



AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF SHADAB ZEEST HASHMI'S KOHL AND CHALK

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze the poetry collection of the Pakistani American poet Shadab Zeest Hashmi, entitled as *Kohl and Chalk*, through the lens of ecocriticism, in order to highlight postmodern ecological and socio-cultural anxiety. This environmental perplexity has been incorporated through various historical, geographical, and diasporic concerns which are thematically highlighted in her poems. The roots of this ecological quest can be traced in a number of factors – technological advancements, globalization, cross-cultural migrations, and territorial disputes. The primary objective of this paper is to highlight the association of culture and environment; the secondary objective is to reveal postmodern ecological concerns in the text. Ecocriticism, as a framework, is employed by discussing the ideas of critics such as Jelica Tomic, Thomas K. Dean, and Nancy Cook. A decipherment of ecological elements in her poetry will reveal how postmodern literature unearths the environmental angst rising from the detachment with nature, and increased indulgence in technological expansion, where poetry serves as a reclamation of the relationship of mankind and nature.

Keywords

Ecology, Culture, Nature, Geography



1. Introduction

Hashmi's poetry to unearth her postmodern ecological angst. It highlights how the poet reclaims her feminine and existential identity through establishing a connection with nature in various ways. This paper employs the theories of

This paper aims to explore various ecocritics to explore the significance of culture, landscape, place and space and their association with environment, as well as to study how the poet deals with the dilemma of environmental deterioration in a postmodern

world. Shadab Zeest Hashmi is a contemporary Pakistani-American poet. Originally written in English, her poetry has been translated into Spanish and Urdu as it is largely based on the historical and cultural concerns of Muslim civilization. She has experimented employing the structure and style of Urdu ghazal into English poetry which marks her distinguished poetic style, as one of her reviewers states: “Shadab Zeest Hashmi, (2010) in *Baker of Tarifa* revealed a bold and original voice with an ability to meld cultures and poetic forms with great skill. “Shadab Zeest Hashmi, (2013) in *Kohl and Chalk*, she takes this further with her accomplished ghazals – a poetic form central to Urdu literature and song” (Shamsie, 2014).

Her poems include the themes of feminism, history, peace, and perspectives on Islam which can be regarded as significant postmodern concerns (Alcosser, 2014). Critics and reviewers consider her poems to be “able to move from the domestic and the sensual to the political” (Steinman, 2014). This highlights that her poetry involves personal or individual concerns such as feminism, as well as social and political concerns such as peace and environmentalism.

1.1 Significance of Study

Published in 2013, *Kohl and Chalk* has not been largely explored by various critics. The recurrent concerns of the book are peace and humanity which have been highlighted by a few reviewers. However, the book has not been analyzed through the lens of contemporary environmental issues applying ecocriticism which is a postmodern terminology. By exploring Hashmi’s

ecological concerns, this research fills a gap in contemporary Pakistani literature created by the lack of environmental discourse. It offers room for further research on atmospheric issues in South Asian studies.

1.2 Research Questions

This paper answers the following research questions:

How does Hashmi’s poetry highlight her ecological angst? What is her take on the human detachment with nature in postmodern times?

1.3 Methodology

This research is a content based analysis of Hashmi’s *Kohl and Chalk*. It is an exploratory kind of a research involving qualitative study of her poems and applying various concepts of ecocriticism. The theories of ecocritics such as Jelica Tosic, Nancy Cook, and Thomas K. Dean are employed as secondary tool for this research. The research involves the exploration and analysis of various relevant and recurrent symbols, images, metaphors, literary devices, and themes in Hashmi’s poems which refer to historical and cultural concerns relevant to the study of environment. The research follows an inductive patterns revealing how Hashmi’s ecological concerns symbolically represent the angst of a postmodern individual towards his or her socio-political circumstances. By specifically focusing on linguistic structure of her poems, the research studies Hashmi’s poetry thematically and stylistically. The limitations that the research encounters include limited access to relevant scholarly articles, unreliability of online sources, and lack of criticism available on South Asian

literature. However, this lacuna is filled by exploring Hashmi's poetry in the light of a postmodern framework to reveal the contemporary concerns prominent in the works of South Asian writers.

