

**RESEARCH PAPER****Trauma of Migration and Environment: An Ecocritical Analysis of *Exit West*****¹Alina Tahir, and ² Dr. Munazzah Rabbani ***

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ABSTRACT

The present study probes the effects of toxic discourse and trauma through which both humans and environment suffer in the novel *Exit West* (2017). The main objective of this research is to identify the toxicity and devastation of refugees and environment through trauma of migration. The study is qualitative in nature and Buell's Toxic Discourse (1998) and Caruth's Trauma Theory (1996) have been applied as a framework for the study. Analysis has been done by the use of textual method. Hence, the findings revealed that migration is a terrible event of human history which effects people both mentally and physically. Migration is a global issue and *Exit West* (2017) revealed that how time and climate act as the working force behind this terrifying journey.

Keywords: Calamities of Refugee. Ecocriticism, Ecological Devastation, Natural Environment, Refugee Trauma

Introduction

This paper probes Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) from the perspective of trauma and toxic discourse. Ecocriticism is quite a relevant field in present times and it is continuously emerging with time. Ecocriticism studies "the relationship between literature and physical environment" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii). The exact date of emergence of ecocriticism is not confirmed but Jonathan Bate is often regarded to use the term 'ecocriticism' first in early 1990s. Scholars, who analyzed American nature writing texts with regard to prevailing ecological and environmental issues and crises, commenced a movement which initiated its activities in United States in 1970s and 1980s. Lawrence Buell in his *Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005, p. 2) claimed about the roots of Ecocriticism in these words: "If environmental criticism today is still an emergent discourse it is one with very ancient roots. In one form or another, the "idea of nature" has been dominant or at least residual concern for literary scholars and intellectual historians ever since these fields came into being".

In *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Glotfelty expounds the phrase ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical Environment" (1996, p. xviii). The main purpose of this method was to retrieve the proficient dignity and Glotfelty refers to as "the undervalued genre of nature writing" (ibid. p. xxxi). As stated by Buell, ecocriticism is an investigation of the relations between literature and the ecology carried out in a spirit of dedication to environmentalist practices (1995, p. 430). Buell's definition stresses that ecocriticism is the relation between literature and the ecology.

Evolution of Ecocriticism in Literature

During 1990s, a series of scholarly meetings made the dormant study of ecocriticism active. Most eminent conferences included: Harold Fromm lead the 1991 MLA distinct

session and Glen A. Love conducted the 1992 American Literature Association Symposium. The sole purpose of the association ALA was to procreate modern environment related work and to have academic access to eco-literature. By analogy, ecocriticism is associated with connection between literature and ecology and how the relation of humans with natural world is portrayed in literature. The word 'eco-criticism' is elucidated to intend 'house judge' by William Howarth (1996). He claimed that the oikos is nature, a place, Edward Hoagland called 'our widest home, and the kritos is an arbiter of taste' (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996. p. 69).

Caruth defined trauma as a torment that discusses and tries to express harsh and secret reality which could not be approached in other case. So this indicates how Caruth incorporated discourse of literature to throw light on the specific notion of trauma. For Caruth, the ordinary object in literature, psychoanalysis and trauma is the torment and misery of unfamiliar (Felman, "Testimony", 1996, p. 52). Caruth analyzed that how the familiar and unfamiliar realities about traumatic incidents amalgamate the psychoanalytic theory of trauma and migration.

Literature Review

Shah and Kumari (2019) conducted a research study in which they discussed the natural environment of Afghanistan. This paper studied Hosseini's novel from the ecocritical point of view. Story of novels revolves around siblings who had been lost in childhood and met in old age after so many years. This paper employed descriptive qualitative research method. To sum up, researcher asserted that there should be harmonious relationship between human race and natural environment.

Ahsan (2019) highlighted the postmodern ecological and sociocultural anxiety of Pakistani American poet Shadab Zeest Hashmi. Researcher used the lens of ecocriticism to emphasize on the postmodern environmental and sociocultural anxiety and issues. Descriptive qualitative research method was employed as a tool for this research.

Makhdoom and Yaqoob (2019) highlighted how language communicates and makes a relation to the ecology in various cultures. The research methodology was qualitative in nature and initially relied on intertextual comparative study of chosen fiction. To conclude, the study of transcultural communication occupied importance because the study of various cultural experiences in comparison can pave the way for a society of mutual meanings and global perspective.

