



Unmasking the Ecological Dilemmas: An Eco-critical Reading of Uzma Aslam Khan's Trespassing

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the novel Trespassing by Uzma Aslam Khan in the context of ecocriticism by conducting an in-depth textual analysis. The research exposes the complex ecological challenges inherent in the narrative and demonstrates how Khan exposes the intricate relationships between humans and their environment through the use of storytelling. The analysis provides an examination of the novel's portrayal of nature and the repercussions of human activities on the environment, thereby revealing the intricate ecological motifs that permeate the story. Especially in regards to Khan's literary work, the article emphasizes the significance of ecocriticism when analysing the dynamic interaction between literature and environmental issues. Hence, this research elucidates the evolving function of literature in confronting ecological issues and bolsters the critical standing of ecocritical analysis within modern literary scholarship.



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INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is a multifaceted and interdisciplinary academic discipline that presents novel avenues for the examination of literature and its relationship with the environment. Ecocriticism is an academic discipline that aims to cultivate ecological consciousness via the study of literature, with the ultimate goal of fostering societal transformation towards a culture that prioritises sustainability and environmental stewardship. According to Howarth (1996), ecocriticism is a literary theory that is based on the principles of both ecological and literary theory. Ecology is an academic discipline concerned with the investigation of the intricate interconnections between organisms and their surrounding environment, encompassing the examination of many processes that exert influence on both biotic and abiotic components. The field of ecology holds significance as it provides us with insights into the mechanisms and

challenges inherent in the natural environment. Ecology also helps us make responsible and sustainable decisions about the use and conservation of natural resources, as well as seek innovative and creative solutions to mitigate or adapt to environmental impacts. Furthermore, ecology sensitizes us to the importance of respecting and protecting the diversity of life in all its forms and manifestations by promoting environmental ethics (Marland, 2013). The ecological study of literature can be significant for several reasons. One of them is that it can contribute to the formation of environmental awareness and ecological ethics in readers by showing them the different ways in which literature reflects, questions, criticizes or proposes visions of nature and the relationship between human beings and the environment. Another reason is that it can broaden readers' cultural and aesthetic horizons by offering them a variety of literary texts that address environmental issues from different perspectives, genres, styles, and historical and geographical contexts. The ecological study of literature can also improve environmental problem analysis (Love, 2003). In conclusion, the ecological study of literature can inspire readers to investigate literary ways of describing and interpreting nature and to create their own ecological texts.

In 2003, Uzma Aslam Khan wrote *Trespassing*, a novel about environmental activists who fight a mining company that destroys the ecosystem. Because it addresses environmental issues, the work might be regarded as ecocritical. Ecological themes include biodiversity, pollution, climate change, colonialism, capitalism, ecofeminism, resistance, and utopia in the narrative. The narrative also examines nature and culture, human and non-human, local and global, material and symbolic. The novel creates a complex and dynamic world where individuals and environments connect and change using many stylistic and narrative devices.

In Karachi, the narrative introduces Amal, a marine biologist; Rafiq, a journalist; Tara, an activist; and Cyrus, a businessman. In the second half, the four characters reunite on the island to fight a mining business that wants to exploit its riches. The third half is set at sea, when the characters face their choices. The novel critically and reflectively examines contemporary environmental issues and the limits of collective action and societal change. Environmentalism and responsibility to other living things are also promoted in the story. The tale encourages readers to reconsider their environmental practises and seek more sustainable and peaceful ones.

Research Questions

1. What kind of images and symbols does Uzma Aslam Khan use to represent ecological dilemmas?
2. How do the characters reflect ecological dilemmas in *Trespassing*?

