

REPRESENTATION OF NATURE IN THINNER THAN SKIN: AN ECOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract:

This study is an Ecocriticism of Uzma Aslam Khan's novel "Thinner than Skin" (2012) carried through Cheryll Glotfelty's (1996) framework. This framework is used to explore nature, its uses, and its lasting effects on humans and their surroundings as depicted in this novel which is based on northern areas. The study is non-empirical, based on close reading of the novel. In close reading, four steps suggested by Patricia Kain (1988) are applied, and those four steps are: Initial reading stage, interpretive reading stage, critical reading stage, and writing stage. The researchers collected data by following these techniques. The study finds out that due to mesmerizing impact of the mountain ranges like Karakoram, Himalayas, and Hindukush visitors are attracted. By applying Glotfelty's concept it is found that apparently, they are just mountain ranges, but actually, they are giving countless advantages to the people and the environment. Due to these ranges, people are getting water, they are protected. The valleys and mountains are source of residents' food while the trees and herbs are used for different medical purposes. Hence, the whole life of northern residents depends on nature and natural resources. Therefore, the study emphasizes to value and respect the nature so that humans can live a more peaceful and comfortable life.

Key words: Environment, Karakoram, non-empirical, forests, medical treatment, resources

Introduction

The report of UNEP (2013), declares that Pakistan is blessed with a variety of ecological regions, such as the Karakoram, Himalayas, and Hindukush ranges. These rangelands are responsible for covering the bulk of the mountainous landmass and are deeply linked with humans as well. The protection of humans depends on these valleys, and these valleys present a beautiful view of the surroundings. The report also highlighted the significance of forests and their ecological benefits in northern regions. According to the report, forests are the best source for forest products and are useful from an ecological point of view. The report mentions that forests protect watersheds and maintain soil productivity. So, collectively, the ranges and forests are the breadbasket for the country. These ranges and forests are the natural products created by Almighty Allah for human beings. These different forms of nature are also sources of survival for humans and are the precious gift that adds more beauty to Pakistan's scenario and attracts people from all over the world. Humans use these natural resources for multiple purposes. Therefore, it is the responsibility of humans to utilize nature and its resources meticulously. Thus, the report brings forth the importance of nature and natural resources in our environment and their association with human life.

Keeping in view above discussed perspective, this study is conducted on Pakistani ecology, especially nature and its healing effect on human beings, which is the main concern in the modern time period. The researchers wanted to justify that human life without nature is futile, and its nature and its multiple forms, which make life comfortable and beneficent. In this regard, the researchers thought to look for Pakistani literary writers and their contributions to

environmental concerns in which they themselves are living. Therefore, looking from ecological perspective Uzma Aslam Khan remains the most renowned author of Pakistan for the depiction of ecological issues based on the Karakorum, the Himalayas, and the Hindukush ranges. She persistently discusses nature, the beauty of nature, and its multiple facets. She vehemently talks about the protection and safety of nature. Therefore, the researchers selected Khan and her work "Thinner than Skin" (2012) for the current study. The novel is analyzed through the theoretical framework of Ecocriticism propounded by Cheryll Glotfelty (1996).

Significance of the Study

There has been much research conducted on Ecocriticism and ecological issues. All those researchers either display ecological issues or depict their violation by humans. But in the current study, the positive sides of nature and its connection to human life and the surroundings are noted. This study shows nature as a living agent that performs a pivotal role in human life. Consequently, it can be said that the study is meaningful as Khan's this novel is analysed from a different perspective.

Theoretical Framework

Cheryll Glotfelty is an Assistant Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno. She is the one who revived Ecocriticism. Before, Glotfelty, Ruckert forwarded the concept of Ecocriticism in his essay entitled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978). This essay spread awareness regarding Ecocriticism and ecological issues under the study of literature. Later on, Cheryll Glotfelty defined the concept of Ecocriticism in her work "The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology" (1996). This work is the collection of twenty essays edited by Glotfelty. In this work, the introduction chapter "Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis," is written by Glotfelty. In this introductory chapter, Glotfelty talks about Ecocriticism in detail. She is very much worried about ecology and its concerning issues. She describes in her essay that there is a lack of research on ecological issues and stresses the need for research on these issues so that contemporary ecological issues can be resolved. For her, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. xviii). Physical environment refers to different elements of nature, such as air, trees, natural vegetation, lakes, oceans, mountains, valleys, garbage, and cities. Ecocriticism is the study of nature (Aesnath & Santhanalakshmi, 2021). Ecocriticism is a new approach to studying the relationship between humans and the natural environment (Farooq et al., 2022). Glotfelty (1996) conducts surveys of Ecocriticism and opines that reading nature writing is very important. She has the view that nature writing plays a vital role in teaching us to value the natural world in an increasingly urban society. Therefore, she considers nature as the main part of the environment; therefore, it has a deep connection to human life. She has the opinion that nature writing boasts a rich past, a vibrant present, and a promising future. She stresses the importance of reading Ecocriticism and nature and thinks that if students take literature and composition and are taught Ecocriticism as their subject in their course, then they will be more encouraged to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis (Glotfelty, 1996). Hence, she stresses the inclusion of Ecocriticism in the syllabus so that the knowledge about nature and its relation to humans can be spread widely. So it can be said in Ecocriticism that nature has a strong connection to the environment and with the present, past, and future of humans as well.

