



## The Diasporic Imagination and Eco-critical Responsiveness towards Nature: An Exploration of Aamer Hussein's *The Swan's Wife*

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### ABSTRACT

Within literary realm, the relationship between environmental sensitivity and postcolonial woundedness is a dubious one. Ecocriticism highlights Nature as a space of socio-cultural values where the writer uses his imaginative bend to explore issues related to environment such as maltreatment of environment by humans and anthropocentric utilization of nature. Taking Aamer Hussein's collection of short stories i.e., *The Swan's Wife* as sample, the current study, in this context, sheds light on how nature/environment and postcolonial understanding can serve as a metaphoric signifier for healing colonial wounds. Through a detailed qualitative content analysis, the paper explains how nature is an engaging mechanism in Aamer Hussein's selected work that assimilates diasporic imagination with eco-consciousness. The study, thus, initiates a much-needed debate between the role of ecocritical thought and postcolonial consciousness in Pakistani context.

**Keywords:** *Environmental sensitivity; diaspora; anthropocentrism; postcolonial consciousness*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

The intersection between Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism has been an interesting rather esoteric concept which demands the investigation and exploration from the ecocritical as well as postcolonial sensitivity. While postcolonial studies broaden the ecocritical perspective of inclusion of not only humans but also Nature as a victim of Postcolonial hegemony, interestingly Ecocriticism acknowledges the indulgence of diverse human groups instead of generalizing humans in one simple category who are the offenders of Nature.

This relationship is actually based upon the concept that anthropocentrism and

Eurocentrism go hand-in-hand. It sheds light on the interrogation of the moralities related to social ecology along with the questions of environmental concern. Thus, the subalterns are deprived of the access to their resourceful lands and are left with the realization of restoring their community and communal and cultural practices. Both colonization and anthropocentrism consider land as an empty property to be taken over by the offenders. Places are no more places but rather are taken as empty spaces at the intersection of ecocriticism and postcolonialism.

Aamer Hussein's collection of short stories i.e., *The Swan's Wife* is taken as the sample for the current study as it both

explicitly and implicitly bonds with the postcolonial sensitivity and an attachment with Nature. In this regard, the way nature/environment act as a healing mechanism for postcolonial sensitivity, is the concern of this research. It is found that Nature is serving as a metaphoric signifier for healing colonial wounds. Through a detailed qualitative content analysis, the paper explains how Nature is an engaging mechanism in Aamer Hussein's selected work that assimilates diasporic imagination with eco-consciousness. The study, thus, initiates a much-needed debate between the role of ecocritical thought and postcolonial consciousness in Pakistani context.

Writers, generally are inspired from the places of their existence and develop a distinct kind of compassion towards them. Aamer Hussein's writings are representative of the various places and cultures he has been exposed to. His is one of the most creative voice in the horizon of short story writing, having written five short stories collections, many of which further have been translated in other languages.

Aamer Hussein believes on the unavailability of being exposed to diverse philosophies, cultures, ideologies and languages. Achieving multiple perspectives is significant because it delivers a rather more clear life vision as according to him, "Any hegemonic structures that restrict this need to be broken and remade" (Siddiqui, 2015).

Amit Choudhary pronounces about Aamer Hussein stories that 'Hussein's stories are about individuals and their countries of exile, where the world itself is seen as a place of transit' (Khair, 2004). This consciousness is thoroughly connected to cultural rootedness and hence we can call Hussein's work as

'situated cosmopolitanism'. As, he has been close to various cultures and consider himself as a world writer, for him, culture and race are important.

"I was 15 when I went to England to study and there I met Iranians, Palestinians, even had a Korean friend. And there was one thing that was common in all. There was a sense of displacement among them, a feeling that their home is elsewhere. Gradually, I also imbibed a similar feeling and with political turmoil taking place back home it added to the feeling of rootlessness" (Siddiqui, 2015).

Noor-ul-Huda Shah, a remarkable Sindhi writer commented about Hussein's writings that he is the writer of the country which has been a victim of rootlessness and sufferings for many years. "Everyone is seeking a safe haven, where they can feel secure. I am pleased to know and meet a writer who feels this and writes about it in his stories" (Siddiqui, 2015).

Those stories from the book are selected which have exemplified the Human-nature interaction and postcolonial sensitivity. These stories raise a clear stance on environmental discourse and reveal man/nature binary. Furthermore the environmental tensions, through texts and narratives are elaborated at length by the characters.

### **1.1 Research Objectives:**

The primary objective of the research is to examine and analyze the construction and relationship between ecocritical and postcolonial sensitivity as established in the selected stories.