Statement of the Problem

This article assesses Uzma Aslam Khan's novel *Trespassing* from an ecocritical standpoint. The novel follows environmental activists who fight a mining company that threatens an Indian Ocean island's nature. Ecological themes include biodiversity, pollution, climate change, colonialism, capitalism, ecofeminism, resistance, and utopia in the narrative. Uzma Aslam Khan uses several artistic and narrative tools to create a complex and dynamic world where individuals and spaces interact and change. The essay also examines how the novel reflects, questions, criticises, or promotes different perspectives of nature and the human-environment relationship and how these visions affect our relationship with the environment. The researcher employed Greg Garrard's ecocriticism theory.

Significance of the Study

The study advances ecocriticism in contemporary Pakistani English literature. The study demonstrates that Uzma Aslam Khan is one of the most important and original voices in this subject, critically and reflectively addressing modern environmental issues. The study provides a deep and in-depth reading of *Trespassing*, a novel rarely examined and disseminated in academia. The study reveals the multiple layers of meaning and complexity that this novel has, as well as its literary and ecological value. The study is also important because it encourages interdisciplinary and transversal dialogue between literature and other areas of knowledge, such as ecology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, ethics and ecofeminism, which can enrich the analysis and understanding of the environmental problems. Finally, the study is important because it sensitizes the reader about the importance of respecting and protecting the environment and its inhabitants, as well as seeking more sustainable and harmonious alternatives to living on the planet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature has consistently functioned as a medium for reflecting human experiences, and within its pages lies the potential to evoke a significant shift in our connection with the natural world. Ecological awareness, denoting an acknowledgment of our intertwined relationship with the environment and the urgent need for its safeguarding, has emerged as a critical concern amid escalating environmental crises. Literature, through its unique capacity to elicit empathy, shape perspectives, and spur action, plays a pivotal role in nurturing ecological consciousness and catalyzing positive change.

The potential of literature to foster empathy is its main ecological awareness tool. Novels, short stories, and poems immerse readers in environmental issues. Read these stories and share in the protagonists' pleasures, sufferings, and profound understanding of the beauty and fragility of their ecosystems. Additionally, literature can change worldviews by challenging environmental conventions and attitudes. Authors can criticise and criticise anthropocentric ideas that degrade the environment. They can show the consequences of unsustainable practises, making the ecological problem a moral obligation. Literature helps rethink humanity's relationship with nature and promote an ecocentric viewpoint. Literature can change worldviews, inspire empathy, and motivate. Environmental literature depicts people and communities protecting their environment. Such narratives demonstrate human agency, show the potential for change, and inspire optimism and opportunity. These stories inspire people to plant trees, reduce waste, or promote conservation. Literature also raises awareness of hidden ecological issues. Novels, essays, and poetry about environmental degradation illuminate its widespread effects and the lives of marginalised communities disproportionately affected by it. By raising these issues, literature promotes debate, advocacy, and collaboration to solve them. In this way, literature has a unique and vital function in environmental consciousness. Literature becomes an effective environmental advocate by fostering empathy, reshaping attitudes, inspiring action, and raising awareness. Literature may inspire change by linking people to nature, reevaluating assumptions, and becoming environmental stewards in a time of environmental crisis. In a world where ecological consciousness is growing, the written word may alter and inspire a more sustainable future. Within the enigmatic realm of ecocritical theory, the perturbed conscience of our times trembles in the shadow of a profound and intricate conundrum. The relentless degradation of the environment, like a riddle written in the language of human folly, stands as a formidable enigma.

Ecocriticism, that mysterious discipline that plumbs the depths of literary and cultural studies, beckons us to decipher this puzzle of our own making. In its cryptic embrace, ecocriticism unearths the intricate threads that connect humanity and the natural world, weaving a perplexing tapestry of narratives that delve deep into the heart of environmental turmoil. This field not only unravels the multifaceted web of ecological woes like pollution, deforestation, climate change, and resource exploitation but also seeks to fathom the arcane moral, social, and ecological implications that lurk within. The degradation of the environment, this elusive specter that haunts our collective conscience, becomes the focal point of ecocritical scrutiny. It invites us to wander through a labyrinth of perplexity, where literature and cultural expressions unveil themselves as both mirrors reflecting our environmental transgressions and lanterns guiding the way toward understanding and healing this enigmatic relationship between humankind and the natural world.

