

Grumbling Earth and Wailing Trees: Ecological Grief and Ecophobia in Wazir Agha's Selected Poems

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Abstract



Ecological Grief and Ecophobia are the terms widely used in contemporary discussion related to the impacts of climate change and environmental issues on mental and psychological health and pose a serious threat of ecological crises and environmental collapse. Ecological Grief refers to a sense of loss or mourning of loss that stems from the experience or knowledge climate change, global warming, pollution, environmental degradation, disaster of nature and ecological devastation. Ecophobia refers to mans feelings of helplessness and powerlessness to ward off environmental catastrophe and ecological crises. This study finds Ecological Grief and Ecophobia in Wazir Aghas poems Her Enemies, The Beckoning Wind, Persuasion and Lets Remove the Crust of Brown Earth. In these poems, earth is grumbling, trees are wailing and other objects of nature are crying to warn man of the impending threat of serious environmental catastrophe and ecological crises. These poems echo with growing environmental consciousness and are replete with stress, anxiety, uncertainty and fear caused by these environmental and ecological concerns. Moreover, it found that this Ecological Grief and Ecophobia may turn into a practical force that prompts man to some action in order to channel worry, fear and uncertainty into some kind of resilience or to make him learn to develop some skills to live with that fear, grief and phobia if these problems do not seem to be uprooted in near future.

Keywords: Ecological Grief, Ecophobia, Climate Change, Climate Anxiety, Ecological Crises, Resilience, Disaster

Introduction

In our contemporary world, climate change, global warming, pollution, environmental degradation and ecological problems pose a serious threat of ecological and environmental catastrophe. There is mounting awareness of these concerns in recent times. This growing concern causes stress, anxiety, fear, uncertainty and distress. Ecological Grief and Ecophobia are the terms that are widely used to discuss these concerns. Although there is lack of research about different forms of anxiety, grief and other psychological impacts of the environmental issues and climate change, yet many people experience Ecological Grief and become ecophobiatic. So, these two terms are frequently used in contemporary discussions related to environment and climate.

This study tends to explore Ecological Grief and Ecophobia in selected poems of Dr. Wazir Agha, a Pakistani writer, critic and poet. Wazir Agha's poetry, composed in Urdu, Punjabi and English, is enriched with various descriptions of nature, environmental issues and ecological problems. For the analysis of Ecological Grief and Ecophobia, this study delimits itself to four poems: "Her Enemies (2001), The Beckoning Wing (2001), Persuasion (2001) and Lets Remove the Crust of Brown Earth" (2001). So this study intends to find how environmental issues and climate change have impacts on mental and psychological health and how these difficulties can lead to the ways of coping or settling with them. Another research objective of this study is to explore and analyze Ecological Grief and Ecophobia in Wazir Agha's selected poems in order to highlight the significance of treatment of such themes in literature as well as everyday life.

So far as relevant literature review is concerned, no significant research has been found that explores and analyzes ecological Grief and Ecophobia in literary texts. So, there is this research gap that my research intends to fill by using Ecological Grief and Ecophobia as theoretical measures for this qualitative research. Relevant theoretical literature is utilized in the conceptual discussion of Ecological Grief and Ecophobia. Research method used in this qualitative, interpretive and exploratory research is textual analysis.

Concepts of Ecological Grief and Ecophobia

Contemporary environmental issues of global warming, climate change, environmental degradation, ecological disaster and pollution of natural resources have posed a serious existential threat that may cause ecological crises. It has serious impacts on life in general and human physical and mental health in particular. Ecological Grief and Ecophobia are consequences of this ecological crisis which is quite alarming and calls for urgent and immediate solution. Ecological Grief and Ecophobia are the terms widely used in clinical and public discussions in recent years. Socio-psychological impacts of environmental degradation and ecological disaster have affected mental health as well, causing anxiety, fear, grief, uncertainty, stress and depression. In some cases it may lead to suicidal ideation and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well. In simple terms Ecological Grief is a sense of loss or mourning of loss that stems from the experience or knowledge of climate change, global warming or environmental destruction. According to Rosenfield (2016), Ecological Grief is “the grief reaction stemming from the environmental loss of ecosystems by natural or man-made events (p. 12). Similarly, Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) define it as the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (p. 275). So, it can be said that Ecological Grief is a natural response or reaction to ecological losses and is found, more frequently, in people having close relation with nature and its environments.