Hussain (2018) conducted a study on environmental consciousness using ecocritical lens and unveiling the influence of consumerism, capitalism, migration and technology on the communities and urban spaces. The descriptive qualitative research method was utilized for study as research tool. The study highlighted the pivotal role of author in raising ecological consciousness for sustainable progress in the developing country.

Niazi et al (2013) conducted a study on the impact left by environmental changes on the character of any being. Researcher analyzed *The Rainbow* by D.H. Lawrence to probe deep ecological philosophy. Tool used for paper was descriptive qualitative method. Summing up, Ursula's inclination towards the reunification of the lost natural roots and getting away from bitter modernism. This paper highlighted how man changes when he is detached from nature.

Buell (2005) debated the involvement of the imperiled condition and ambiguous destiny of existence on planet for academic and societal studies. The ecological revolution in intellectual studies is best comprehended, then, less as a stone monument than as a assemblage of discordant actions.

Buell (1999) discussed about ecocriticism which is relatively recent movement dating from the 1990s, that was still in its infancy. The ideas about natural habitat and environment have been examined and the examination of literature in connection to environment has only just begun to take on the appearance of a main crucial mutiny.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this research consists of Lawrence Buell's notion of "Toxic discourse Theory" (1998) and Cathy Caruth's "Trauma Theory" (1995) for *Exit West* (2017). The basic motive for the implementation of Buell's notion of Toxic Discourse (1998) and Caruth's Trauma Theory (1995) is that Buell and Caruth in their theories throw light on those particular elements which facilitate the demand of work that is being explored in the present study.

Toxic Discourse

Lawrence Buell's visions on the themes of nature absence, environmental pollution, toxic risk, climate, nature absence and ecological devastation aided to comprehend and grasp the struggle and journey of the characters efficaciously from the selected fiction.

The toxic discourse implied in ecocritical framework gives it more emphasis and enhances the structure from the core, and spots toxic insinuation and their effects on the human body and ecology. So, the incorporation of Buell's phrases "toxic discourse" is pivotal for observing the unrestrained ecological degradation and toxicity in Hamid's fiction. Toxic discourse is implied in the present study because it acknowledges that natural world as the physical ecology in which humans reside. It is not a completely harmonious biotic economy but nature has markedly been altered by technology (Buell, 1995, p. 4). So, this framework aims to understand that how modern Pakistani fiction spotlights the dwelling of individuals who are inhabiting in modern societies and experience different kinds and forms of toxic risk. In her article, Heise (2008) asserts that instant concentration to risk theory and toxic discourse can be beneficial for comprehending the ecological contamination that is a perennial subject in modern literature. The essay by Cynthia Deitering (1996) Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 80s published in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) provides that the 1980s constructed a "toxic consciousness" in affix natural fictions. Cynthia (1996) appealed that this toxic consciousness strives to center on crucial ecological issues; for example, the Three Mile Island Catastrophe and Green House Effect are of distinct importance.

The problem of toxic has been an important factor in ecocriticism. It has not been so commonly received in the domain as contrasted to the aesthetic assets of nature (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982, p. 221). Buell expounded it as an explicit fear stirring from sensed intimidation of ecological risk due to chemical alteration by human activities (1998, p. 31). From the commencement of globalization and urbanization to the modern era, the intimidation of toxicity has been sensed.

Trauma Theory

The phrase 'trauma' originally came from Greek language that signifies wound or any injury of the body. But this phrase is commonly used to refer to mental torments. Someone who experiences the melancholy of traumatic events is totally different. In opinion of Caruth (1996, p. 142), the melancholy of traumatic events is averted by the notion as they happen "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known." After a span of time, the events go on revealing the disasters like change in the attitude and modification in the ecosystem. So Caruth asserted that the motive of trauma does not incorporate the deleterious events but it incorporates the confusion of "unassimilated nature" from that everyone was unaware initially. The most pinching and secret portion of traumatic incidents is that it continues to

be reverse in a cycle and continuously afflicting the sufferer for permanent torture. The observation of Cathy Caruth for trauma as the delineation of psychological issues, facts about past events and description of time. In Caruth's vision of trauma: "Trauma cannot be indicated in the most abusive event in survivor's bygone recollection. But, it finds in the passage that its actual blended in environment, the manner it was particularly not acknowledged in the initial phase-returns to peruse the sufferer of trauma afterwards" (Caruth, 1996, p. 04).

