

Matricide and Other Crimes against Mother Nature: Earth as a Non-human Witness of Ecological and Environmental Degradation in Agha's *A Tale So Strange*

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Abstract



*In our contemporary times, human life faces great existential threat resulting from serious environmental issues. In such situation, Ecocriticism has emerged gaining momentum owing to its main focus on relationship between man and nature as well as literature and environment. So, this study aims to explore ecocritical perspectives in Wazir Agha's long narrative poem *A Tale So Strange* (1998) which is, indeed, a strange tale of ecological disaster and environmental degradation caused by man's own lust and paranoia of power, progress and materialistic development. As man himself raised this war against Mother Nature and started violence and other crimes, he stands as a tyrant and nature as a victim. So, this study further focuses on the validity and authenticity of nature's capacity to narrate its own tale in case of man's being at the opposite side. Earth is seen as a valid witness of all that violence in Agha's *A Tale So Strange* (1998). So, this exploration of ecocritical perspectives along with focus on nonhuman witness may strengthen the cause of ecocritics and environmentalists who are trying to plead nature's case to save its environment for the survival of life. Moreover, it may provoke researchers and writers to give nature and other non-human objects the power and space to narrate their own accounts of terror and violence. By highlighting ecological disaster and environmental degradation in the text, the study finds in Agha's poem *A Tale So Strange* (1998) a considerable contribution in the field of ecocritical and environmental literature as well as the theory of witnessing beyond humans.*

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmental Consciousness, Wilderness, Pastoral, Non-Human Witness

Introduction

In our contemporary times, human life faces great existential threat resulting from climate change, pollution, and ecological disaster, destruction of nature and its sources and environmental degradation. Man himself is responsible for this environmental crisis owing to this paranoia of progress and materialistic development. He himself launched this war against Mother Nature and started violence and other crimes. He stands as a tyrant at one hand and nature as a tyrannized and a victim at the other. As efforts to protect nature, its environment and ecological systems are being made with serious concern, Ecocriticism has emerged, as a discipline, to play its part. Though scope and nature of Ecocriticism is still in its developmental phase, it can be labeled as a reaction to the anthropocentric attitude of human beings. It does not mean traditional nature writing but it primarily means to focus on the relationship between literature and environment with an express purpose of creating some balance between nature and man.

This present study aims to explore ecological perspectives present in Wazir Agha's long poem *A Tale So Strange* (1998) which is really a strange tale of ecological disaster and environmental degradation. Although ecocritical reading of such texts is quite a common trend, yet no critic or reader has turned his/her focus on the ecocritical aspects of this long poem. No considerable literature has been found that analyzes or explores the target poem. So, by exploring ecocritical perspectives, this study further aims to widen the range of Ecocriticism by showing importance and ability of non-human things to serve as a witness. For exploring and framing certain ecocritical perspectives, this study mainly focuses on the main ideas of Glotfelty, Greg Garrard and Lawrence Buell who are main ecocritics. Concepts of these critics constitute the theoretical framework of this qualitative research that utilizes textual analysis as research method. Being qualitative, this research is interpretive and

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exploratory. Instead of making wild guesses, evidences are purely taken from the text of the poem in order to validate the theoretical concepts.

A Brief Overview of *A Tale So Strange* (1998)

Born in 1922, Pakistani writer Dr. Wazir Agha is a versatile genius being a critic, essayist and a poet. His poetry is in Urdu, Punjabi and English including various themes. Dr. Wazir Agha was brought and lived all his life in a village. In this way, he had firsthand experience of nature. His poetry is enriched with themes of nature and he has frequently used objects of nature in different contexts in his poems. His long poem *A Tale So Strange* (1998) is a literary masterpiece and has been translated into Greek, Spanish, Swedish, Hindi and Punjabi. It reveals and portrays the anxiety and anguish of man's mind in current scenario of environmental degradation, pollution and ecological disaster.

The poem *A Tale So Strange* (1998) opens with the description of sleeper who has been sleeping in cottage in a jungle. There is silence all around and the place is all savage. But this long slumber, silence of the cottage amidst dense forest and his distance from the hustle and bustle of modern life all are sources of comfort for him. He is unaware of the happenings which took place and caused great rupture. Being ignorant from what happened and is still happening, the sleeper does not know even the terrible condition of the forest where wild animals, trees and all objects of nature have been targeted by the man's lust of power and progress. Different animals and objects of nature rush to his cottage, wail and cry, and try to wake him. They, perhaps, think that the sleeper is their lost hope who can get up and come to their rescue. When they all fail to wake him, the speaker comes forward and starts the dialogue with his "pungent words" (Agha, 1998, p. 15). He narrates the tale of man's doom—the tale of moral and spiritual collapse, environmental degradation and ecological disaster. Hearing this tragic tale, the speaker wakes up and remembers the golden age when man was not at war with nature and earth blossomed with beauties and charms of natural objects. So, this dialogue between sleeper and speaker is apt comparison of past and present: past showing nature at its bloom and serving as mother but present showing nature as a victim. So past has been remembered as golden age and present as an age of turmoil and rupture.