2. Literature Review

The framework used for this research is Ecocriticism. Jelica Tomic's interdisciplinary study of literature and environment has been primarily employed as the lens through which Hashmi's poetry is analyzed. Ecocriticism can be defined as a field of study "concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature" (Tomic, 2006).

One aspect of ecocriticism deals with culture being a part of the larger ecological system as an ecocritic, Thomas K. Dean, holds the view that it is a "study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.) that is in some way connected with the human relationship to the natural world" (Dean, 1994). Identical to this philosophy is Hashmi's poetry which not only contains cultural references associated with the natural environment but in itself is a cultural product.

Similarly, ecocriticism is concerned with how the geography of a region influences the state of being of its inhabitants. The cultural practices, states Tomic, emblemize the "cultural geography of a region" showing that "the 'where' influences the 'is' in the spiritual way" (Tomic, 2006). Hashmi also highlights how the

existence of the individuals of a certain geography is shaped by their environment.

One significant aspect of geography is landscape which this research studies. Ecocriticism is "most appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, character(s) and place" (Scheese, 1994). The landscape, in the form of flora and fauna as well as geophysical features such as rivers, plains, and mountains, is a primary concern of Hashmi's poems which displays the poet's connection with her land.

The connection between an individual and place is strongly linked with the idea of 'placement' explored by a critic Nancy Cook. For Cook, ecocriticism deals with "how we place ourselves in the world and the biological, social, and political ways in which we define where we are" (Cook, 1994). Hashmi, in her poems, also brings forth how place and space trigger the environmental association of an individual in the form of socio-political factors acting upon his existence. Based on the philosophical ideas of the above mentioned critics, this research traces various aspect of ecocriticism in Hashmi's poetry.

3. Analysis

The Pakistani-American poet Shadab Zeest Hashmi is famous for incorporating the patterns of Urdu ghazal in English poetry, thus amalgamating the native tradition with foreign writing style. Similar is the case with the themes

she highlights which are a blend of local and international issues; environment, culture, and landscape are the prominent few among them. Her poetry bridges the space between the poet and her environment which is referred to through various ecological, geophysical, regional, and cultural references. Her poems also reflect the struggle of a postmodern individual to achieve solace through establishing a link with her ecology in the midst of the chaos of a technology-ridden world. Since ecocriticism is “concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature” (Tosic, 2006), this paper unearths how Hashmi's poetry becomes emblematic of her relationship with the surrounding ambience, and its tangible as well as abstract aspects.

3.1 Nature and the Female Self

The foremost thing that a reader encounters in *Kohl and Chalk* is the title of the book which is quite significant when observed through the lens of ecocriticism. Kohl and Chalk, being achieved from antimony sulphide and calcium carbonate respectively, immediately make the reader bring natural elements into consideration highlighting an eco-centered approach. For Hashmi, kohl is “to see the moon lucid, to let place/ Dream you up” (Hshmi, 2013). Kohl, which is employed as a natural product for the enhancement of sight and beauty, is discussed as a means to strengthen the poet's relationship with nature and the larger cosmos through moon as a celestial body. Moon symbolizes beauty, tranquility, and a distant yet

idealized space; however, the desire to behold it lucid represents the urge to connect to that serenity and beauty which it contains, through the sense of sight. Establishing this link is essential for being ‘placed’ within the larger cosmological space, and consequently, for being dreamed up by place, which refers to the process of deriving identity from the ambience of that certain place.

In a similar fashion, chalk becomes a metaphor “to map that dream,/ To draw cross hatched lanterns/” (Hashmi, 2013). This ecological cartography is triggered by chalk working as a catalyst for carving a space for the poet, authenticating her ecological existence like kohl. It also suggests the idea of chalk being commonly associated with writing and drawing on a dark surface, an element that can metaphorically chart her dream of placement while being in an era in which spatial and geographical displacement have become serious dilemmas, and to draw lanterns. Lantern, being a source of light, symbolizes enlightenment and knowledge – an image that goes in accordance with chalk for its educational uses. Apart from giving existential identity to the poet, both kohl and chalk refer to her feminine association with nature; kohl being a product for beauty, and chalk being a medium to transmit knowledge in educational institutions. Feminine nature is similarly considered to be responsible for transmitting the cultural values to the younger generation in family – a social institution.

