

Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*: A Study through Lawrence Buell's Theory of Ecocriticism

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Abstract: Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) is often explored in terms of friendship, betrayal, guilt, and the search for redemption set against the reality of Afghanistan. The previous research articles focus on trauma, identity, ethnicity, and what it means to be Afghan after invasion and war. This paper examines how nature acts as an external factor depicting human emotions rather than just being the backdrop in the story. This study attempts to fill this research gap by applying Lawrence Buell's four criteria to analyze literature and environment. Buell's theory helps to understand how humans, nature, and fates are interconnected. He talks about how stories represent humans' shared responsibility in the world and the need for ethical balance between humans and all other living beings. This study focuses on the natural setting, which includes gardens, trees, seasons, and even the weather, to portray the psychological change that happens in the characters' lives. It shows how nature helps to shape people's memory, history, and the possible ways to discover strength and offer forgiveness. This article concludes that ecological spaces play an active role in shaping humans' lives and offers various possibilities to change and improve life's circumstances amidst uncertain moments.

Keywords: Nature, Redemption, War, Afghanistan, Ecocriticism

Introduction

The Kite Runner, a novel by Khaled Hosseini, is set in Afghanistan. The novel portrays the lives of Amir and Hassan, who experience issues based on identity, trauma, war, friendship, and guilt. The novel depicts how civil wars transformed Afghanistan from a non-violent homeland to a devastated landscape. Nature in this novel plays a significant role in representing how characters feel and transform amidst the situations. In the contemporary world, people show ecological concern, which makes them realize the real facts of how their actions affect the natural environment. This leads the human world to explore nature in literary space, which results in the ecocritical framework called ecocriticism. This theory focuses on the interconnectedness of both people and nature.

Ecocriticism is an emerging literary movement which portrays the relationship between literature and the physical environment. According to Cheryl Glotfelty, ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii), emphasizing literary texts as inseparable from ecological certainties. Lawrence Buell is a key figure in ecocriticism, who has authored *The Environmental Imagination*. In his book, he observes ecological conflicts as “a crisis of the imagination” (Buell 2) and portrays nature as a living part of the story rather than the background scenery for the novel. He argues that human life is connected to the land, which shapes humans’ memories, identities, and cultures. His insights are relevant in Hosseini’s novel, where environmental degradation reflects his characters’ psychological destruction. Hosseini’s vivid description of nature, which includes gardens, trees, rivers, and mountains, appears as elements that shape human emotions and offer different experiences.

The novel *The Kite Runner* displays how historical reality remains unstable. It presents nature as a tool to help the characters acquire their identity by finding redemption between the chaotic movements. Hosseini introduces Amir as the protagonist whose environment gradually changes from being calm to violent. In his early life, his flourishing and lavish childhood turns into abandoned buildings, barren streets, and wild landscapes. These terrible experiences make him lose his innocence, social harmony, and public identity. Throughout the novel, whenever nature is affected, his personal life also gets affected. It shows how human and environmental history are interconnected.

Review of Literature

The existing research articles focus on trauma, identity, and conflict. It shows how the characters undergo political distress and how they are affected by war and trauma. The conflict that occurs in Afghanistan, the civil war, and the psychological aspects have been analyzed so far. This research article analyses the novel *The Kite Runner* through an ecological perspective, showing people’s understanding of Afghanistan’s landscapes and how this helps them stay connected to memory and identity through the natural environment. However, there is no research on how Hosseini uses environmental imagery and how it relates to Lawrence Buell’s ideas.

Objectives of the Research

The main objective is to examine Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* through the lens of Lawrence Buell's ecocriticism. Hosseini's environmental imagination goes hand in hand with Buell's theory. The paper analyses characters' identity through environmental imagery of memory and trauma. It highlights the role of nature in Amir's redemption and evaluates Buell's environmental imagination in modern works of post-war fiction.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the environment, which highlights their integration. Garrard asserts that ecocriticism enquires into "the idea of nature" (Garrard 4), which further helps expand environmental criticism. Lawrence Buell, an ecocritical theorist, argues that nature should be seen as a participant and not just a backdrop. He states that environmental crises require literature to transform human perspectives on nature, to which he proposes four features of ecocritical texts.

Discussion

According to Buell, there are four characteristics of the text that concern ecocriticism. His first criterion is, "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest human history is implicated in natural history" (Buell 7). This criterion states that the novel's setting is not just used as a narrative strategy but appears as a historic reminder of how nature is occupied in human life. Similarly, Hosseini describes nature as an active participant in his novel, *The Kite Runner*. In Afghanistan, the natural landscape helps people to preserve their memories through which their identity is shaped. Nature assists people and becomes a silent observer of both innocence and destruction.