Trauma of Migration & Environment in *Exit West*

Mohsin Hamid's novel "Exit West" (2017) is about the life of asylum seekers who astray from one place to another for the sake of safe asylum. Devastated and noxious environment and dreadful issues of migration and terrorism have fractured their mental and physical health. In this section, ecocritical exploration of aftereffects of migration, terrorism and noxious environment and traumatic incidents in the "Exit West" (2017) has been carried out by the implementation of Buell's notion of 'Toxic Discourse' (1998) and Cathy Caruth's 'Trauma Theory' (*The Unclaimed Experiences*, 1996) as diasporic theoretical framework. The prominent themes under study are natural environment, calamities of refugees, ecological devastation and refugee trauma.

In *Exit West* (2017), Mohsin Hamid posits that migration is not only moving from physical boundaries but also moving through time. Migration is important component of individual's life as he migrates from birth to childhood, childhood to adulthood, adulthood to marriage and from marriage to parenthood and then finally to his last destination which is death. Mohsin Hamid asserts that individual migrates throughout his life.

Natural Environment

Nature is portrayed in the form of destruction. Nature is one of the important compartment of human's life that can never be denied. Nature performs the task of protection for humans by creating different protective layers around this planet e.g. Ozone layer. These layers guard humans from all kinds of disasters, harms and damages. The existence of human and other living thing is at risk without nature. In novel *Exit West* (2107), nature is portrayed as the essential factor for the survival of human race. Without the natural environment, people will become physically and mentally ill.

"A large tree, blocking out sunlight to dirt and a few wisps of grass" (Hamid, 2017, p.5)

"Dirt" is "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter (Mary Douglas, 2007, p. 44) The situation shows the divergence of Saeed's thoughts and his focus on things. The passage of light is completely cut down due to interference of large tree outside the house of the firm. It was grown for the benefit of humans but now it is no more of any usage for anyone and causes disturbance. But in other way this tree is house for hawk that is making his nest on the top of tree. These lines depict how one thing is useful for someone and the same thing is useless for other people. There are the residuals of smoking butts in the lawn alongside dirt and thrash.

"a cold breeze... smelling brine in the air... Stretch of sand... Grey waves" (Hamid, 2017, p. 99,100)

Cold air was blowing and touching their faces. The air also brings the smell of saltwater as it was blowing from the sea. The brine smell can be felt from the air. The cold breeze and sight of sand was the indication for some beach or seaside. Saeed and Nadia were pleased to see the natural environment and it was a source of their new life. This new air

and environment has arisen a wave of hope in Saeed and Nadia. They were overwhelmed by this new environment.

“The sky had begun to change, and was less dark now than indigo... cool but not cold” (Hamid, 2017, p. 179).

From an ecocritical standpoint, all these references point to a fundamental belief in ecocriticism. As proclaimed by Glotfelty, “everything is connected to every other thing” (1996, xviii) reflecting humans’ essential connection with the environment. Atmosphere has changed, letting people move about. Environment is very vital during migration as the whole migration relies on environment which is both beneficial and dangerous for migrants. Migrants move from one place to another from hotter to cold and cold to humid, and humid to dry. It becomes very difficult to cope with the changing environment. The alteration into the environment occurred due to pollution or natural factors.

Calamities of Refugees

Refugees face many hardships during migration. Migration is a painstaking process. Hamid has given insight into the trauma of migration and the problems faced by refugees in the host nation. Refugees were facing problem like scarcity of food and other accessories like health etc. Innocent people are slaughtered without any impeccant. Refugees have to stay under the bare sky in the harsh environment.

“Refugees had occupied,... pitching tents... roads, .. boundary walls of house...” (Hamid, 2017, p. 23)

The state utilizes refugee camps as the major sites where surveillance and control takes place. Liisa Malkki argues that the refugee camp is a standardized, generalizable technology of power in the management of mass displacement” (1995, p. 498). It enables “the spatial concentration of people and facilitates bureaucratic processes” (1995, p. 499). There is no shelter for the refugees. They have nothing with them. Neither there was any house nor any place where they could protect themselves. With the passage of time, people started to mangle in dreadful situation and settled down where they find place. Due to shortage of place, refugees had started to establish tents between the road.