3.2 The Association of Environment and Culture

The cultural values of a social setup become an important fragment of the overall ecological setting, which influence the human society and its various aspects. Hence culture, for ecocritics, becomes a significant ecological concern as they define ecocriticism to be “a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.) that is in some way connected with the human relationship to the natural world” (Dean, 1994). This natural essence of her native land is highlighted by Hashmi in her poetry through various images. Culture, in her poems, becomes a means to establish a connection with her ecological ambience. One instance of this is “Cardamom Eyes” (Hashmi, 2013) – the title of the first portion of her collection. Cardamom is linked to the cultural and gustatory practices of Hashmi’s native land Pakistan since Arab, Middle Eastern, and South Asian countries are by far the largest consumers of the spice (The Ceylon Trade Journal, 1968). The reference to cardamom offers an insight into the traditional tastes of these countries in which the spice is used in various dishes. The connection between cardamom and eyes is established not only on the basis of the similarity of shape, but also by making the phrase a metaphor for the local culture since eyes are considered as a mirror to the soul whereas the cultural practices of a land are a mirror to the ecological setup of that landscape. Entitled as “Cardamom Eyes”, this portion contains poems on traditional notions and practices related to marriage, motherhood, and relations, highlighting a social arrangement through personal descriptions.

The first poem of this portion, “Wedding Ghazal”, contains a cultural idiom as she writes: “They said, ‘a fistful of rice!’ Instead, I threw a glance/ over my shoulder at the tin copper mist, at my city diluting” (Hashmi, 2013). The embedded reference to the tradition of throwing a fistful of rice, which is common in many Asian and European cultures, refers to a practice according to which the bride, before departure, takes fistfuls of rice and throws them over her head during the wedding. Rice, being an image for vegetation, is meant to bring productivity, fertility, and luck, referring to nature, culture, and their interrelationship. However, throwing a glance at her ‘diluting’ city symbolizes the custom of leaving her parents’ home when a girl gets wedded. Analyzed through this stance, the poem makes a circular connection between these references of tradition and ecology: marriage, extension of life, fecundity, and the cycle of life. Similar eco-cultural patterns woven into her poems can also be traced through the mention of “wet henna on one hand” in “Poem for a Wedding Feast” (Hashmi, 2013), and “as your groom sees your henna diluting” in “Wedding Ghazal”. Painting hands with henna, just like throwing fistfuls of rice, contains traditional significance being a cultural practice in many Asian countries since Asia is the largest producer and consumer of henna leaves (New World Encyclopedia, 2018), and thereby, also appears as natural flora. This reference points to the natural ecology of countries like Pakistan which shapes the native culture of that land. Having “wet henna on one hand” when the other hand is

“wedded to a seashell pen” (Hashmi, 2013), the poet brings forth her traditional feminine role in the society. She highlights two personas of her personality: on the one hand, she is a bride, fulfilling the traditional values of the society; while on the other hand, she is a poet who is composing a poem on her wedding feast, thus satiating her intellectual and spiritual cravings. Likewise, the ‘diluting’ henna becomes a symbol for the end of the wedding festivities for which the bride’s hands are painted, and the start of a new practical life. Henna, being a natural flora, becomes a bridge between her culture and poetry.

Filial relations and peculiar customs related to them also become a theme in some of Hashmi’s poems. One such poem is entitled as “Taste-buds Bloom on Silence”. The poem opens with the following stanza:

Dark Honey
For the newly born
Silvery cakes for the bride
For the groom
Rose pistachio milk
Rice pudding
For when we gather. (Hashmi, 2013)

These seven lines display the local traditions of the Subcontinent related to three events: childbirth, marriage, and familial gatherings; and highlight ritualistic use of natural or dairy-made food. For instance, the newborn is made to lick a few drops of honey as a tradition; the bride is usually offered small square shaped sweets made with milk and decorated with silver leaf; the groom is presented with pistachio milk

in an ornamented cup; and rice pudding – a sweet dish common in the Subcontinent – is prepared for the guests, at weddings in particular, and other occasions in general, symbolizing merrymaking. Similarly Hashmi’s poems are marked by references to traditional foods like “pulao”, “haleeb” and “mango achar” (Hashmi, 2013). These practices emblemize the “cultural geography of a region” showing that “the ‘where’ influences the ‘is’ in the spiritual way” (Tosic, 2006). Thereby, in an abstract manner, the environmental patterns of a certain geographical location affect its inhabitants. For instance, the age-old trends in a culture become trans-generational practices which possess the ability to retain themselves through temporal transitions. This reveals that ‘place’, which has become an important postmodern concern, affects the state of ‘being’ of an individual.