Ecocriticism as a Theory

As compared to other critical approaches and theories, Ecocriticism is a young approach which, in America, is often associated with "Association for the Study of Literature and Environment" (ASLE). However it is a broad approach with some other labels as 'green studies', 'environmental literary criticism' and 'ecopoetics'. In general, it is study of representation of nature in literature and focuses on relationship between environment and literature. The term was first used by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: an Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1996). Since then, it has got great focus and gained momentum because of our contemporary environmental problems. The term has been defined in several ways by different critics because critics and scholars are still busy in establishing its aims and scope. However the most appropriate and relevant critics and writers to this current study are Lawrence Buell, Cheryl Glotfelty and Greg Garrard. The frame work to explore ecocritical perspectives in Agha's *A Tale So Strange* (1998) is established in the light of the main concepts of the above mentioned critics.

In his fundamental and famous work, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Glotfelty establishes the foundation of ecocriticism as a theory and highlights the basic questions which an ecocritic means to ask. So, Glotfelty says:

How is the nature represented in this sonnet? What role the physical settings play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? [---] In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? (p. xix)

Cheryl Glotfelty further tries to define Ecocriticism by saying that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii). Lawrence Buell tries to define Ecocriticism and its main aim by calling it a "study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (Buell, 1995, p. 20). According to Garrard (2004), Ecocriticism is a mode of analysis which is informed by an environmental awareness (p. 37). Garrard has also used some key terms like pollution, pastoral and

wilderness which are quite relevant to this study. Ecocritical ideas derived from Buell, Garrard and Glotfelty can be summed up by Camilo Gomides (2006) who considers Ecocriticism as “ the field of inquiry that analyses and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations” (p. 13).

So, in the light of ideas and definitions of the concerned critics, some ideas of Ecocriticism are drawn and applied in the analysis of the poem *A Tale So Strange* (1998) in order to explore its ecocritical perspectives. These relevant concepts are ecological awakening or consciousness, relation between man and nature, interconnectedness and interdependence of nature and man, man's detachment from nature and his war against it, pastoral and wilderness. So, analysis is done in the light of these main ideas which highlight ecocritical aspects of the poem.

Ecocritical Perspectives in *A Tale So Strange*

The poem *A Tale So Strange* (1998) opens with the description of “a primordial jungle” (p. 13) dense with shrubs and bushes without any sign of human life or presence. There is a cottage and a sleeper is lost into a deep slumber. The poem opens thus:

There,
it was
a primordial jungle
of dense intertwining shrubs
and bushes
and in that jungle
there stood a cottage
and he lay therein. (Agha, 1998, p. 13)

This very opening description of jungle dense with bushes and shrubs shows poem's concern with nature. Furthermore, sleeper is nudged by roaring and thundering clouds. He is shaken by the wind that blows “with burning eyes” (Agha, 1998, p. 13). There also come jackals, monkeys, peacocks and deer to shake him and wake him up but he is unmoved. So, the wild animals, wind and clouds seem to be in dire need of the sleeper. They seem to be in a panic and consider him their savior. Instead of painting and describing the beauty and charm of the nature, its objects and wild animals, poet has shown them trying to do something, to wake the sleeper by nudging and shaking him. Sleeper's sleep and nature's cry show that nature and man need reconciliation. It is an attack on man's anthropocentric attitude. Nature is in panic, in danger and calls man to wake up and come to its rescue. It is the core point common to most of the ecocritical thinkers. After all these animals and objects fail to wake up the sleeper, they lament and cry in an elegiac tone:

Tis time you woke up, dear.
Even the last millennium
is now gone for over. On the round disc of the sun
dark spots have sprung up.
The shining necklace
of the moon
has now shattered into
jewels of burning stars. (Agha, 1998, p. 14)

It is the disaster of nature which is further confirmed when they say that “the grass is all burnt, the streams all dry” (Agha, 1998, p. 14). This burnt grass, dry streams and sun with ‘dark spots’ shows degradation and destruction of natural environment and ecological system. This tale of disaster told by the wild animals, wind and clouds create a situation where all objects of nature like wind, clouds, animals, forest, grass and water are in the same boat realizing each other's problems and crying and wailing for solutions. They are all in a very close and loving relationship in spite of being victimized by man; they turn to him, shake him and try to wake him up. They don't shun man out of their camp but consider him their fellow tied in the same close relationship which he has forgotten owing to his lust of power and paranoia of progress and development. So, it becomes clear that man and all objects of nature are part of one vast ecological system. That is what concerns the ecocritics and environmentalists. So, this ecological disaster and environmental degradation is an ecocritical perspective which is further affirmed and authenticated by the interconnectedness and relationship between man and nature. Be it roaring cloud, burning wind, crying wild animals or sleeping man, all

are shown as parts of the same system. Thus the poem is highly successful in creating an ecological awareness and environmental consciousness.