In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini uses natural imagery to introduce the setting to evoke people's memories. His imagination includes the shimmering water, breeze, trees, and open sky, which act as a tool to reconstruct Amir's childhood. According to him, memory is always rooted in the environment, which agrees with Buell's criterion. Buell and Hosseini claim that the natural landscapes directly participate in the human world rather than just being idle. Hosseini opens the novel with the protagonist, Amir, recalling his past through imagery of nature: "The early-afternoon sun sparkled on the water. . . a crisp breeze. . . kites. . . soaring in the sky. . . above the trees" (Hosseini 14). The imagery connects him to his memory where he states, "I sat on a park bench near a willow tree" (Hosseini 14). The willow tree used here is more than the physical scenery because it develops a contemplative place for Amir to react to his past events, resulting in the beginning of his ethical journey. His recollection of the landscape reflects "sense of place" (Heise 10), thereby demonstrating how it helps him in identity formation.

Nature offers good values like self-exploration from childhood to ethical awakening of adulthood in the human world. Similarly, Hosseini frequently connects Amir's childhood identity with the trees in Kabul. Amir recalls, "when we were children, Hassan and I used to climb the poplar trees" (Hosseini 15), while "our trouser

pockets filled with dried mulberries and walnuts" (Hosseini 15). These vivid images disclose how Amir and nature are interconnected.

Trees offer recreation, nourishment, and companionship to every living being in the world. Buell asserts that ecocritical writing in literary texts dissolves the rigid boundary between humans and nature. Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* symbolizes this interconnectedness through Amir's ordinary childhood experiences. He presents Kabul as a richness-filled landscape in Afghanistan. The novel contains natural vegetation, including "rows of cherry trees... a small vegetable garden... tomatoes, mint, peppers, and a row of corn" (Hosseini 17), and these products become essential to the people residing in Kabul. This demonstrates how human life is connected to environmental production for their daily life. The garden in Kabul represents how harmony exists between humans and nature. This reinforces Buell's argument that environmental descriptions focus on ecological interdependence and how they evolve social relationships with nature. Hosseini introduces "a loquat tree" (Hosseini 17), which silently witnesses the marginalized lives of Hassan and Ali. The environment acquires emotional and social significance in this novel.

Buell's second criterion is that "the human interest is not understood as the only legitimate interest" (Buell 7), which states that both humans and nature have their own rights in the world. So, it suggests that when humans try to do something out of nature's provisions, then nature will also give the same in return. Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* consistently depicts how human history is inseparable from ecological history. The relationship between Amir and Afghanistan's changing landscapes mirrors how political turmoil affects an individual and leads to personal transformation. Amir observes how they took their "first steps on the same lawn in the same yard" (Hosseini 21) years back and how the shared meadows now symbolize familial closeness and common identity.

Despite the political partitions in Afghanistan, nature emerged as an agency that holds the history of the relationships. Hosseini links Baba, Amir's father, allegorically with environmental power. He mentions that his hands look "capable of uprooting a willow tree" (Hosseini 22), which highlights Baba's physical power just like the tree. He opines how human identity is voiced through ecological allegories. The novel's prominence lies in the ecological setting, which appears during Baba's effort to connect with Amir at Ghargha Lake. He states, "the water was a deep blue and sunlight glittered" (Hosseini 23), which is not just scenery but a place to reflect father-son interaction. The lake water signifies calm and the emotional distance separating the father and son. Afghanistan's landscape reinforces their emotions through the active relationship existing between them. Afghanistan's seasonal cycles constitute its cultural life. When Amir mentions, "the first day of spring, New Year's Day" (Hosseini 28), it shows how the Spring season signifies rejuvenation, richness, and communal celebration. Buell states that environmental texts always contain narratives that portray nature's cyclical processes. Hosseini's description of Nowruz, a new day in Persia, reveals how cultural traditions are followed in Kabul and how they remain deeply rooted in seasonal rhythms.

Amir's childhood memories often disclose ecological imagery, where he states "one long lazy summer day with Hassan, chasing each other between tangles of trees" (Hosseini 32). Nature provides freedom, enhances creativity, and offers emotional safety to people. In Amir's life, the trees appear as living participants as a symbol of their friendship. He mentions Afghanistan as a living ecosystem where "their sheep... goats... camels' necks" (Hosseini 32) hold the beauty of the landscape. The description of "watering the lawn" (Hosseini 33) illustrates how humans are concerned about their everyday environmental stewardship. It shows how domestic ecological practices receive attention in the world, and it emphasizes humans' dependence on nature and the responsibility towards nature. Through this, Hosseini integrates the human world with the nonhuman world, as Buell states that literary works on ecology should recognize diverse forms of life within the shared ecologies.

The third criterion is that "human accountability to the environment is a part of the text's ethical orientation" (Hosseini 7). This criterion states that the ecological texts should contain values which reveal human accountability for their actions. According to Buell, ecological writing helps people to acquire moral accountability and reveals how the human and natural world are connected through the works related to the environment. In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini uses the pomegranate tree to symbolize memory, guilt, disloyalty, and recovery. He introduces "a pomegranate tree near the entrance to the cemetery" (Hosseini 33), which signifies life and death. The pomegranate mentioned in the novel constitutes the imaginative world of Amir and Hassan, where Amir carves into its trunk, "Amir and Hassan, the sultans of Kabul" (Hosseini 33). The inscription on the pomegranate tree portrays it as a living record of friendship and ecology which silently preserves all without judgment. Buell contends that natural scenery retains cultural memory, and this is evident when Amir and Hassan build a strong relationship with nature and continue to share their rituals. He says "after we'd eaten the fruit and wiped our hands on the grass" (Hosseini 33).