3.3 The Significance of ‘Place’ in Environment

The concept of place becomes quite significant in Hashmi’s poems with regard to environment because “Ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, character(s) and place” (Scheese, 1994). In Hashmi’s various poems, landscape appears as an important entity through the picture that she paints of different cities of Pakistan. In her poem “Swat”, she writes: “Riddles of lodges, springs, *paan-cigarette* cabins,/ *tire shops*,/ *chinar* trees circled by the musk of kerosene” (Hashmi,

2013). The imagery highlights the quintessential spirit of the city through visual and olfactory images, consisting of huts, tiny shops for cigarette or snacks, and chinar trees alongside the road. Though the poet displays fascination with the landscape by describing her desire to climb the “ladder to the moon” and “[eat] the coconut-white river” (Hashmi, 2013), the image of the land is not entirely romanticized. The reference to kerosene oil and tire shops, being a hint to modern and mechanized lifestyle, brings an element of artificiality and coarseness in the overall idyllically natural backdrop. The poet’s relationship with the landscape is further personalized when she realizes that she is “summoned/ to shoulder/ this place like a pallbearer” (Hashmi, 2013). This expression attaches an element of lament not only for the lost beauty of the land in the wake of surgical strikes or natural disasters but also due to humans’ indifference towards the trauma that a land like Swat bears. By being a pallbearer for the landscape, the poet takes up the responsibility to bear and nourish the memories of this place.

The concept of place is also incorporated through geographical and political references in her poems. Place and cartography, as mentioned above, are important ecocritical concepts as they give rise to the idea of “how we place ourselves in the world and the biological, social, and political ways in which we define where we are” (Cook, 1994). The idea of border, and belonging to a historically important geographical space on the world map can be traced in “Coloring the

Border” in which she writes: “While the black curve of Tor Khum,/ a trail of loss,/ sang in war-tongues” (Hsahmi, 2013). The reference to Pak-Afghan border is not just meant to display a specific place for Pakistan on the map, but also to indicate a whole narrative of the war fought over a number of years between the US military forces and the native militant groups. As a consequence, some of the affected population started coming to Pakistan as refugees in 1979 (Ashraf, 1988) about which she writes: “It was 1979,/ history looping/ like a bomb circuit” (Hashmi, 2013). Likewise she records the trauma of the Afghan refugees in “Wedding Ghazal”: “My dowry was a silk cap with geometrically broken hearts,/ sewn by Afghan refugees; in art’s labor, their grief diluting” (Hashmi, 2013). Such geopolitical and historical matters incorporated in her poems hint at environmental issues taking place as a consequence, for instance migration which affects population, the dynamics of vegetation, production and consumption, and disrupts the natural socio-ecological order of a region.

With regard to regional geography, the American professor of environmental history Donald Worster states that “region derives its identity primarily from its ecologically adapted modes of production” (Cook, 1994). Such regional identity appears as a theme in Hashmi’s poem “Passing through Peshawar” in which the city derives its peculiar identity through its various ecological aspects: the crops that the land produces, the flora and fauna, the traditional architecture, and the tiny insignificant acts of everyday life. The