### **1.2 Research Questions:**

1. How the selected stories present the interface between postcolonial and ecocritical philosophies?

2. Which ecocritical undertones of Nature contribute in enhancement of postcolonial sensitivity?

### 1.3 Significance of the Study:

The study is significant as it can illuminate the intersection of ecocritical and postcolonial sensitivity established in literary texts in Pakistani context. Further it would be helpful for emerging writers, teachers and students who want to examine or incorporate these themes in the writing.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

### 2.1 Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Issues and Perspectives

Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* states that:

Broadly defined, ecocriticism [...] is an umbrella term [...] used to refer to the environmentally oriented study of literature and (less often) the arts more generally, and to the theories that underlie such critical practice. (138)

This definition of "ecocriticism" offers parameters to investigate environmental representation in literature from multiple dimensions.

The colonialist discourse inherent in postcolonial theory took its roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Joseph-Ernest Renan, in his *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871) sketched out the supremacy of the imperial nations to civilize the colored nations intellectually, socially and culturally. Postcolonial discourse offered a counternarrative to

the Eurocentric beliefs of Global North and perpetuated environmental justice whereby each section of the natural world has freedom to exist apart from capitalist hegemonic ideals. Postcolonialism, in this sense, can be termed as "anthropocentric" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 03) as evident in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Said's *Orientalism* (1977) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Environmentalism, or Green Studies is a relatively new field of investigation that seeks to determine the intersection between nature and humans in diverse ways. Postcolonial Ecocriticism states that human violation and maltreatment must be addressed first before addressing nonhuman needs.

Eco-consciousness vis-à-vis postcolonialism implies a healing relationship as Wordsworthian nature can take up a sustainable role in alleviating colonial wounds. An environmental discourse informed by postcolonial sensitivity pairs up how both entities are (mal)treated, objectified, subjugated, marginalized and victimized by a dominant subject. According to Mukherjee in *Postcolonial Environments*, "the relationships between human and nonhuman agents or actors that define the history of the Indian subcontinent is what I understand as 'environment'" (2010, p. 05). Since both are downtrodden, the remedial interdependent symbiosis is fundamental to initiate the process of recovering from postcolonial anxiety.

Huggan's and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2015) displays an exhaustive and cross-cultural relevance of green postcolonialism. It further offers cultural, historical, political and ecological insights on postcolonial anxiety. The binaries such as wealthy/poor; master/slave and developed/underdeveloped highlight

some of the core problems existent in postcolonialism. It is, in this context, that ecological discourse can pave a path for a fruitful alliance and “a productive overlap” between the two theoretical models (Huggan, p. 701). Similarly, *Greening’ Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives* (2004) by Graham Huggan also entwines the two fields and describes the utility of non-human actants for human beings in social and cultural realm.

In *Environmental Justice Reader*, the issues pertaining to social inequality, colonization and environmental degradation are portrayed which may “shape the aspiration toward ‘postcolonialism’ or ‘green postcolonialism’” (Heise, p. 252). Pablo Mukherjee’s reading strategy for reading postcolonial environmental text offers affinities between how both critical theories are gateway to a unified understanding of nature and postcolonialism. According to him, the content and thematic style of postcolonial texts may be ambiguous upon first reading; however, a deeper study can unveil topographies in which the narrative structure, itself, is resistant to the colonial imports. By providing a detailed analysis of Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Sinha’s *Dead Air* and Joshi’s *Blood on My Water*, he scrutinizes as to how, “novel itself is a register of the environment of uneven historical development specific to postcolonial India” (p. 82). The uneven style of South Asian Novels, according to Mukherjee, reveal deeply entrenched artistic responses to history and culture where environment, culture and history intertwined and interdependent (Mukherjee, p. 84).

## 2.2 Pakistani Fiction and Ecological Discourse

Pakistani anglophone writing offers diverse co-mingling between nature and culture. Scot Slovic, an ecocritical theorist, in *Ecocriticism of the Global South* (2016) that Pakistani literature is slowly coming to terms with environment and offers transnational globalized interests through its distinct ecological turn. Uzma Aslam Khan, Nadeem Aslam and Mohsin Hamid’s fictional narratives deal with issues such as environmental violence, pollution, waste materials, contamination, and lack of environmental sustainability. Hamid in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) states how the “city’s neglected pipes are cracking” (98), the contamination of “underground water mains and sewers mingling, the taps” draws attention on threats to human health caused by pollution (p. 99-100). Kamila Shamsie uses the concept of ‘ecological risk’ to define an array of ecological transformations in global context. Her novel, *Burnt Shadows* (2009) delineates the tropes of deteriorating environmentalism and its catastrophic aftermath. Owing to global representations by Pakistani authors, Raja Masood in his article “The Pakistani English Novel: The Burden of Representation and the Horizon of Expectation” (2018) claims that the “Pakistani novel in English has finally come of age and has garnered its space within and without Pakistan” (2).