“The first two weekends of the curfew came... Air strikes... shattering Saeed’s bathroom window... lemon tree Fighter-bombers grated hoarsely through the sky” (Hamid, 2017, p.52)

David Morley asserts “if the West generally shows the ground of the migrant’s dreams, for the West itself the migrant is often still imagined as the scapegoat” (2000, p. 155).

The whole city was under the control of militants. Curfew was imposed. People were assaulted through air. They knew that there were migrants people and their lives had no value. The air strikes destroy everything including the trees and plants. The window panels were broken and earth was moving as if it was an earthquake. Nadia picked up lemon tree from the window as there was constant bombing from the militants via atmosphere. Those attacks were polluting environment by releasing harmful and hazardous chemicals besides the loss of valued lives of loved ones. And people were living in such devastated environment.

“Rumors that the curfew might be relaxed... a temporary anti-terrorism measure... alone and much more afraid” (Hamid, 2017, p. 55)

The control of movement, control of physical environment, psychological control were the basic mechanism to have control over refugees during their migration. They also imposed curfew to control above mentioned movements. Saeed and Nadia migrated from their country to Mykonos, to London and afterward to another city of Marin. Novel mentioned number of cities of Europe. This stems from "the conventional fears of host communities of being polluted by incoming foreigners" (p. 155), which gave rise to "symbols of impurity [and] rituals of purifications" (Morley, 2000, p. 155).

"Drones and helicopters overhead, fights, murders and rapes and assaults blamed incidents ... migrants" (Hamid. 2017, p.142).

When viewed, alongside risks in the form of large-scale technologies, the toxic discourse articulated what Buell refers to as "a threat of hegemonic oppression" (1998, p. 38). The strategy to attack during nights was significant so that migrants could not find enough time to escape. Migrants were exterminated, kidnapped, paralyzed, injured and raped everywhere. A critical role was played by the nationalism and racism to shape refugees' agency in the foreign land. The state of modern migrant was same as those of slaves in the colonial times. The roots of migration went back to the era of colonial past, which was extremely horrible and dark

Ecological Devastation

The destruction of ecology is clearly depicted from the city in which civil war has erupted. Due to excessive bombardment and chemical explosions, the environmental pollution of unidentified city has reached to its zenith. Natural environment, atmosphere of city, water reservoirs, plants and trees were deeply effected by the horrible consequences of war. Due to these deadly radiations, tress and plants will decease. *Exit West* (2017) shows the trauma of civil war on migrated people and their environment. Migrants had to reside in such deleterious environment as they have no other options.

"Lemon tree did not recover, ... sat lifeless, clung to by a few desiccated leaves" (Hamid, 2017, p. 89).

Contemporary concepts of risk in the novels include the consequences of humans' deployment of technology and its impact on the human and non-human environment. This question of risk is a notion theoretically propounded by Ulrich Beck (2009). According to Beck, the novelists also played a key role in examining the two sides of risk, which he referred to as chance and danger" (2009, p. 5). The environmental pollution has reached its zenith that it let the lemon tree die. Nadia tried her best to recover the plant but once the life is gone it never comes back. Excessive heat of summer and pollution of surroundings caused the lemon tree to be perished.

Refugee Trauma

Refugees are treated as an outsider. Neither national government nor the host nation pays attention towards the issues of refugees. Survival is first priority of all living things but humans want to live in freedom. They need clean and pollution free environment for their existence. The security of boarders should not be given priority over the safety of refugees. Most of the migration occurs from East to West. Migration has created the issues of refugees in "*Exit West*" (2017). Refugees face calamities in the form of nature.

"Scattering of his extended family, struck him as deeply sad, ... loss of a home, no less" (Hamid, 2017, p. 94)

Saeed got grasped by a feeling of misfortune as he planed to withdraw. He grieved the dissipating of his more distant family and his companions. These lines delineated the

trauma of refugees as they got upset with the ongoing situation and went in the relocation of past. Pequeña maintained that Saeed's "nostalgic memories make him a prisoner of the past" (2019, p.51).