The poem moves on, the speaker intervenes and tries to wake up the sleeper with his “pungent words” (Agha, 1998, p. 15). This time, the sleeper wakes up and starts dialogue with the speaker. This dialogue between sleeper and speaker is comparison between past and present. Like the wild animals and other objects of nature, the speaker tells the gloomy and strange tale of the present where man is facing environmental crises and existential threat largely because of his violence against nature. He says:

Every where
iron appears to have stirred
and awakened. ‘Tis now
chirping and singing all around us.
The butterfly,
the moth,
the koel,
the sparrow,
___all have turned into iron.

Iron has now grown wings. (Agha, 1998, p. 16)

The destruction is caused by iron which is metaphor of industrial development and expansion. This present is called “the brazen age/of turmoil/of depression” (Agha, 1998, p. 17) by the speaker. Sleeper remembers the past when he went to his long sleep and remembers it as a “Golden Age” (Agha, 1998, p. 17). He says:

When I was engulfed
by sleep,
everyone else was wide awake; there flowed
nectar in flowers,
silvery water in streams,
rivers kept expanding,
heavy with fruit and flower,
the cows were pregnant,
the coconut full to the brim. (Agha, 1998, p. 17)

This comparison between the brazen age and the golden age shows man’s violence against nature which changed that golden age into an age of iron at one hand, and man’s nostalgia on the other. Greg Garrard (2004) propounds the idea of classical pastoral which is “characterized by nostalgia” (p. 37). This pastoral is idealization of the rural and the nature and demonizes the urban (Garrard, 2004, p. 33). So, along with the story of ecological disaster and degradation, the above description of the golden age fits to the concept of classical pastoral of Garrard as well because the nature and the rural is idealized and shown as a place of relaxation and comfort featured by sleeper’s nostalgia of that bygone past.

Garrard also focuses on the concept of wilderness. It refers to uncultivated plants, untamed animals, uninhabited places and violent characteristics. All these mean to share ecological interconnectedness. So this wilderness can be considered as a constructed myth of a vast and prime ecosystem. In *A Tale So Strange* (1998) wilderness can be seen as a place in the jungle dense with wild bushes, shrubs where the sleeper sleeps in his cottage where there are only animals, wind and clouds without any sign of human life. So, the sleeper seems to find shelter and peace in the pastoral and wilderness of the jungle. This natural world seems to be a peaceful and comfortable place for the sleeper.

Dialogue between the sleeper and speaker moves on and the strange tale of man’s violence and other crimes against ‘Mother Nature’ continues. The speaker says that the jungle is on fire—“the jungle which loved, nursed, and groomed/their bread” (Agha, 1998, p. 22). Ocean, “the mother of all things” (Agha, 1998, p. 22), is polluted and stagnant. “Matricide is now the faith” (Agha, 1998, p. 22) of ruthless and paranoid human beings. So, owing to this matricide and other crimes against Mother Nature, their own existence is on stake. They are “no longer humans” and “are installed like tombstones” on “their own graves” (Agha, 1998, p. 23). They are “their own phantoms” and “their own shadows” (Agha, 1998, p. 24). This strange tale of man’s violence and crimes against Mother Nature

raises an ecological consciousness that nature and its environment are sources of man's survival and he is survivor of breeding, caring and nursing jungles and oceans.

Earth as a Witness of Ecological Disaster and Environmental Degradation in *A Tale So Strange* (1998)

As 'witness' is closely linked with trauma theory, non-human witness seems fitted to Ecocriticism. As efforts to protest nature, its environment and ecological systems are being made with serious concern and focus, expansion and extension of witnessing beyond humans calls for more consideration and focus. With man as a tyrant and criminal to nature and its environment, non-human witness seems more valid and reliable though it, apparently, lacks human capacity of expression which he privileges during legal testimonial procedure. As nature is being given legal status, it needs to be given that capacity of expression as well. So that it may better detail and authenticate the accounts of violence it faces.

Attempts to theorize witnessing beyond humans are being made. Theory of witnessing is being reconceptualized for the sake of its expansion and extension beyond humans. Shela Sheikh, in her article (2018) "The Future of the Witness: Nature, Race and More-than-Human Environmental Publics" says:

Furthermore, although the figure of the witness has traditionally been confined to the human (particularly in the legal realm), I argue that, where care for both human and non-human life is at stake, witness collectivities necessarily entail an expansion beyond the category of human. In other words, that such collectivities might be more-than-human, --- (P. 148).