There are three types of those ecological losses: a past physical ecological loss, loss of environmental knowledge and anticipated future loss. Past physical ecological loss means the extinction or disappearance of ecosystems, species or landscapes. Loss of environmental knowledge means disruption of cultural and personal identity that is made in accordance with nature and its environments. Anticipated future loss means the future loss of ecosystems, species, landscapes or ways of life.

In contemporary discussions, various terms are used to refer to that grief, worry, anxiety, depression or stress caused by climate change, global warming and destruction of natural environments. Main terms are Eco-Anxiety, Solastalgia, Ecological Grief and Ecophobia. In particular, Eco-Anxiety and Solastalgia are often confused with Ecological Grief. Although these terms share some common points, yet there is a clear difference among all these terms. In the report of American Psychological Association (2017) Eco-Anxiety is defined as a chronic fear of environmental doom (p. 68). Glenn Albrecht (2012) defines it as a generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse”(p. 250). Grupe and Nitschke (2013) draw a line between fear and anxiety maintaining that fear is more related to a concrete threat whereas anxiety is a consequence of a troubling situation which includes uncertainty (p. 489). So, we are supposed to be anxious, restless, stressed and depressed when we find or feel the devastation and degradation of environment and its ecological systems. Environmental melancholia”(Lertzman, 2015, p. 1) is another term used to a similar condition that is related to Eco-Anxiety. It refers to unconscious mourning of environmental degradation. This environmental degradation, climate change and ecological disaster has made millions of human beings feel stressed, afraid, anxious, overwhelmed, grief-stricken, depressed, powerless or helpless. Another term, Climate Anxiety, is also used to describe mental effects of climate change. Pihkala Panu highlight a difference between Climate Anxiety and Eco-Anxiety in his 2020 article “Anxiety and Ecological Crises: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety”(n. p). He states, Eco-Anxiety can be used to describe any anxiety which is related to the ecological crises, and climate anxiety means such anxiety which is significantly related to anthropogenic climate change (n. p.). Similarly there is difference between Ecological Grief and Solastalgia. Galway et al(2019) define Solastalgia as the distress caused by the unwelcome transformation of cherished landscapes resulting in cumulative mental, emotional and spiritual health” (p. 11). So, Solastalgia is homesickness while being at home whereas Ecological Grief is mourning or sense of loss that has happened or may happen again in future.

So far as the concept of Ecophobia is concerned, it refers to the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness to stop environmental disaster and ecological degradation. Concept of Ecophobia can also be used to explore the fears related to environmental issues. Mcknight in his article (2010) *Overcoming Ecophobia: fostering environmental empathy through narrative in childrens science literature*” discusses Ecophobia and the strategies to overcome it in young ones and he regards it a natural reaction in young children. David Sobel has detailed, formulated and theorized the concept of

Ecophobia in a book *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education* (1999). So, Ecophobia can be defined as a strong feeling of helplessness and powerlessness to resist or stop the process of environmental degradation, climate catastrophe and ecological disaster.

So, Ecological Grief and Ecophobia are taken as theoretical lens to explore and analyze Wazir Agha's selected poems: "Her Enemies" (2001), "The Beckoning Wing" (2001), "Persuasion" (2001) and "Let's Remove the Crust of Brown Earth" (2001).

Ecological Grief and Ecophobia in Wazir Agha's Selected Poems

A Pakistani writer, critic and poet Dr. Wazir Agha composed poems in Urdu, Punjabi and English. His poems have been translated into different languages of the world and go international acclaim. As he was born in a village and brought up in the company of nature, Wazir Agha developed a close bond with nature and its environment and reflected it in his writings. His poetry is replete with themes of nature and readers come across beautiful landscapes, mountains, rivers, fields, trees, birds and animals while passing through his world of poetry. His poetry is a feast for the researchers and scholars interested in Ecocriticism and Environmental studies. Because of his close affinity and bond with nature, its environments and ecological systems, the poet has passionate desire to save it. Most of his poems are haunted by this passionate desire to save Earth and a mounting fear to lose natural world. Along with other themes of nature, most of his poems are filled with Ecological Grief and Ecophobia. Readers find grumbling earth, wailing trees, weeping clouds and scared birds in his poems which represent man's stress, fear, anxiety, helplessness and depression caused by his actions and activities to destroy the natural world. This disaster has further resulted in climate change and environmental degradation. So, following selected poems by Wazir Agha are analyzed with the lenses of Ecological Grief and Ecophobia.