Ecocriticism deals with the relationship between literature and the environment focusing on ecological issues. Ecocriticism emerged in the United States in the 1990s as a response to growing environmental awareness and the need to incorporate an ecological perspective into literary studies (Byrnes, 2022). Ecocriticism is based on the concept of environmental imagination of writers and readers to represent and perceive the natural environment in their works and experience. Ecocriticism analyzes how literature reflects, questions, criticizes or proposes different visions of nature, and how these visions influence the way we relate to the environment. Ecocriticism also explores connections between literature and other disciplines, such as ecology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, ethics, and ecofeminism.

Ecocriticism has evolved over time, going through different stages and trends. According to Henry (2001), ecocriticism has followed a process similar to that of feminism, which can be divided into three phases: the first, focused on searching for images of nature in classical literature and identifying stereotypes and absences; the second, dedicated to rescuing the marginalized tradition of texts written from nature; and the third, concerned with the literary constructions of human beings in relation to their natural environment. Some of the current trends in ecocriticism emphasize the link between place and identity, the political and cultural implications of environmental exploitation, the rights and welfare of animals and the economic and social dimensions of environmental problems.

In South Asian context, Amitav Ghosh, Mohsin Hamid and Uzma Aslam Khan have written novels for environmental awareness. Sandhya (2018) analyzed the works of Amitav Ghosh with an ecocritical perspective. Sandhya (2018) states that Ghosh explores the complex relationship between humans and nature and raises awareness of environmental issues. Ghosh creates ecocritical discourse and vision using narrative, language, symbolism, imagery, and intertextuality. The Sundarbans is a unique and complex ecosystem threatened by natural and human influences, as Ghosh shows in *The Hungry Tide*. Locals value the environment culturally and spiritually. Ghosh utilizes the water to symbolize change, migration, resistance, and identity while revealing the ecological and social effects of opium farming and commerce on India in *Water of Poppies*. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh blends science and fiction to create a complex and compelling plot that challenges Western science and reason and progress and development that often ignore or exploit nature. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh criticizes modern culture, politics, and literature for failing to confront the climate problem and offers alternative modes of thinking and envisioning to encourage a more ethical and responsible connection with nature.

Yaqoob (2015) opine that modern Pakistani fiction in English depicts how industrialization and urbanization harm the natural environment, resources, and human habitats and communities. Yaqoob (2015) state that the works of Uzma Aslam Khan show land, water, and air pollution and sea resource overexploitation caused by industrial trade and urban expansion. Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and Mohammed Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) show how "nature" has disappeared from Pakistan's crowded cities, leaving polluted environments with physical and mental illnesses. These novels warn readers that urbanites have accepted a lack of natural resources. These books illustrate the negative repercussions of human progress on society beyond unsustainable lifestyles.