Daniel Williams, in his article (2018) "Coetzee's *Stones*: *Dusklands* and the non-human witness" says, "Legal standing can be accorded to trees, forests, rivers and lakes" (P. 4). He further argues that non-human witnesses are attestants working with validity in "a testimonial sense" (p. 7).

Richardson and Zolkos (2022) say, "What does it mean to witness after the human?" and this phrase intends to imply that witnessing after the human or non-human witness means "the departure, or the crumbling away of, the human" but they affirm that "this is not to say, of course, that testimony viewed from a post-humanist perspective takes place in a world devoid of humans" (p. 3). It is to say that non-human witness is and should be validated in the world of humans where human witness can become biased and partial especially in judicial procedures in the case of violence. Non-human witness including earth, forests, rivers, lakes, landscapes and other ecological systems, which are in a constant state of degradation, can stand as more effective and valid testimonies. They have the capacity of retaining memories and can speak the nature of violence or deeds done to them.

Jennifer Lackey (1999) says, "Knowledge is not necessarily transmitted via testimony" but it can be said that "testimony itself can generate knowledge" (p. 490). It is more relevant to the non-human witness or testimony (e.g. rivers, lakes, forests, animal, etc). Without relying on human witness, communication of speech, these objects of nature can present the details of violence done to them more effectively and clearly. They attain the agency and power to narrate their own accounts of destruction in non-verbal language. Polluted lakes and rivers, devastated forests and degrading ecosystems are attestants and valid witnesses to prove the villainous and devilish deeds of humans in the courts and worlds of humans.

So, owing to the relevance of non-human witness to the field of Ecocriticism, this present study highlights the role of poetry and literature in broadening the horizons of this field by giving nature the power to express its own accounts of violence and sufferings, and authenticates this point by showing earth as a witness of ecological disaster and environmental degradation in *A Tale So Strange* (1998).

In his poem "On the Grasshopper and Cricket", John Keats says that "poetry of earth is never dead" (n.p.). John Keats seems to believe that poets pass away, trends in literature change, genres get changed or modified but the poetry of earth did never die and cannot die over. Keats' this faith in expressive power of earth is found in *A Tale So Strange* (1998) where it is witness of ecological disaster, destruction of nature and degradation of environment. After being a witness of golden age when there was "silvery water in streams" and "nectar in flowers" (Agha, 1998, p. 17) in *A Tale So Strange* (1998), earth is witness of burnt grass, burning wind, polluted oceans and burning jungle. It has witnessed dry streams and iron with wings being its ruler. The poem reads thus:

A comet appeared

in the heavens
and a tear big as a mountain
dropped
on this earth
making it sterile.
When that happened, out came iron
donning crown of steel on its head
declaring itself the master. (Agha, 1998, p. 18)

So, these accounts of man's violence against nature which are causes of environmental crisis and existential threat, took place on earth with earth. Though these accounts are narrated by a human poet, the earth stands as an attestant to all what happened, be it matricide or other crimes against mother nature, thus serving as a valid non-human witness.

Conclusion

In the light of main ideas of Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard and Chyrrl Glotfelty, Ecocriticism is considered to focus on the relationship between man and nature as well as environment and literature. So, it is largely concerned with the ideas of interconnectedness between nature and man, awakening of ecological awareness or environmental consciousness, and ideas of wilderness and pastoral characterized by nostalgia. Agha's *A Tale So Strange* (1998) is found as an ecocritical poem possessing above mentioned key aspects. It can be labeled as an elegy of nature's disaster as well as a desperate attempt to bring man and nature together in the vast ecological system which they belong to. So that they may save each other as a serious threat resulting from climate change, pollution, ecological disaster, environmental degradation and global warming is imminent on the heads of the both nature and man. So, nature is being given rights and legal status, Ecocriticism is gaining momentum and focus, expansion of witnessing beyond humans seems most fitting and calls for serious consideration. So, this study explores accounts of violence and other crimes by locating earth as witness because *A Tale So Strange* (1998) gives non-human objects an active role to do something for their survival when wind, clouds and wild animals are found shaking and nudging the sleeping man. Although it is a fictional narrative, *A Tale So Strange* (1998) presents earth as it is – replete with scars and imprints left by man's violence. So, it is in a better position to narrate and tell its own strange tale, by evaluating ecocritical perspectives and earth's capacity to express and narrate the accounts of violence. The study finds *A Tale So Strange* (1998) contributing in the field of ecocritical and environmental literature and the theory of non-human witness as well. It may provoke further research in this domain and help ecocritics and environmentalists who are working to address the lurking threat of environmental crisis. It may raise environmental awareness in readers and this can help reducing pollution, global warming and other contemporary ecological issues.

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