In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, a book published in 2008, the theoretical framework of eco-cosmopolitanism is given by Ursula K. Heise. She defines eco-cosmopolitanism as having traditional ecological knowledge in being an individual citizen of the world. Pakistani fiction in English reverberates the tropes of exile, colonization, silencing of individuals on socio-political grounds and so on. The language also convenes all such

issues and hence becomes a contested site for struggle through metaphorical use of ideas.

Discussing Pakistani fiction, Hashmi writes that formalist and syntactic dimensions of Pakistani novels underlie specific features such as linguistic and stylistic turning it into “indigenized Pakistani language” (48) but is also very near to what Mukherjee dubs “uneven development” (14). However, this unevenness is due to colonial history that resides by and large inside Pakistani culture. Although Pakistani fiction is researched (e.g., Rahman, 2011; Perzadeh, 2019; and Yaqoob, 2016) from aspects such as toxicity, eco-consciousness and environmental crisis, yet the healing impact of environment on postcolonial sensitivity remains an under-researched area which needs consideration. In order for racial, social and cultural wounds to heal, an interconnectedness between environment and human is mandatory. By dint of Mother Earth’s universal traits of love and care, the postcolonial pangs of slavery and exile can be minimized, if not obliterated.

The current study, therefore, aims at bridging this gap between diasporic imagination and utility of environment to cure colonial wounds. *The Swan’s Wife* demonstrates how ecological awareness and natural ties can help redeem the individual deficiencies and can offer them acting out their angst.

### 3 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS:

#### 3.1 Introduction of the Stories:

In *The Swan’s Wife*, Umair Omar, the speaker and the character is revealed at various stages of his life and can forthrightly be taken as one who represents an alter ego of writer, Aamer Hussein. The book reveals that Umair is an

academician and his youthful appearance specifies his social experience of a carefree and sensitive student.

There are nine writings termed as ‘Nine Postcards and Nine Notes’ which Umair wrote down while residing in Spain.

The stories, ‘Knotted Tongue 1’ and ‘Knotted Tongue 2’ are associated to the female characters who were narrator’s friends and who have died. Women are assigned the voice through these stories. The tone of these stories is feminist and the female protagonists are Shams and Zohra; representing love and success in terms of astrology.

‘Ahmar and Ambara’ is the last story of *The Swan’s Wife* which is written in a fable style dealing with princess, prince, charmed substances and envious sisters. The story is located outside of time and space which invariably bound the other stories. This story is unlike traditional fables since Hussein takes the readers towards a semi-finished conclusion. Hussein’s ability to tease his reader makes his writing unforgettable.

The stories *Knotted Tongue-I*, *Third Post card* from Umair, *Fourth Post card* from Umair, *9<sup>th</sup> extract* from Refika’s Notebook, *Knotted Tongue II* and *Ahmar and Anbara*, are selected as they entail both postcolonial and ecoconscious motifs in them.

#### 3.2 Postcolonial humans; their identity crisis and the role of Nature:

*Knotted Tongue -I* is the story in the book which deals with themes of exile and displacement and describes the story of an immigrant writer Zohra. The speaker of the story got a letter from her as an invitation for her book launch ceremony, there Zohra and her writing creativity is introduced with reference to Nature. Her

writing was like rain and fire. Rain and fire are the elements of Nature and they seem to contribute towards the individuality of the writer, Zohra. Then the old country of the speaker is mentioned, hence an association with both Nature and the country of origin is depicted by bringing colonial and ecological registers together.

*The writer enclosed some poems whose words were like drop of rain and arrowheads of fire. The letter came from my old country* (Hussein 2014, pg. 41).

At this juncture, further, the postcolonial themes of race, gender and ethnicity are hinted at through such descriptions like:

*I want to go home to do something. Here one's tongue is useless. The bastards seal our lips and leave our arms paralysed. I can't speak anymore, neither verse nor protest. Here I'm a vegabond, I carry my home on my back* (Hussein 2014, pg.42).

These descriptions highlight the conflict between the consciousness of national spirit and the complicated accommodation and adjustments of the diaspora. This feeling of subjugation is further contrasted with the creative freedom and impulse Nature seems to offer to the writer, Zohra.

*In a glass hall on the banks of river, one afternoon. White swans skimmed the surface of water. She'd gathered her thoughts into poems and read aloud two of them* (Hussein 2014, pg.42).

Zohra, being a colonial subject, is contrasted with Zohra being a creative independent and free writer. And this freedom and independence is shaped and manifested in her intrinsic bonding with Nature. Therefore, the role of Nature is that of a succor or inspiration for the subjugated and silenced postcolonial individuals.