Wazir Agha's poem "Her Enemies" is a story of devastation of this planet: devastation of nature, environment and ecological systems. It echoes with poet's anxiety, stress, fear and uncertainty. Human beings are called enemies of this globe because they themselves have launched this war against earth. The poem starts thus:

As the day dawned
someone rose
and tossed heaven wards
in a revolting, manner
a piece of blood-dripping flesh
a clammy clot into the filthy heavenly yard
and found relief
from that profound, sickening nausea. (Agha, 2001, p. 33)

In the above lines, a clammy clot" and "a piece of blood-dripping flesh thrown towards heaven is, in fact, earth and someone who has tossed it is man. The man who is considered son of the mother earth has turned into a bitter and ferocious enemy. This image of the earth and mans enmity with it has emerged from narrators Ecological Grief and Ecophobia because he is so stressed and depressed to see the devastation of earth and seems helpless to hold it back. The poem further affirms this condition thus:

My earth
a dull piece of flesh
was likewise hurled safe
into the blind cosmos;
there was none
to mangle her
to rend her asunder
until her enemies came forth
from within her womb-- (Agha, 2001, p. 34)

It is terrible to see that earth gave birth to humans and they became her enemies mangling it and turning it into a dull piece of flesh. Now they themselves are anxious and frustrated to see it thus. They are helpless and fearful. It is height of grief, stress, fear and helplessness that the narrator sees and imagines earth as dull piece of flesh, a clammy clot. Narrator's imagination seems to be devastated and shattered by the impacts of environmental issues and climate change. Epstein (1972) argues that "the inability to integrate the data of the world into meaningful schemata, whether in terms

of a self concept, or a predictive model of the environment, is a basic source of anxiety” (p. 303). So, the narrator feels this inability which caused anxiety and stress, and is overwhelmed by the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. The poem moves on and ends thus:

And now the fangled earth,
this torn, frightened globe
remains suspended
between the jaws of her own
ferocious breed
and bleeds everlastingly! (Agha, 2001, p. 34)

Mans lust for material progress and development has devastated nature, its environment and ecological systems. He has polluted water and air with the smoke and waste of factories. He has cut forests and ruined natural habitat of wild life that itself is at stake. And the process is non-stop. As a result, earth is fangled, frightened and torn. This bleeding earth is injured and ruined by its own breed. Narrator’s image of this frightened and injured earth is, of course, a manifestation of Ecological Grief and everlasting bleeding of the planet is strong feeling of helplessness and powerlessness. It shows that the narrator is haunted by Ecophobia.

Agha’s poem “The Beckoning Wind” is a nature’s cry that is shouting and yelling at human beings to be comforted and relaxed in her soothing, velvety arms. The poem opens thus:

The beckoning wind kept coaxing:
come, let us touch that branch
and, hiding in the leaves of that tree, clap our hands,
fall, rise and tumble into the stream bath, swim
walk barefooted on the velvety vendure far away. (Agha, 2001, p. 44)

This is what nature yearns for taking human beings into its lap, soothe and lull. But, on the other hand, the ferocious human beings are busy in destroying her and her sources. They themselves are digging their own graves. The wind was calling on but the narrator was fighting thirst with an empty leather flask/caught in his teeth (Agha, 2001, p. 44). The wind was calling on, coaxing and tempting the narrator to join her to “walk barefoot on the velvety vendure (Agha, 2001, p. 44) but the unfortunate was trying to quench the thirst of his child who kept wailing” (Agha, 2001, p. 45) for a drop of water. He himself is thirsty as well and cries, I needed just a sip of fresh water (Agha, 2001, p. 44). Terrible effects of global warming and declining water sources are highlighted as the narrator continues his story of helplessness on the call of the wind. He says:

I had not forgotten
the fiery darts shot from the sun’s chariot,
piercing the flask and spilling the water,
I had not forgotten
the cry of my child for a tiny drop;
but what could I do? (Agha, 2001, p. 44)