Hosseini, in his novel, describes how nature nourishes friendship both literally and symbolically. Amir's storytelling scenes happen beneath the tree where nature becomes the narrative agency in his life. When he shares his stories, the "sunlight and shadows of pomegranate leaves" (Hosseini 33) dance on his face. The light moves through the leaves on his face, shaping his perception and imagination of world events. The trees become the active listener of his stories rather than being just the background, which is evident when Amir recalls, "we sat for hours under that tree . . . until the sun faded in the west" (Hosseini 34). The tree offers the space to share his suppressed emotions, which comforts him in all possible ways. Through this, Hosseini's literary work fosters people's imagination and friendship when connected with nature. The tree's branches embrace Amir and provide him with emotional intimacy before infidelity abolishes it. Years later, when Amir returns to Kabul, his discovery of the barren tree shatters him when he realizes how nature has become sterile over time. Nature's flourishing style is depleted when political conflicts arise in Kabul. Hosseini describes nature's decline briefly by presenting the damaged tree. The tree reflects fractured alliances, national annihilation, and ecological damage. Amir realizes how nature's destruction affects human lives in Kabul and how it damages the emotional

connection with it. This shows how every individual should possess environmental accountability to save nature because the spoiled landscapes expose damaged moral associations.

The fourth feature is “some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text” (Buell 7). Buell’s final principle upholds the fact that all people should try to imagine environmental development as an evolving process rather than a fixed setting. Throughout the novel, Hosseini shows nature’s transformation and the “dynamic interrelationships” (Oppermann 463) that arise from Afghanistan’s political upheaval and affect Amir’s emotional development. The seasonal changes in the novel reveal how Amir undergoes emotional transitions during his childhood, and winter symbolizes his childhood experiences. Hosseini describes the winter season as joyful, when Amir and other boys participate in kite competitions. This event connects people after Hassan’s attack. As the story progresses, it unfolds different aspects of the environmental setting, providing different meanings on each occasion.

Hosseini adds the historical event of Afghanistan’s political conflict where Amir recalls, “a white light flashed, lit the sky in silver” (Hosseini 40). This reveals the ecological dynamism that exists in Afghanistan where the well-lit sky becomes an onlooker of revolution and violence. This makes nature a historical catastrophe that acts indifferent to the people and to the world by being just an observer. According to Buell, the environmental narratives interpret how ecological history and political history intersect. Hosseini’s depicts the sky as an eyewitness of Kabul’s conflict, and the transformation illustrates how the environment keeps changing even as society collapses. This ecological destruction is a “slow violence” (Nixon 2) which unfolds slowly across time.

Hosseini depicts nature as a tool that replaces dust with vegetation and uncontrolled houses with thriving communities. It symbolizes Afghanistan’s moral destruction, especially in Kabul. Amir’s recovery takes place when he flies a kite in the sky with Sohrab after many years. He realizes how the sky, which once witnessed betrayal, now experiences reconciliation. Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* is a perfect example to show how Buell’s belief in environment continues to generate new meanings in the worldview. The findings of the research show how nature is a source always available to the human world, which actively restores loss by healing and renewing human life. Buell’s four features allow the readers to find obvious ecological meaning and how human and nature remain always connected. His theoretical framework speaks about the regular environment, social landscape, and ecological memory, which act as a bridge between the human and nonhuman worlds.

Conclusion

The study concludes with the ecocritical scope of the novel, *The Kite Runner*. The analysis examines how Afghanistan’s landscapes become active agents even during and

after war rather than being passive participants. The novel enhances “environmental consciousness” to illustrate how the human and non-human world stays interconnected in history. Hosseini’s use of natural elements preserves emotional memory, which impacts characters’ moral development and fulfills Buell’s first criterion. The article determines how Hosseini’s novel is closely intertwined with the history of environment and politics. Kabul’s ecological environment represents the disintegration of the nation’s uniqueness, familial relationships, and ethical values when nature is destroyed. Environmental degradation acts as a metaphor in this novel that reflects the historical trauma of both the people and nature. The third criterion is how the pomegranate tree develops as the novel’s central symbol, illustrating Buell’s concept of attachment to place and the memory surrounding the environment. The fourth criterion is that the novel encounters anthropocentric perspectives in portraying humans, animals, landscapes, and seasonal changes as components of a shared environmental community. When an individual practices routines such as gardening, cultivating crops, and caring for domestic land, this reinforces human environmental responsibility. Finally, Amir’s exile denotes ecological displacement, where his identity remains deep-rooted in landscapes and demonstrates how belonging depends on environmental memory. The article concludes that Hosseini enlarges ecocritical discourse by revealing war as an environmental upheaval. When politics arises, it creates conflicts that damage ecosystems, destroy cultivated landscapes, and disrupt ecological continuity. Consequently, *The Kite Runner* backs significant ideas to contemporary environmental humanities that integrate ecological perception with post-war reconstruction.

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