Saleem, Azeem and Hashmat (2022) state that *Thinner Than Skin* by Uzma Aslam Khan depicts environmental issues. Khan shows how elite class and officials in power plan and design spaces to benefit their socio-political interests rather than the residents, especially in northern Pakistan. The study contended that unstable spatial production creates social hierarchies and inequities, which nature rejects through natural calamities to achieve spatial and environmental justice and balance. The research also highlights how Khan reveals human preconceptions and discrimination against each other, other species, and the ecosystem. The article concludes that urbanization requires rethinking our relationship with nature and place, which are typically driven by capitalist designs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current article employs qualitative research. The research has used textual analysis for the analysis. Textual analysis examines written information systematically. This method emphasises rigorous data gathering methods like close reading, content analysis, or discourse analysis, depending on the texts. For textual analysis, the research has opted the theory of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, a term coined by William Rueckert in his groundbreaking 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," is an approach to literary and cultural analysis centred on nature and the environment. Its core objective is to explore the intricate bond between humanity and the natural world. Eco-critics argue that we are just one species among many, coexisting in a shared world and interconnected with various species in intricate communities. Eco-critics scrutinize literary works from an eco-centric standpoint, giving particular attention to the portrayal of the natural world. Additionally, they broaden the horizons of literary criticism by giving prominence to "factual" literature, including reflective topographical materials such as essays, travelogues, memoirs, and regional literature. One distinguishing feature of ecocriticism, as pointed out by theorist Greg Garrard, is its close alignment with the science of ecology (Garrard, 2023). Eco-critics encourage readers to cross disciplinary boundaries and enhance their ecological literacy. Ecocriticism offers a solid theoretical foundation for environmental text analysis. Five fundamental ideas define literature and culture from the perspective of nature. These ideas include nature as a text, nature as discourse, imagining nature, writing for the environment and the ethics of ecocriticism. These fundamental notions provide a solid basis for adopting ecocriticism's main principles and applying them to the academic interpretation of literature in an ecologically contextualized setting.

DATA ANALYSIS

Trespassing is a story about the nature and environment. Khan has dedicated a significant portion of the book *Trespassing* to the natural world. Throughout the novel, there is a wealth of vivid and

abundant natural imagery, encompassing elements like rain, silk, and fruit imagery. Within the novel, readers encounter numerous allusions to mulberry trees and silk farms, providing them with a gateway into the world of silk farms and the underwater realm. They become acquainted with the lives of silk worms and the underwater ecosystems. Additionally, the book imparts knowledge about Pakistan's native plant and animal life, with references to indigenous fruits such as Jamun, bird species like bulbuls and peepal, and various trees including cedar, oak, wild thyme, fig, hibiscus, jasmine, as well as a diverse array of animals like parakeets, cats, chameleons, butterflies, crickets, snails, and a host of other creatures both on land and in the sea.

The plot primarily revolves around Danish's avid pursuit of shell collection and Dia's deep engagement with silk worms and the silk production process. The production of silk signifies the fusion of nature and culture, where the opulent and valuable fabric spun by silk worms also carries cultural significance. It offers a unique window to explore the intricate interplay between culture and nature and the negative impact of cultural practices on the natural world. Silk, in this context, symbolizes the harmonious blend of cultural and natural elements, weaving the story of the novel into its delicate fabric.

The ecological dilemmas are skilfully woven through the characterization of different characters. Riffat's ambition to establish a silk factory in Thatta and her daughter Dia's fascination with closely observing the transformative journey of silk worms make silk a recurring motif. It's highly advisable to delve into the intricacies of silk production to gain insight into how human intervention disrupts the natural life cycle of silk worms. The production of silk is intimately connected to human egocentrism, which positions humans at the apex of the food chain. In contrast, eco-centrism acknowledges the interdependence of humans and other organisms within the natural world, rejecting notions of human dominion over the entire universe.

The line "to extract the thread, the cocoon was boiled in water" (Khan, 2005, p. 108) shows that silk is produced by the death of silkworms. Salamat at one stage states that "Feed them a lot. When they've spun their cocoon, if you want the thread, boil them" (Khan, 2005, p. 152). In the quest for silk production, human intervention intentionally disrupts the natural life cycle of silk worms. To obtain silk, the cocoons housing live pupae are subjected to a harsh boiling process, leading to the harsh and inhumane termination of these living organisms, all in the name of human indulgence. This practice starkly showcases human cruelty, as it not only interferes with the silk worm's natural life cycle but also involves the heartless killing of these creatures for the sole purpose of silk production.

Dia's interest in silk production parallels another key character in the novel, Danish, who indulges in the hobby of collecting seashells and marine specimens. Danish's deep affection for sea creatures and shells is apparent as he preserves an Argonaut, reflecting his genuine appreciation for nature. Yet, while this reflects his connection to the natural world, it also highlights a certain disregard for the underwater ecosystem, which his unconventional hobby may disrupt. Danish's preservation of these creatures primarily serves to fulfill his personal pleasure, inadvertently causing harm to marine life. Both Dia and Danish embody modern individuals who find solace in the natural world while, paradoxically, impacting it for their self-centred desires.

