" (Kothari, 2015, p. 30), introduces a tone of mock triumph that subverts the arrogance of industrial power. When a journalist from the *Kachchh Times* captures the moment, aided by Sulemankaka and Mr. Rasiklal, the movement enters public consciousness, gaining both human and media allies. The procession swells to "several hundred animals (and two humans)," marching toward Bhuj as townspeople line the streets in astonishment (Kothari, 2015, p. 32).

One child exclaims, "Mummy... this is so much better than those boring Republic Day parades!" (Kothari, 2015, p. 32), offering a wry commentary on how spontaneous ecological solidarity surpasses state spectacle. As the march enters Bhuj, urban creatures, including "mongooses, bandicoots, ducks and geese, skinks and snakes," join the procession, signaling that wild and domestic, rural and urban, are all participants in a shared ecology (Kothari, 2015, p. 33). Overhead, birds carry a banner proclaiming, "Kachchh is not just for humans!" (Kothari, 2015, p. 33).

The procession culminates at the District Collector's office, where human allies, including the Maldharis, the Agariyas, members of the Kachchh Navnirman Abhiyan, and schoolchildren, stand in solidarity with the animals (Kothari, 2015, p. 35). To the animals' astonishment, the District Collector greets them warmly and announces that "we are already reconsidering our decision to put the factory there... this matter has gone all the way to Ahmedabad and Delhi" (Kothari, 2015, p. 36). Sulemankaka explains that he had alerted the newspapers, arguing that "any development activities here should be only if you and we both agree. And a factory like this is not development!" (Kothari, 2015, p. 36). The animals, momentarily disarmed by the success of their cause, erupt into a collective cheer, producing a "strange medley of sounds" that includes "squeaks, squawks, croaks, trumpets, brays, hoots, hisses," and the rhythmic "drumming" of Bagla tapping on a turtle's shell (Kothari, 2015, p. 37).

The animals' refusal to submit to human authority, their ability to cooperate despite their differing instincts, and their insistence that "Kachchh is not just for humans" (Kothari, 2015, p. 33) articulate an ethic of coexistence grounded in reciprocity rather than hierarchy. The illustrated fable concludes not with the complete defeat of domination but with the restoration of ecological balance, affirming Haraway's (2016) argument that survival depends on "staying with the trouble" (p. 2) and learning to live and flourish through interdependence.

### **Eco-Cosmopolitanism and Planetary Imagination**

While the narrative concludes by restoring ecological balance within Kachchh, its vision of coexistence ultimately extends beyond the local landscape to imagine a broader planetary community of interconnected human and nonhuman lives. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, Ursula Heise (2008) conceptualizes *eco-cosmopolitanism* as an outlook that "envision[s] groups as part of planetary imagined communities of both human and nonhuman kinds" (p. 61). Ashish Kothari's illustrated fable *Shero to the Rescue* (2015) materializes this framework by situating its narrative within the particular ecological and cultural milieu of Kachchh while simultaneously invoking a planetary consciousness. The migratory birds, who "had seen many lands in their travels" (Kothari, 2015, p. 9), symbolize this interconnectedness by bridging the local and the planetary. Through such imagery, the text aligns local acts of stewardship with a broader ecological awareness, suggesting that care for one's immediate environment

contributes to the well-being of a shared global ecosystem.

## Conclusion

Embedding environmental theory within an accessible narrative, Kothari's *Shero to the Rescue* challenges the elitist division between "serious" and "juvenile" literature. Its simplicity is strategic rather than simplistic, and its pedagogy is political rather than merely didactic. In doing so, the illustrated fable reclaims children's literature as a legitimate site of intellectual inquiry through which the commons, multispecies justice, and ecological ethics can be imagined, taught, and enacted. The narrative thus subverts the long-standing prejudice that stories written for children cannot simultaneously engage with urgent social and environmental concerns. Rather than offering moral instruction alone, *Shero to the Rescue* demonstrates how picture storytelling can cultivate ethical imagination while fostering ecological awareness and collective responsibility.

By foregrounding cooperation over competition and collective care over individual profit, the text resists neoliberal tendencies of privatization that threaten both human and nonhuman forms of life. Kothari's work contributes meaningfully to contemporary debates in the environmental humanities that seek to reimagine agency, kinship, and sustainability beyond the anthropocentric frame. It resonates with the "ecoethical turn" articulated by thinkers such as Donna Haraway and Ursula Heise, who advocate multispecies coexistence and planetary belonging as alternatives to what Arturo Escobar (2020) describes as "brutal forms of extractive globalization" (p. 16), a developmental paradigm that reduces ecological relations to systems of exploitation. Likewise, Kothari extends these theoretical conversations into the realm of children's literature, suggesting that ecological consciousness begins with the stories societies tell their youngest readers. His narrative ethos also reflects what Escobar (2020) terms "matriarchalization," the defense and re-creation of "relational and cooperative modes of living with humans and nature" (p. 16). By embedding these principles within an illustrated fable, Kothari transforms popular children narrative into an instrument of ecological ethics that nurtures empathy, interdependence, and shared stewardship.

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## Bio-note

**Dr. Tuhin Majumdar** has been serving as Assistant Professor in the Department of English

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at Khatra Adibasi Mahavidyalaya, affiliated to Bankura University since February, 2015. A UGC-NET JRF awardee, he received his PhD from The University of Burdwan in 2018 for his research on the representation of violence in contemporary English graphic novels. He further earned a Master's degree in English Language Teaching from Netaji Subhas Open University in 2023. He has co-edited two books entitled *Voices: A National Research Anthology on Northeast Indian English Poetry* and *Philosophical Interventions in Language, Literature and Critical Thinking*.

**Email ID:** [tuhinmajumdar87@gmail.com](mailto:tuhinmajumdar87@gmail.com)

**ORCID ID:** 0000-0003-0758-7011

