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Climate Change and Refugees: Images of Leaving and Returning in *A Home for the Hargila*: Book Review

Abstract: This review discusses the visual layers in the graphic picturebook *A Home for the Hargila* by Nalini Ramachandran and Pankaj Saikia. The story follows three girls in Assam, India, and tells the story of the disappearance of the endangered “Hargila” birds (Greater Adjutant Storks) in the region due to climate change and human intervention, and their subsequent return. The review will discuss how visuals are used as a narrative technique in this picturebook to convey emotions and expressions related to migration, climate crises, leaving, and returning to the child reader.

Keywords: graphic picturebooks, climate refugees, migration, Hindi, endangered species, visuals

Developed as a graphic narrative, Nalini Ramachandran’s picturebook *A Home for the Hargila** (*Room to Read India*,¹ 2023) – illustrated by Pankaj Saikia – follows three young girls in Assam, India, and seeks to tell the story of the disappearance of the endangered “Hargila” birds (Greater Adjutant Storks) in the region. Based on real-life efforts by the Hargila Army,² led by Purnima Devi Burman, to protect the endangered bird, the picturebook shows young readers a glimpse of how wildlife species are affected by climate change and human action. The 36-page picturebook takes the reader through the journey toward the birds’ eventual return to the girls’ village. It is interesting to note that the

¹ Room to Read is a global organization transforming the lives of millions of children in low-income countries by focusing on literacy and gender equality in education. Founded in 2000 on the belief that World Change Starts with Educated Children®, their model focuses on deep, systemic transformation within schools in low-income countries during two time periods which are most critical in a child’s schooling: early primary school for literacy acquisition and secondary school for girls’ education. See www.roomtoread.org.

² As Daniel Graham notes, “Led by Dr Purnima Devi Barman, the ‘Hargila Army’ or ‘Stork Sisters’ movement rescued the greater adjutant stork from the brink of extinction” (Graham 2024).

Hargila Army comprised 10,000-odd women and their efforts, and the author of the story chooses to channel this in the story via three girl protagonists supported by older women in their families.

This review will explore the visual layers in *A Home for the Hargila* in order to explore the role of visuals as a narrative technique in graphic picturebooks. In this instance, the illustrator Pankaj Saikia (who hails from the state of Assam himself) uses visuals to convey emotions and expressions that intricately build the subtext of the picturebook – touching upon difficult topics such as migration, climate crises, and leaving and returning for the child reader. The book is aimed for young readers in the age group 8–12, in the Indian context in which Room to Read India runs program libraries in underserved government primary schools.

At the beginning of the book, visual space and geography is outlined as an important element of the story through a map that helps us locate where each of the three girls live, “in Tak-Tak Village, a big village by a small lake,” while also giving the reader a glimpse into what their living conditions and environment look like. Pakhi lives in a small hut amidst greenery, and Kakoli lives on stilt houses (which implies that the area frequently gets flooded). On the other hand, Haseena and her family’s makeshift tent-home seems to be on the outskirts spatially, and next to the local dumping grounds – indicating a predisposition to potential climate-linked disasters.

As the story builds, we see various examples of how climate change seems to have affected the girls’ village life – the local weatherman ‘Mausam Mamu’ (Weather Uncle) seems to be frequently making wrong predictions. A simple announcement from him declaring ‘no rain this week’, signals the onslaught of a flood, and as the village-folk scurry home for shelter, Mamu is left alone in the rain, among a deserted landscape. As the storm subsides, the illustrator skillfully brings in images of post-flood destruction very common in news reports from north-east India in a manner that is age-appropriate for children. Characters use makeshift rafts to traverse the village, and occupants of the stilt houses look around miserably. These images of movement, while not “leaving” or “returning” to the village itself, indicate how precarious life in the village has become in the midst of a climate crisis, wherein the survival of homes and even people may not be guaranteed.

When the hero of the book – the Hargila bird – is introduced, the illustrator displays its dramatic entrance through the creative use of movement and shadowy silhouette, painting the creature as a long-lost myth or legend. As the story progresses, the narrative ascertains this further. Older women across the village talk about the bird in poetic terms, with a focus on larger-than-life features and sound imagery. There is an underlying nod toward the gravity of climate change’s effects on women – which further get exacerbated for women of lower castes and classes, and/or minority religions. The first visual image the reader

gets of the Hargila is hand-drawn in chalk by Pakhi's *aita* (grandmother) on a wall, followed by an artistic motif of the bird depicted in local folk-weaving style as Kakoli's *khuri* (paternal aunt) narrates a myth around it. The bird remains visually ephemeral to the reader.



As the story reaches its climax, panels show silhouettes of the Hargilas leaving Tak-Tak Village in a flashback, driven away by community members who believe that the bird is too dirty for them to co-exist with. Haseena then draws a pivotal comparison between the Hargilas leaving (a loss of biodiversity for the village) and her family having had to migrate from their homeland. Hints in the story point toward Haseena and her family being refugees from the nearby country of Bangladesh, now having to live in Assam as part of a local Muslim community of garbage collectors.

Both these instances of “leaving” are mesmerizingly mirrored across two facing pages of the picturebook. The illustrator uses the same visual style to draw the comparison. One of them “leaving” is more symbolic – the expulsion of the Hargila birds by Gojen and his friends indicates the years-long process of human intervention wiping out animal habitat. The other is based on stark socio-political reality, and is in this case more permanent. The leaving of the Hargilas is still captured in local memory for a generation of village elders. However, Haseena’s family’s migration seems to be a traumatic reality only for her, and they remain resigned to a life as part of the rag picking community.



After the flashbacks, the three girls set their minds on finding the elusive bird and bringing it back to the village. Then, the narrative shows us the return of a singular Hargila, as the girls spy the bird perched high upon the local dump yard. An adult explains that these areas, once marshy, served as the species' habitat and roosting site before their disappearance. Here, the reader may expect a joyous image of the Hargila's return, but what happens is unexpected. The bird appears ragged as it consumes decaying meat from the dump yard, horrifying the girls and serving as a call to action for them as well as the book's implied reader.



As the girls become determined to rally the village around bringing Hargilas back, images of the bird appear in the book in different ways. Pakhi learns to paint from *aita*, and paints it across the village, Kakoli uses a hand puppet of the bird's head to narrate stories about the Hargila's majestic past, and Haseena and her mother use plastic bags from garbage to create toy figurines of the bird.

As the book moves toward its resolution, the illustrator uses a wordless page of panels to show the Hargila's large frame juxtaposed with its nemesis – the infamous Gojen uncle who was responsible for the bird's previous exit from the village. Gojen, one of the two featured male characters in the story, seems to stand in for human greed, a lack of empathy, and a foil for the three protagonists and their families' values. As the Hargila makes yet another attempt to return to its home in this scene, it is met with the stereotypical conservative figure in Gojen, who is hesitant to allow his village to be "polluted." The clever use of bird-like features for the man to mirror the Hargila indicates an uneasy reckoning with the self for the human race. In the absence of the written word, the narrative progresses with Gojen contemplatively accepting the Hargila back into the village, indicating hope.



In this way, illustrations in *A Home for the Hargila* contain images of leaving and returning that complement the narrative and provide nuanced notes of individual and community identity. The story makes for a visually interesting attempt to introduce the complex themes of climate change refugees to young readers in the context of the global majority.

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