

FROM SACRED RIVER TO SILENT MEMORY: CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT IN TARAR'S *SORROWS OF SARASVATI: THE LOST RIVER*

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Abstract

This research explores the ecological study of Tarar's Sorrows of Sarasvati: The Lost River, applying Lawrence Buell's theoretical framework to analyze the novel's depiction of environmental and cultural loss by using qualitative content analysis. Using Buell's concepts of ecological degradation and cultural identity, the study examines how the novel portrays the river's disappearance as a profound environmental and cultural trauma. By implementing Buell's theoretical constructs into the analysis, the research contributes to the field of ecocriticism and environmental humanities, highlighting how literature can address and reflect ecological crises and cultural identities. By using a qualitative content analysis approach, this study aims to offer new insights into the ways literature can nurture ecological awareness and ethical considerations, emphasizing the relevance of narrative in understanding and responding to environmental and cultural challenges.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, cultural trauma, ethical question, cultural displacement, toxic discourse, environmental degradation

Introduction

The proposed study seeks to analyze *Sorrows of Sarasvati: The Lost River* using Lawrence Buell's ecocritical theory to understand the way the text engages with environmental themes and constructs a narrative that reflects ecological consciousness and cultural loss. Buell's concept of the environmental imagination, as outlined in his seminal work *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), emphasizes the role of literature in shaping public perception of environmental issues and promoting an ethical engagement with nature. The research framework is particularly relevant for examining the selected novel, which presents the river not only as a natural entity but as a vital part of cultural and spiritual identity. By employing Buell's ecocritical lens, this research explores how the novel portrays the Sarasvati river's disappearance as a form of ecological trauma, raising questions about the intersection of environment and identity.

Sorrows of Sarasvati: The Lost River is a translated version of Mustansar Hussain Tarrar's *Bahao* by Dr. Safeer Awan and Dr. Saleem Anwar Khan. The text captures the profound cultural and environmental significance of the Sarasvati River, a river that is both mythic and historic in its presence and absence in South Asian geography and consciousness. The narrative weaves together themes of environmental degradation, cultural memory, and spiritual connection between humans and nature. These elements make the text enriched for ecocritical exploration, especially through the lens of Lawrence Buell's theoretical framework. Tarar has defined a dying river as a living narrative. The novel's plot revolves around an unnamed village on the bank of the Ghaghara. This village is situated away from the main streams of city centers like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, further elaborating on the dying culture of society along with the Sarasvati river. This research provides a detailed understanding of *Sorrows of Sarasvati: The Lost River* as an environmental text. It also demonstrates how the novel uses the motif of a lost river to address broader concerns about ecological degradation, cultural memory, and identity. In doing so, the study contributes to ecocriticism and environmental humanities by highlighting the role of literature in reflecting and shaping ecological consciousness. The research also argues that narratives like *Sorrows of Sarasvati* serve as important cultural artifacts that not only document environmental and cultural losses but also invite readers to

reimagine their relationship with the natural world and rethink the ethics of environmental stewardship.

This introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive analysis of *Sorrows of Sarasvati*, situating it within the broader discourse of ecocriticism and environmental philosophy. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of ecocritical scholarship, emphasizing the role of literature in fostering ecological awareness and inspiring action towards environmental conservation.

Aim

The aim of this study is to critically analyze *Sorrows of Sarasvati: The Lost River* through Buell's ecocritical framework to explore environmental degradation and cultural displacement.

Research Objectives

- To portray the transformation of the Sarasvati river from a sacred symbol of cultural identity to a silent emblem of ecological loss.
- To portray the environmental loss and cultural displacement reflected in Tarar's portrayal of environmental loss in *Sorrows of Sarasvati*.

Research Questions

1. How does Tarar's *Sorrows of Sarasvati* portray the transformation of the Sarasvati river from a sacred symbol of cultural identity to a silent emblem of ecological loss?
2. How are environmental loss and cultural displacement reflected in Tarar's portrayal of environmental loss in *Sorrows of Sarasvati*?

Significance of Research

The novel *Sorrows of Sarasvati* reflects on environmental and cultural challenges and calls for reimagining and reconsidering human-nature relationships. Furthermore, the research focuses on the South Asian context to broaden the scope of ecocritical analysis, offering valuable insights into how literary representations of nature and culture intersect and influence contemporary environmental and cultural debates.