poem paints a picture of “poplar” and “willow” of the town, and the “belligerent crows” (Hashmi, 2013) sitting on telephone wires. The local spirit has been captured through the mention of the “breaking open of a walnut in a door-hinge” (Hashmi, 2013) referring to walnut being one of the most popular and preferred dry fruits in North Pakistan. The “plum sold in crates on the roadside” and the “radio at the *tandoor* playing/ *filmi* songs, the whiff of Lux soap” (Hashmi, 2013) all combine to indicate that the local ambience of the town has a timeless quality brought through its traditional and ecological environment. The description of the socio-ecological setup has been given through various sensory images; olfactory, through the reference of Lux soap; auditory, through the “squeaking of a rusted seesaw” (Hashmi, 2013); and tactile, through the “winter sun warming the mosque’s marble” (Hashmi, 2013). Another mentionable aspect of this poem is the juxtaposition of the natural environment and the artificial world of technology in the last line of the poem where after describing the typical ethos of the town she writes: “the bus will pass/ all these things/ before you click pause on your video game” (Hashmi, 2013). The particular note on which the poem ends makes an appeal to the reader to keenly observe and reestablish that link with nature which the modern man has long lost due to technological advancement resulting in human indifference towards environmental deterioration.

3.4 Ecological Deterioration

From this subtle reference to human detachment from nature, Hashmi’s poetic concerns move forward to more explicit references of environmental deterioration such as deforestation. In her poem “Ghazal” she writes: “There was so much wood to collect, so we cut down the oak, the teak,/ the olive” (Hashmi, 2013), and “Who hung the garlands, snatched the rose from the lark’s side?” (Hashmi, 2013). The grotesque reality highlighted here comments on the role that humans play in triggering the decline of natural resources: forests are being cut not only to collect wood but also to make room for construction for urban sprawling as a consequence of huge population migrating from rural to urban localities. The second quote from the poem also symbolizes the ironic practice of destroying nature and prioritizing personal ornamentation, and thus attaches an element of artificiality to modern lifestyle.

Another important atmospheric concern related to deforestation is global warming. It has been reported in 2013 that “Pakistan faces the highest deforestation rate of Asia, at 2.1 percent” (Triana, 2013) which becomes one of the major causes of temperature rise in the country. An online report entitled as “Pakistan is Ground Zero for Global Warming Consequences” generated by *USA Today*, states that Pakistan is “the nation facing ever-rising temperature [being] among 10 countries affected most by climate change according to the 2018 Global Climate Risk Index released by the public policy group Germanwatch” (Salam, 2018). Such degradation of environment, affecting major

biological and social aspects of life, becomes a dilemma for the postmodern writers. Therefore, depicting the state of one of the cities of Pakistan, Hashmi writes in “The Road”:

It’s over fifty degrees Celsius
Which means death
For the sherbet vendor
Who can no longer afford to buy
Or keep ice. (Hashmi, 2013)

The atmosphere that the poet brings before the readers through such description is not glorified like that in the rest of her poems; rather the climatic conditions are portrayed as severe. The subtly underlying irony in these lines tells the tale of man’s own endeavors to modernize himself which have made him destroy the natural resources which keep the environment rich and healthy, and suffer the hideous repercussions of his own acts. Moreover, analyzed through a political viewpoint, the stanza highlights the dilemma of the lower class of society who are directly affected by climatic changes whereas the bourgeois mostly remain indifferent because the heat bothers the “sherbet vendor” and “the laborer/ working the day shift” (Hashmi, 2013), but the “MNA won’t see this/ through her Ferragamo sunglasses/ and tinted windows” (Hashmi, 2013). This dichotomy, apart from highlighting political and atmospheric problems, also makes a sarcastic comment on the social setup of the society, thereby proving her poetry as an eco-centered text.

4. Conclusion

This research paper highlights that Hashmi provides a complete narrative of the eco-cultural history of the Subcontinent through her poetry. Through this representation, her poetry highlights the need for a connection with environment in the midst of the chaos of a postmodern materialistic and technology-ridden world where human detachment with nature is a significant subject for literary discourse.

Hashmi’s poetry proves to be a strong foothold for ecocritical analysis because her several poems appear as eco-centered texts. Her poetry establishes a sound relationship with nature, land, and landscape which symbolizes the reclamation of the identity that an individual derives from his/her native environment. However, this connection is not essentially developed through romanticizing or glorifying nature; it is also strengthened by sharing the grief of an environmentally deteriorating land. Her poetry equally celebrates the beauty of nature as well as mourns human indifference towards its vulnerability and gradual degradation. This ecological angst rising from the detachment from nature appears as an important postmodern concern in literature. Thereby, this research paves the way for further analysis of human association with environment through various aspects of Ecocriticism.

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