The narrative in *Trespassing* not only acknowledges but also emphasizes the importance of nature and non-human life in human settings. Nature isn't relegated to a mere backdrop or a source of symbols and images to represent human experiences; rather, nature and non-human

creatures are integral components of the storyline. The presence and life cycle of silkworms are central to the novel. Khan provides a detailed account of how industrialization and technology have disrupted natural processes and disturbed the delicate ecological balance. She enlightens her readers about the fact that silkworms confined within factory breeding cells have lost their innate instincts, even to the extent of forgetting how to nourish themselves.

Khan's narrative shines a spotlight on the pervasive problem of inadequate cleanliness in urban areas. The images and symbols like "dust-opaque windows" raise concerns for enhanced sanitation and hygiene standards within city environments. It serves as a poignant reminder of the difficulties associated with subpar hygiene practices and underscores the imperative for more effective public health measures in urban settings. Khan's portrayal illuminates the all-encompassing nature of these challenges and underscores their substantial influence on the overall quality of life in Karachi city by accentuating the need for swift and effective action. The novel depicts the ecological dilemmas of urban areas which are exposed to a diverse range of pollution types, encompassing noise, air pollution, litter, elevated temperatures, and dust. The sources of this pollution include vehicles, informal settlements, open drainage systems, waste accumulation sites, industrial byproducts, and chemical emissions.

Another excerpt "the sky was light grey haze and the leaden heat immediately stifling, not a star shone through" (Khan, 2005, p. 39) presents a vivid description of the sky, which is characterized as a "light grey haze." The author meticulously delineates the characteristics of the natural environment in order to establish the ambiance of the setting. The utilisation of chromatic elements and visual representations is a prevalent strategy in the realm of ecocritical writing, wherein authors frequently employ sensory particulars to vividly portray and establish a profound connection with the natural world. In addition, the usage of the term "leaden heat" evokes a sensation of suffocation, so establishing a depiction of a climate that is severe and unappealing. This visual representation might be seen as a potential indication of the impact of human activities or alterations in the environment on the ecological system. The term "leaden heat" encompasses not just meteorological conditions but also serves as a metaphorical representation of the weight and challenges imposed by environmental concerns. This suggests that the environment is not solely characterised by physical oppression but is also subject to the repercussions of human activities. The absence of celestial bodies holds symbolic significance within the framework of ecocriticism. The concept being referred to is that of light pollution, which is a frequently explored subject within the field of ecocritical research. Light pollution is frequently linked to the adverse effects of urbanisation and modernization on the environment. In this case, the lack of stars may be a result of excessive artificial lighting, which not only blocks the sight of heavenly bodies but also disturbs natural ecosystems and their cycles. It shows the disconnection from the night sky, a connection that has been culturally and environmentally important for humanity throughout history.

Salamat reveals the issue of water crises as he says "with the fresh water cut off, the trees were withering, and the fish dying (Khan, 2005, p. 359). Salamat's words plunge us into a realm of bewildering complexity, where the very essence of an entire ecosystem is cast adrift amidst the turbulent sea of human recklessness. The Indus River's once life-giving flow, now dwindled to a mere trickle, stands as a haunting testament to the ceaseless ethnic conflicts that have parched the land and condemned both flora and fauna to a merciless fate. Here, the suffering isn't confined to the aquatic realm alone; it reverberates through the terrestrial domain, a cacophony of despair. The lifeblood of countless species, both in water and on land, is slowly drained away. And as if

this weren't enough, Salamaat unravels the story further – the once-prosperous mulberry trees, now frail and pallid, bear witness to the shriveled bounty of nature, echoing the disarray of the broader ecosystem. The perplexing intricacies of this narrative lead us down a labyrinthine path of ecological turmoil, leaving us to grapple with the enigmatic forces at play in this world of imbalance.