Research Methodology

This section explores the research methodology adopted for analyzing ecological degradation and cultural displacement in Mustansar Hussain Tarar's *Sorrows of Sarasvati: The Lost River* through Lawrence Buell's ecocritical framework. The study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing literary analysis as the primary method for interpreting environmental themes in the novel. The novel *Sorrows of Sarasvati: The Lost River* serves as the primary data for this research. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, books, and research papers on ecocriticism and Buell's theories. Peer-reviewed journal articles and critical essays on Mustansar Hussain Tarar's works are also utilized to support the analysis.

This research adheres to ethical guidelines in literary studies by ensuring that all sources are properly cited and credited. Interpretations of the text remain objective, avoiding misrepresentation or personal bias. Furthermore, it does not involve human subjects, issues related to consent and privacy do not apply. While this research provides an in-depth ecocritical analysis of the novel, it has certain limitations.

Literature Review

The field of ecocriticism has expanded significantly since its emergence in the late 20th century, providing new ways to analyze literature through the lens of environmental consciousness. According to academics like Harold Fromm and Cheryl Glotfelty, ecocriticism is the study of the connections between literature and the natural world, with a focus on the works that address ecological issues and human interaction with the natural world. One of the most important people in this discipline, Lawrence Buell, has made significant contributions to its advancement by laying the theoretical frameworks that emphasize the ways literature shapes environmental consciousness. His groundbreaking book *The Environmental*



Imagination (1995) established fundamental ideas essential for text analysis, including cultural displacement and reading ethics.

Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination (1995)* marks a pivotal moment in ecocriticism. In this work, Buell argues for the capacity of literature to influence environmental perception and cultivate a deeper awareness of ecological issues. His concept of the environmental imagination emphasizes the role of narrative in framing human-nature relationships and constructing ethical considerations for environmental care. Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination (1995)* represents a key role in the development of ecocriticism, which highlights a new understanding of literature and its connection with environmental concerns. The literature does provide a means of understanding for human beings and cultures regarding the natural world, and therefore must not only inspire reflections about the human flourishing outside of urban areas, but also the reimagination of the human/nature relationship through the recollection of narrative and a moral sensibility. Suggesting well-known life writing texts such as Thoreau's *Walden* and Carson's *Silent Spring*, Buell points out that literature, in its storytelling form, can deconstruct anthropocentrism by viewing human beings as the central and most significant components of nature, and promote ecocentric ideas, which acknowledge the inherent significance of nonhuman life (Buell 1995). Therefore, the *Environmental Imagination* continues to be an important category of ecocritical thought as it provides substantial opportunities for engaging with the ethical, the emotional, and the rhetorical in environmental representation. Thus, this literature review explores the theoretical and contextual foundations of the research on *Sorrows of Sarasvati: A Lost River* through the lens of ecocriticism, with Lawrence Buell as the primary theorist. It examines existing scholarship on ecocriticism, Buell's contributions, environmental and cultural narratives in South Asian Literature, and the broader intersections of environmental humanities and postcolonial studies.

The Sarasvati River holds a unique place in Indian cultural memory and mythology, functioning as both a sacred entity and a symbol of lost heritage. William Cronon's essay *A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative (1992)* highlights how stories shape our understanding of environmental change. Applying this concept, the novel's narrative can be analyzed as a cultural memory that combines environmental history with mythological storytelling. As such, the dual identities of significance and sacrality extend beyond their role in myth and memory and constitute a legacy of history, expression, and spirituality that resonates across generations. Environmental change is unavoidable from stories because stories help grasp the meaning of environmental processes by contextually linking culture, nature, and history into a cohesive narrative. By linking themes from Cronon's essay to this novel, we can view the narrative more or less as a form of cultural memory that links environmental history to mythological storytelling in order to preserve and interpret the legacy of the Sarasvati River. This narrative approach allows a reader to not only view the flash flood in the last chapter as a river with topographical features, but also that the river is a living symbol of a living memory resonant in people's consciousness and identity. David Haberman's *River of Love in an Age of Pollution (2006)* explores the sacred rivers of India, focusing on the tension between reverence for rivers and their degradation. This work provides a framework for understanding that Sarasvati's disappearance symbolizes broader ecological and spiritual crises, linking the novel's environmental themes to cultural memory. In this way, the ecological themes of the novel become closely associated to cultural memory in a way that suggests that the disappearance of our rivers represents not just the physical damage to our environment, but a deeper and more aggravated rupture trauma to our spiritual and cultural identities. The ecological health and cultural health are closely linked, and the decline of the river can be interpreted as a disruption of the relationship between people and their environment. Jenny