Narrators Ecological Grief is at its peak when he feels that his lips are parched and cracked/and elixir in his eyes/has already turned into clouds and gone (Agha, 2001, p. 45). The coaxing and calling wind, as a representative of nature, still wants to allure instead of man’s ruthless treatment but the ferocious man has almost reached a point of no return. He is terribly parched by the thirst and beaten by the hot blazing sun. The ecophobiac narrator shows his helplessness and powerlessness when he says that the wind kept calling but he could do nothing (Agha, 2001, p. 45). Thirst stands for lack of water and its sources and the piercing sun rays stand for global warming. Both of these two problems are the most burning issues of our contemporary world and, according to the latest researches in the field of climate psychology, these have real impacts on people’s mental health. Comtesse and et al (2021) define this ecological Grief thus: We should regard ecological grief as a response to actual and past ecological loss or a reaction to future situations that trigger the current loss (n. p.) These impacts are manifested in the forms of Ecological Grief, Ecophobia and other socio-psychological and mental concerns. International Journal of Mental Health Nursing (2019) says, Although the issue of climate change usually brings thoughts of environmental impact and physical health concerns to our consciousness, climate change also affects people’s mental health” (Usher et al, 2019, n. p.).

“Persuasion is another Agha’s poem, which shows the narrator persuading unnamed partner to come and see the devastation and disaster of nature around him and its impacts on the physical environment as well as soul and inner self. Such impact on soul and inner-self causes stress, fear, uncertainty, anxiety and loss of agency. This is what causes Ecological Grief and Ecophobia. The poem opens with the description of the morning which is fascinating with a city wholly wrapping in the green blanket of/trees and a grey chain of mountains impregnable farther/away (Agha, 2001, p. 60). But the poem’s tone changes dramatically and the narrator portrays a terrible picture of the day. It is a day in an industrial city with coughing, panting roads and, panicky, touchy, weary street cars” (Agha, 2001, p. 61). There is a spectacle of ageless heavy weight trees being/chopped down and the heinous sight of eagle beaked dark bulldozers/ pouching on the skeletons of decayed buildings (Agha, 2001, p. 61). The narrator is in a panic and calls this scene “utterly wild” (Agha, 2001, p. 61). His persuasion reads thus:

If ever you come to me
when the mid-day blazing hot
I’ll show you round my city of mired steel;
seat you onto an iron cage swing
to see, from the top of the highest building
dark columns of smoke rising from the blackened
muzzles of mills,
and narrow drains, acting like pores,
flowing in dirty lanes. (Agha, 2001, p. 60)

This scene of the city shows industrial and materialistic development. Man himself was mad and lusty for this development which he ensured at the cost of nature. He cut trees, ruined forests, devastated natural environment and ecological systems in order to fulfill his dream of this progress. Now the devastation of nature has become a nightmare that frightens him and ruins his sleep. He is grief-stricken, restless and depressed. The high buildings, mills shoveling out black smoke, bulldozers and panting roads, haunt him like a ghost. The narrator feels the impact of degradation and devastation of nature and is conscious of the severity of this impact on his psyche and inner self. He says, If ever you come to me/ I’ll seat you on the balcony of my eyelashes/and make you see a similar view/ inside my soul (Agha, 2001, p. 61). This is what psychologists may point out as a constant and strong form of fear and stress and distress (Panu, 2020. n. p.) which may cause Ecological Grief and Ecophobia. Of course, the narrator of the poem is ecophobic and stressed. He is anxious and realizes the impact of environmental degradation and other environmental issues on his soul and psyche. As Hannah Comtesse and et al (2021) state: The consequences of ecological grief could be adaptive and/or maladaptive. As the experience of ecological grief can be painful and debilitating, it could pose a mental health risk (n. p.). They further state, Grief is a universal and natural response to separation or loss and encompasses a range of emotional [e.g. yearning, bitterness], cognitive [e.g., preoccupation with the loss, diminished identity] and behavioral reactions [e.g., withdrawal from social and recreational activities] (Comtesse et al, 2021, n. p.).