The image of "polythene bags hung on tree limbs" (Khan, 2005, p. 327) unleashes a whirlwind of intricate ecological reflections that dazzle the mind with their perplexing complexities. It first beckons us into the abyss of pollution and littering, a disheartening abyss where human indifference and neglect cast a shadow over the natural realm. These polythene intruders disrupt not just the scenic purity of nature but also dance with sinister allure for unsuspecting wildlife, a haunting symbol of a world choked by human callousness. Delving deeper, we encounter the enigma of an anthropocentric worldview, a realm where human convenience and desires reign supreme, heedless of the intricate web of life. The use of polythene bags, infamous for their environmental harm, unveils a culture where the whims of humanity eclipse the intricate tapestry of ecological interdependence. The intrusion of human-generated waste into these natural sanctuaries becomes a paradoxical testament to the fragility of the ecological web. This image pulls the curtain back on the relentless specters of consumerism, overconsumption, and wasteful practices that haunt modern society. The polythene bags, symbolic of a disposable culture, are a stark reminder of the blind pursuit of convenience and the sacrifices made at the altar of sustainability. It leaves us perplexed, torn between convenience and environmental responsibility, as we ponder the intricate puzzle of our consumer-driven lives in the context of ecocritical examination.

The novel portrays the dilemma of pollution as Dia observes that "a bus passed them flashing messages of love, belching gallons of carbon monoxide" (Khan, 2005, p. 288). This line symbolizes the bus's utilization as a medium for conveying emotional or commercial messages, underscoring how the natural environment is frequently co-opted for human purposes. In an ecocritical framework, this instance exemplifies the common occurrence of nature serving as a backdrop for human activities, with the bus, emblematic of urbanization and transportation, becoming a canvas for human expression. Nonetheless, the tone of the depiction takes a somber turn as the bus is characterized as "emitting significant quantities of carbon monoxide." This contrasting portrayal accentuates the environmental repercussions of human actions. The release of carbon monoxide, a detrimental greenhouse gas, functions as a stark reminder of the ecological ramifications of contemporary transportation. In an ecocritical context, these examples serve as a clear illustration of how literature can shed light on the intricate relationship between humans and their surroundings. The contrast between the tender "messages of love" and the harmful "carbon monoxide" serves as a commentary on the multifaceted and sometimes conflicting connections between human culture and the natural world. This analysis emphasizes the importance of ecocriticism in examining how literature portrays these intricate interactions and their ecological implications. This stark polarity between the "messages of love," delicate and tender, and the malevolent specter of "carbon monoxide," a sinister emissary of ecological doom, weaves an intricate tapestry of commentary. These examples amplify the resonating enigma of ecocriticism, an enigmatic lens through which the mystifying portrayal of these intricate intersections and their haunting ecological riddles is cast into stark relief.

CONCLUSION

The novel *Trespassing* effectively encapsulates the essence of ecocritical analysis by presenting ecological quandaries through detailed sensory descriptions, emphasising the potential impact of human activities on the environment, and symbolising the effects of light pollution on the natural world. Within the labyrinthine depths of ecocritical contemplation, such confounding instances materialize as a mystifying revelation, shedding cryptic light upon the complex interplay of humanity and the world that cradles it. It asks readers to consider the complex interaction between people and the environment, which is a central focus in the study of ecocriticism. It also urges readers to consider the many ways in which human endeavours harness, abuse, and adversely influence nature. *Trespassing* is a significant and modern work of eco-fiction that increases readers' awareness of the environment, stimulates them to reassess their relationship to the natural world, and pushes them to explore how they might contribute to the preservation of ecological balance. The novel is crucial to eco-criticism since it effectively reflects the country's different environmental realities and opinions. It throws light on today's critical environmental issues and invites people to reconsider their priorities.

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