Price's critique of nature nostalgia in environmental narratives warns against romanticizing the past while ignoring present ecological realities. This critique can be applied to examine how Sorrows of Sarasvati navigates the tension between mythological reverence for the river and the contemporary ecological consequences of its loss. Price argues that viewing a past experience favorably in terms of the natural world can detract from urgency in addressing environmental issues and ultimately lessen the efficacy of addressing current problems. Using Price's critique to unpack the text of Sorrows of Sarasvati, it recounts the tension in perceiving the environmental nostalgia in the storytelling around the river's ecological calamity. The text resists a simple nostalgia by addressing both the cultural importance of the river and the real impacts associated with its loss in contemporary environmental and ecological degradation. This measured consideration opens up our engagement with the past and the present as both something accessible and ultimately fleeting. Through an invocation of previous experience of the river, the text hopes to remind us as a collective ecological community that it is possible to acknowledge ecological loss and not retreat into an idealized memory of a lost place. Environmental consciousness can be further developed through sympathetic language that adds depth, but still allows us to move to agency and action.

The concept of place is central to the novel's depiction of the Sarasvati River and its surrounding landscapes. Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977) discusses the emotional and cultural significance of places, providing a framework for analyzing the novel's portrayal of the river as a site of collective memory and identity. Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (1976) examines the impacts of modernization and environmental degradation on the sense of place. Relph's ideas can be used to explore how the novel critiques the loss of cultural and ecological identity associated with the Sarasvati's disappearance.

The novel's themes of ecological and cultural loss resonate with global environmental challenges. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) critiques the failure of contemporary literature to adequately address climate change. Ghosh's insights provide a framework for situating Sorrows of Sarasvati within global discourses on environmental crises. Ghosh suggests that the lack of literature that engages meaningfully and critically with the realities of climate change is in some way representative of a broader unwillingness to contemplate the complexities of global environmental crises. His ideas offer an important lens to situate Sorrows of Sarasvati within global conversations about ecological degradation and cultural loss, and show that this novel can contribute to literary engagement with the urgent environmental crisis. It depicts the urgency as aligned with environmental disruption as cultural memory. In writing about environmental priorities, the novel is in keeping with Ghosh's insistence on narratives that engage with the unthinkable consequences of climate change and ecological collapse. Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) explores the possibilities of resilience and coexistence in degraded environments. Tsing's concept of contaminated diversity can be applied to analyze that the novel portrays the interplay of destruction and resilience in the cultural and ecological landscapes associated with the Sarasvati River. The concept of contaminated diversity recognizes the complicated and often random patterns that life can take to survive or adapt in contexts of ecological damage and human impact. This concept provides a framework for examining Sorrows of Sarasvati to explore the dynamic relationship between destruction and resilience in cultural and ecological contexts related to the Sarasvati River. The loss conveyed in the narrative is not merely devastation but survival and change, as evident from Tsing's focus on the potential to coexist in the Anthropocene. The two frameworks also contribute to the exploration of Sorrows of Sarasvati by connecting it to larger global environmental

conversations, reframing it as relational to two crises- ecological losses and the loss of cultural memory, and focusing on the entangled potential of loss, adaptation, and resilience.

Ecofeminist perspectives offer critical insights into the representation of the Sarasvati River as a feminine entity. Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) discusses how nature and women have historically been subordinated under patriarchal systems. This framework can be used to analyze the river's feminization in the novel and its implications for environmental and cultural degradation. Ariel Salleh's *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern* (1997) critiques capitalist and patriarchal structures, advocating for an ecofeminist praxis that integrates environmental and social justice. Salleh's approach is relevant for examining how the novel critiques the systemic exploitation of both natural and cultural resources. Shiva's ecofeminist work also highlights the connection between women and water in traditional Indian contexts, where rivers are often personified as maternal figures. This perspective can deepen the understanding of how Sarasvati's loss symbolizes both environmental and societal disconnection from nurturing principles.

By bringing together cultural identity and justice as part of environmental imagination, Buell's contribution represents a vital contribution to ecocriticism, recognizing the complicated nature and the need for literature in broader cultural spaces to be inclusive and socially conscious in its reading practice.