Michael Perfect claimed that the retrograde emphasis on the obscurity the entrance may be scrutinized as an affirmation for Hamid's sake that such persisting can not be portrayed in story and, maybe, unbelievable (2019, p. 196). Saeed relied on the memories of past to give himself solace and pleasure in the ongoing situation, instead of Nadia. He thought about his home, environment, his belongings, friends and family. He could not drag himself from those memories. April Joy Pequeña perceives that the craving for home can bring about a powerlessness to conform to new environment: "the migrant's separation from his place of origin is traditionally depicted in a way whereby migrants fail to adapt to his present society due to an incessant longing for the past and for his homeland" (2019, p. 9). All in all, the thought of having a place might be connected to a home-place. Saeed's past was not an obstacle but it was a link between his old and new being. Saeed's memories were reason of solace for him in his new homeland. Pequeña states that "unlike Saeed who remembers home in order to escape the realities of their situation in foreign countries, Nadia made use of her memories of a lost homeland as a means for her to build a home in their new destinations" (2019, p. 51).

"When we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (Hamid, 2017, p. 94).

The dependency of Saeed and Nadia on each other faded with the passage of time as they got settled in new environment. This new change was due to safer environment which diverted their minds towards their future goals. Their focus was shifted towards safe and comfortable environment. In order to overcome the trauma of migration, people have to be empowered from different perspectives. Jan Nederveen Pieterse proposed that: "In a historical sense we are all migrants because our ancestors have all travelled to the places where we have come from. States that impose border controls may go way back in time, but their spread is a recent phenomenon and their covering the globe is more recent still" (1995, p. 392).

"Passage was both like dying and like being born.... She felt cold and bruised and damp... trembling" (Hamid, 2017. P.98).

According to Caruth, trauma produces a break between life and death; it also opens up a new potential for perception and understanding. The problem of trauma is not simply a problem of destruction but, also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival (1995). Nadia was gripped by the feeling of instability. She went into the state of insecurity as the way was like the passage towards the death. Both Saeed and Nadia left their homes with the feeling of broken heart and misfortune. Saeed wanted to proceed with the known people but Nadia was comfortable with everyone. Their migration depicted that they are in the state of constant fear of military inching closer to them. Hamid has beautifully decorated the fear of migrants through this passage.

"The fear in people's eyes ... trapped here, ... hunger forced them" (Hamid, 2017, p. 110-111)

Hamid frames the refugees' apprehensions in terms of "uncertainty", suggesting that "our collective actions have brought us into uncharted territory" and that there is an impending and irreversible threat or risk in the chain of events leading humanity into a future that is profoundly different to what we have witnessed before (Mossner, 2014). The despair of refugees was delineated as they allude to the Western refugee camps as "mousetraps" due to scarcity of food, clean water, pollution free environment, medicine, and health care centers and to migrate to other places. This grim situation of asylum seekers

provoked the internal fear about being trapped until death. The illusion of freedom was a clear deception in which asylum seekers were trapped in the cycle of endless hope. Similarly, the illusion of safety measures has been delineated by Hamid in *Exit West* (2017) via the hopelessness of asylum seekers.

“Wind in her face on a hot day.. rode her motorcycle...dust and the pollution and the little bugs mouth... even spit” (Hamid, 2000, pp. 156-157)

According to the theory propounded by Caruth, people do recover from trauma by recalling the past traumatic events for their survival of the fittest. Her insightful assumption is the possibility of emergence of hope in the stories of loss (Caruth, 1995). In this way, through the repetition of traumatic events of past, Nadia went into the recollection of past when she used to drive bike with freedom. There were no restrictions on her whether she was driving alone or with companions. She had to face lots of pollution and dust, whenever she rode her bike the air touched her face. That air was mixture of dirt, dust and pollution lying besides the roads and stuck to every passer by with the aid of wind. Other times, the air contained little bugs and other flies which suddenly entered into Nadia’s mouth during driving and she had to spit on the road. Gone were those days. But the migration has snatched every single happy moment of her life alongside future.

Conclusion

Migration is very tragic event of human history. In *Exit West* (2017), Hamid universalized the hurdles faced by the migrants in the Western world. Migration deeply affects people physically, mentally, and emotionally. Hamid claims that we are all migrants through time” (Hamid, 2017, p. 209). Migration creates a havoc, situation of fear and trauma. Incongruity of migration is undeniable. *Exit West* (2017) represents a cosmos where everyone is in the state of constant motion. It suggests that motion is life and stasis death. Saeed and Nadia reached their final destination via migration. Novel emphasized that how time and climate are main forces behind the trauma of migration. This is called migration through time. *Exit West* (2017) advocates for the human rights and masses seeking refuge from the ecological destruction and trauma of war. Novel concludes with a maxim “we are all migrants through time”. Hamid puts that migration is an inescapable reality, and stasis is death, a place with no time.

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