### 3.3 Cosmopolitanism and Ecology for an immigrant:

*A year ago she painted me in oils. I 'm dressed in blue and larger than life, Sitting by the window of her London flat. Behind me there's a red brick wall. Here she paints in her eyrie, in a tower. Her studio overlooks tall palms, jasmine bushes, bright flowers.*

*Later with green figs, white peaches, local cheese, we drink summer wine. My sister calls it Poor Man's Sangria* (Hussein 2014, pg.50).

In the world of twenty-first century technological advancement, people despite of being isolated and deracinated persist inseparably associated to Nature and its various phenomena. This connection is built and evident through the above given extracts from the selected story where eco-cosmopolitanism is implied by denoting the way Nature is bridging the rift between the individual global citizen of the world and his seclusion due to this. The isolation and the resulting turmoil could be minimized with a rebonding and reconsidering our natural surroundings which are pure and comforting.

### 3.4 Postcolonial identity crisis and Nature

*Satiated by the blue pool now, hot as heaven. Anxieties disperse, join red petals scattered around on stone and grass. Birds dip their beaks in the pool's water. In the sun's blaze the leaves on their branches shine white. Now I think of the garden I once called home.* (Hussein 2014, pg.52)

The garden once the home is shown lost in the story. The dilemma of exile prevails in the life of diaspora, the loss of identity

and serenity from such lives is shown in consonance with Nature and environment.

*He takes me by the hand. We walk past the barking dogs, the white mare in the tall grass, down the avenue of cypresses, out of the gates, down the winding backstreets of the old town, to the edge of the land where the sea begins. And I take off my clothes and I take off my name and I swim off the page* (Hussein 2014, pg.64).

The above extracts speak of the anxieties, complexities and struggles of humans in the lands of their exile and the nature/nurture or nature/culture conflicts in life. It is only through their contact with Nature that they are able to figure out who they are, where they belonged to and what cultural conditioning or social constructs they want to get rid of. Nature, yet again, is the refuge and possible refuge for such fretful individuals grappling with the issues of identity, ethnicity and nationality.

*We travelled for seven hours and reached the town on the edge of the river at five. The sun was still high and the roofs of the tall fort like buildings glowed in its rays. At once we set off to wander the lanes of the unknown town. The river had broken its banks and several streets were under water* (Hussein 2014, pg.65).

In this story of the female character Shams, Nature is not just the background or physical landscape rather a whole scheme of metaphoric signification is introduced to make the reader realize the undeniable, forceful, fierce and unshakable existence of Nature. This existence is equaled with the enormosity of the feelings of displacement and expatriate. The anguish of the immigrants is shown, their suffering

and contemplating on their survivals in the foreign lands is depicted quite prominently.

*Perhaps silent anger can be washed away by rain water. I remember Shams saying, What a worry it is this having to make a living wage, it kills you. I'm far away from my country, far away from my faith, I don't want to die alone in this desolate city.* (Hussein 2014, pg. 65)

The female character is constantly shown calling on his exile background and imagery of Nature is revoked as a stylistic device.

*One day in winter a weeping friend told me, Shams is ill. A flood of worries has swallowed her up. It had snowed that day. ....But just before spring arrived she died.....But a friend said she had given verbal instructions that she wanted fire, not earth as her final element*(Hussein 2014, pg.67).

### 3.5 Human's answerability towards Nature

*I am prince Ahmar, the youth replied. My father is the king of a far off country, but I have sworn to stay away from my land for seven years because my brother accused me of a crime I didn't commit and I'm not at liberty to say where I come from* (Hussein 2014, pg.121)

The exiled and migrated individual is presented deprived of his land, people and the comforts of home. Later in the story that prince is murdered and the rescuers are the pair of birds who at the expense of their lives are ready to create a rebirth for the dead prince.

*But if his bride were to capture us, and hold us close to each other, heart to heart, and with one stroke of her husband's dagger separate our heads from*

*our necks so that one of us shouldn't die before the other, and hold our heads above the ground where the prince lies, our blood will spill on the earth and its drops will turn into rubies brighter than the one the wicked woman stole from his forehead. Then Ahmar's heart will beat again and he'll come back to the world of living* (Hussein 2014, pg.122).

The prince can be reborn and for this rebirth Nature in the form of birds is offering the life, wholeness and meaning in the story. Once again, Nature is the frame of the story rather an ease and the only blessing left in the lives of casted out and uprooted individuals.

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

We can sum up this study by claiming that the selected texts bear an explicit evidence of the turmoil, identity crisis and exile's agony. But these alone are not the issues. They are further augmented with the rootlessness and displacement from the native world of expatriates. Yet these individuals somehow are able to redevelop and rethink their closeness, their relationship and affinity with Nature. The texts exemplify the rapport of postcolonial and eco-oriented sensitivity and psyche. The Swan's Wife metaphorically, stylistically and thematically is suggestive of the eco-colonial status of individuals.

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