Research Gap

While existing scholarship has addressed ecological and cultural themes in South Asian literature, few studies have engaged with *Sorrows of Sarasvati* from interdisciplinary perspectives that integrate ecofeminism, posthumanism, and indigenous environmental ethics. Additionally, the application of non-Western theoretical frameworks to the novel remains underexplored, presenting opportunities for further research.

Analysis and Discussion

Sorrows of Sarasvati: The Lost River focuses on the exemplification of ecological degradation, cultural memory, and environmental ethics in the novel. This analysis utilizes Lawrence Buell's ecocriticism to show how the novel opposes human-induced destruction and reinvents the ways in which people and nature interact. Mustansar Hussain Tarar, a celebrated Pakistani writer, has long been known for his evocative storytelling, rich descriptions, and deep engagement with history, culture, and nature. His novel *Sorrows of Sarasvati: The Lost River*, originally written in Urdu, is one of his most profound works, reflecting on the historical and mythological significance of the Sarasvati river, a river that has been lost to time. The selected novel is a historical account and a deep philosophical exploration of civilization, loss, and memory. In this detailed analysis, the research explores the themes, historical context, narrative style, and the significance of the translation that brings Tarar's work to an international audience. At times, the river itself seems to speak, mourning its disappearance and reflecting on the civilizations it once nurtured. In Hindu tradition, Sarasvati is not only a river but also the goddess of wisdom, learning, and the arts (Awan, Khan 9-15). However, as geological and archaeological studies suggest, the river dried up thousands of years ago, possibly due to climatic changes and tectonic shifts.

A notable part of the novel is its representation of the Sarasvati river as both an ecological feature and a fragment of a collective memory. "There was a sand of sea under his wings, and he was still flying" (Tarrar 17) illustrates that the river's absence is felt through its lingering presence in myths, oral histories, and the quest for historical truth. For Buell, environmental imagination is the concept used to describe the role of nature in literature and social life (Buell 5). In reference to my research in environmental literature, he considers ecocriticism a particular literary field that strives for the attainment of environmentalist praxis, or practical



action. The insistence of the dialogue on the eternal and changing character of life resonates with Buell's insistence that environmental literature is not only about loss but also about seeking meaning, continuity, and hope in the cycles of nature (Buell 5). The sand of the sea connects directly to Buell's concern about landscapes fundamentally transformed beyond recognition. In my opinion, the transformation of the sea into sand is a representation of an ecological loss that is irrevocable (e.g., coastal erosion, aquifer depletion), as in the novel, with the disappearance of the Sarasvati River. The sand under the crow's wings is understood as evidence of ecological degradation. Buell suggests that degradation cannot simply be reduced to an abstract concept because it physically burdens life. The crow's struggle (but achievement) to keep going (still flying) resonates with Buell's notion of surviving and resisting against the environmental loss (Buell 2-3). For him, though in many ways, life lives on in degraded places. Although it cannot be determined why the sea has subsequently turned to sand, if anything, he would most likely identify this as a direct result of human behavior (e.g., overuse, climate change). The bird's endurance in silence while flying above the sea sand and dry winds starkly contrasts with the role humanity played in creating these landscapes. The sea was not always dry and barren.

The researcher says that the visual feature of lackness, the lack of trees, water and even life turns the physical geography into an emotional and ethical statement of ecological destruction. The environmental writing has such strength in attracting mourning, memory, and responsibility. This is precisely what Tarar does with his novel and, by means of transformation into narrative, invites readers not only to be the spectators, but mourners and those who contemplate the world's ecological and cultural fragile inheritances. "Holding the pestle with both hands, she lifted it above her head... It was too heavy for her. Thirst had sapped all her energy; and her legs shook under the burden of pestle..." (Tarar 380). The Pasrusni successfully lifting the pestle signifies her physical and cultural connection to the environment. The pestle is more than a tool here, and it symbolizes an entire process of traditional labor. This is labor where the body is directly engaged with the land and the local community. Despite extreme exhaustion and a powerful sensation of thirst, the Pasrusni continues to do not only this work, but also this part of the ritual that gives her life. The 73 Pasrusni's thirst and now physical weakness because of a lack of water (likely the drying river and barren land), denotes the declining condition of the environment. Worsening conditions in the environment point to the possible collapse of ways to sustain life, or abandon traditional ways of being, and leave a Pasrusni feeling vulnerable and weakened in the place attached to her. If the pestle feels too heavy and the legs appear to be shaking, it represents the alienating circumstance of sustaining life and culture at an increased level of difficulty as the environment declines. The Pasrusni's physical struggle captures the emotional and physical effects of losing or remapping the relationship to the place of attachment. The passage conveys feelings of anxiety in responding to impending alienation, as if the environment can no longer support her sense of place of attachment and belonging. This resonates with Buell's commentary on alienation and grief from environmental change and how this may dismantle the relationship to an entire human-place connection. This context exemplifies Buell's notion of place attachment by showing how the protagonist's physical labor (being sore from lifting the pestle) represents her bond to her environment and her culture. Her thirst and exhaustion illustrate an environment facing degradation and loss, where a threat to her bond exists. Carrying her weary body represents the burden of struggling to navigate identity, survive ecological loss, and retain cultural continuity. In the end, the passage illustrates the physical and emotional impact of lost place attachment (one of the primary concerns of Buell's environmental literary theory). Ecocentric imagination has foundations in place-affection. This attachment is what drives preservation, laments