Wazir Aghas poem Lets Remove the Crust of Brown Earth (2001) relates to the remedy or the way of coping with Ecological Grief and Ecophobia. Although very little research has been found on clinical or pathological forms of Ecological Grief and Ecophobia and these are yet to be pathologized, yet Literature and studies are now emerging about the various ways of coping with (Panu, 2020, n. p.) these psychological and mental impacts of environmental issues. According to him, environmental education, advocacy, psychology of environmental action and environmental ethics can be helpful. He further says, However, because global ecological problems cannot be solved in the near future, there is a need for skills of living with anxieties and distress and For this reason, there have emerged discourses about resilience, post-traumatic growth and adaptation skills in relation to” (Panu, 2020, n. p.) these issues. So, these approaches focus on value of emotional work and participatory action in order to channel Ecological Grief and Ecophobia “into resilience (Panu, 2020, n. p.). In the poem, the poet intends to stimulate environmental action. He says in the very opening line of the poem, Let’s strive”(Agha, 2001, p. 54). Thus stress, grief and fear rising out of environmental issues and ecological crisis tend to be a Practical anxiety (Kurth, 2018, p. 34) and force to strive for saving this globe. Instead of leaving in nervous and sick condition, Ecological Grief and Ecophobia tend to be practical and working. An anxiety scholar David Barlow (2004) affirms that without anxiety, little

would be accomplished (p. 9). Environmental awareness and consciousness of global ecological and climate problems are highly crucial to stir action and efforts to ward off ecological and environmental apocalypse. Zizek (2010) maintains that people know that a climate and environment apocalypse can take place; they go on thinking that it would never happen (p. 328). In spite of emerging awareness of environmental issues like global warming, air, water and soil pollution, degradation of nature and climate change, there is still lack of acknowledgment of the environmental crises. The poem opens thus: Lets strive/ save ourselves from the cold kisses of falling snow/ impart horror to our looks, thunder to our words (Agha, 2001, p. 54). The narrator prompts others to action because the corpse of grass is shrouded under a dirty quilt of snow, the courtyard is covered with dust of dead trees and the rocks are besmeared with thick, wet/stink of stale aeons (Agha, 2001, p. 54). This terrible sight of environmental degradation and nature disaster makes the narrator so stressed, anxious, depressed and fearful that he is prompted to be wild by imparting horror to his looks and thunder to his words. Thus Ecological Grief and Ecophobia turn into a practical force and the narrator realizes his ability and power to resist that catastrophe. He says:

We are not heaps of ashes
nor soft jelly-flakes of falling snow
not puffs of bitter stink
we are clothed in a skin of brown soil-like the earth. (Agha, 2001, p. 54)

As climate change challenges the everyday practices that define our ecological habitué (Brulle and Norgaard, 2019, p. 15) and other environmental issues pose a serious threat of environmental and ecological crisis, Grief, stress and fear related to these issues can prompt people to action giving them a sense of agency and power which can be antidotes to Ecophobia and Ecological Grief.

Conclusion

Dr. Wazir Agha's poems Her Enemies (2001), Persuasion (2001), The Beckoning Wind (2001) and Lets Remove the Crust of Brown Earth (2001) are replete with Ecological Grief and Ecophobia, the terms widely used in discussions and researches related to climate change and environmental concerns in order to find impacts of these issues on mental health and psyche of the people. Ecological Grief refers to the strong feelings or sense of loss related to the extinction or disappearance of ecosystems, species and natural environments or to the anticipated future loss. It may cause fear, uncertainty and distress related to environmental issues, climate change, degradation of nature and other ecological problems. Ecophobia is man's feeling of helplessness and loss of agency owing to his inability to stop environmental degradation and disaster of nature. Although these terms are not clinically established and properly pathologized, yet many people suffer from Ecological Grief and Ecophobia. Ecological Grief and Ecophobia stimulate people to do something to stop or minimize environmental issues so that serious environmental collapse and ecological crisis may be warded off. In recent times, it has become quite clear that, in order to environmental issues and disaster of nature. He needs to save nature, its environments and ecological systems otherwise there would happen a terrible tragedy and a fatal crisis. This study finds that Wazir Agha's poems are packed with these issues and their impacts on physical well-being and mental and psychological health. This study may provoke further research to focus on environmental issues and ecological problems in the contemporary world where life faces real threat of ecological crisis. Moreover, it may energize the efforts of those activists, writers and thinkers who are striving to save nature and its systems, to fight off ecological crisis by affirming that Ecological Grief and Ecophobia can become a force, instead of disorder or sickness, to empower as well as stir up efforts to soothe the grumbling earth, wailing trees and weeping clouds which, in return make man tremble.

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