destruction, and facilitates a more comprehensive accounting of environmental impoverishment (Buell 262).

“There was no dust but just pure burning sand under the soles. She turned to inspect the sky one more time. It was empty, oozing out such white heat that it looked like a lifeless expanse” (Tarar 378) from the novel uses intense sensory imagery to convey a woman's arduous journey across an oppressive, barren stretch of land. Burning sand and empty, heat-oozing sky symbolize harsh environmental conditions and emotional desolation. Her pause to look at the sky reflects a heartbreaking moment of searching for hope or direction in a world that seems lifeless and 72 unkind. An empty void of the sky and hard ground below the feet suggests a deep existential void. A universe devoid of any life and significance. Similar to the last scene, this scene also signifies environmental degradation; the land has become hard, uninhabitable, and no longer fertile. Parushni's sweat and weariness signify human fragility in the presence of nature's indifference. The passage elaborates on the moment of stillness, despair, and contemplation and signifies loss, endurance, and the search for significance and value in the void of barren memories. Overall, the scene holds powerful themes of struggle, isolation, and existential emptiness. It further explains Parushni's stubbornness to stay in the leave illustrates the Buell's place of attachment, her connection to her homeland, and her love for Ghaghara. Environmental writings tend to be elegiac - not to say elegiacal - they are written in the shadow of loss, under the melancholy of a world that is already passing away or has passed away (Buell 274).

Conclusion

Mustansar Hussain Tarar's *Sorrows of Saraswati: The Lost River* lucidly reveals, viewed through Lawrence Buell's ecocritically oriented approach, an intense assessment of the entangled crises of environmental degradation with cultural disintegration. Through placing the Sarasvati river, both as a tangible entity and a mythic-cultural referent, the novel critiques human exploitation and laments the death of a critical ecological and spiritual lifeline. Thus, the disappearance of the Sarasvati within the novel by Tarar stands as a double reading: physical consequence of ecological neglect: deforestation, unsustainable agriculture, and processing of water; and second, the erosion of the cultural memory and identity. Through Buell's theories, the study interrogates the Eurocentric bias of early ecocriticism and showcases the urgency to amplify marginalized voices as part of the environmental humanities. The mythic past and the desolate present of the Sarasvati River are typical postcolonial critiques, where ecological damage goes hand in hand with cultural loss. Besides, Safeer Awan's and Saleem Akhtar's translation of Bahao into English triggers a cross-cultural dialogue, shedding light on literature's role in shaping planetary ecological consciousness. The Sarasvati evolves in Buell's environmental imagination from just a backdrop to an actor diverting the reader's attention to views of the non-human other. In this manner, by humanizing the river and forcing a confrontation with the ethical questions tied to environmental destruction, the text pushes the debate beyond the theoretical realm and into the heart and gut of the reader. The analysis of this research with respect to Buell's theoretical comments acknowledges that it has limitations. In the future, researchers could read Tarar against other South Asian texts like Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* to trace regional patterns of ecological storytelling. To sum up, *Sorrows of Sarasvati: The Lost River* transcends its specific area to provide a universal parable of ecological and cultural survival. It ties together the ecocritical principles of Buell and indigenous environmental knowledge to argue for a shift in paradigm from exploitation to reciprocity, from nostalgia to activism.

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