Glotfelty has mentioned a list of questions for the analysis of any ecocritical work, and those questions are: "how nature is represented in literature? Where is the natural world in this text? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy affected humankind's relationship to the natural world?"

(Goltfelty, 1996, p. xix). The current study has also taken a research question from the suggested questions of Goltfelty to analyze the selected work of Khan.

Research Question:

1. How is nature represented in “Thinner than Skin” (2012) by Uzma Aslam Khan?

Literature Review

Khan’s selected novel “Thinner than Skin”(2012) has been analysed from multiple perspectives. Some of the studies are also discussed here to see different ideas of the past studies and to rationalize the gap for the current study. Among those studies, the study of Sabir et al., (2024) analyzed the novel through close reading by applying the elements of Gothicism. The findings of the study discuss the tough lifestyle of the northern people and the problems that they are facing in their daily lives. These problems are termed Gothicism. While the study of Ahmed et al., (2024) applies a kaleidoscopic lens of Eco-culture and Eco-spatial as a theoretical framework. The study appreciates the culture of a particular region and its way of life. The scholars laid emphasis on promoting the discourse that is interconnected between culture and the environment. On the other hand, Nadeem et al., (2023) focus on the beauty of the northern area and also highlight issues of these people. In connection with this, the findings of Saleem et al., (2022) show reasons behind the issues that northern people are facing. The researchers found injustice in northern areas that results in social isolation and ecological imbalance, which hinder the prosperity of the living residents of the region. This study is based on the concept of Henri Lefebvre’s idea of “Production of Space” and eco-critical traits of Lawrence within the context of space and socio-environmental concerns. The study of Ahmed et al (2022) explores the voices of subaltern characters in the novel. The study is based on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of Can the Subaltern Speak?. The findings show that the marginalized cannot speak for their basic rights to life. There is another study of Wahab et al., (2021). This study completely challenges the traditional notion of society regarding Eastern women. The study compares Western and Third World women and disregards the concept that the women of Third World are submissive, living under the dominance of males, dependent, uncultured, and uncivilized. The findings clearly show Eastern women are fully aware of their rights, and they are spending their lives according to their own likes and dislikes. The results of the study of Mahmood et al., (2021) are based on textual analysis of the novel by adopting Kinder and Kam’s theoretical framework of “Ethnocentrism” to investigate the text. This research illustrates that the lives of Eastern people are shaped and controlled by Westerners. Eastern people are following the Western mindset, their culture, and their civilization. At the same time, Westerners are labelling Easterners with inferior, uncivilized, and barbarian titles. Contrary to this, the study of Ali (2020) perpetuates the idea that indigenous people have much knowledge, and these people are the source of knowledge for Western masses, but these Western masses are robbing real knowledge of indigenous people and are using it for their own benefits, and call themselves intellectuals. The study of Nazir & Abbasi (2020) shows two perspectives regarding the northern region. First perspective is based on Western intentions who think Pakistan is a haven for Terrorists and a war- torn country, while in the second perspective, the authors are appraising the natural beauty of mountains, valleys, steppes, and glaciers. All these past studies show there is not a single research study on Khan’s chosen work where Cheryll Goltfelty’s concept of Ecocriticism (1996), particularly in relation to nature, is applied. The current research presents nature, and its characteristics in the selected work of Khan in relation to the chosen theoretical framework.

Research Methodology

The current research is a non-empirical study based on the close reading of the selected novel. Non-empirical research is a text-based research (Morrow and Brown, 1994), while close

reading is an in-depth reading of the text (Burke, 2013). In close reading, the four steps suggested by Patricia Kain (1988) are applied to interpret the literary chosen text of Khan. Those four steps are: Initial reading stage, Interpretive reading stage, Critical reading stage, and Writing stage. In the initial reading stage, the researcher read the text of the novel to get an initial idea. According to Kain (1988), in the initial reading stage, the complete text is read to understand the main story. Similarly, the researcher read the novel “Thinner than Skin” (2012) initially, and after initial reading, she came to know that the novel presents two stories. The first story follows the long journey of Nadir (the protagonist) and Farhana, a Pakistani-born American, who travels across various northern regions of Pakistan for research purposes. On the other hand, the second narrative centers on a nomadic Gujjar family led by Maryam, along with her three children, Kiran, Jumnah, and Younis, her husband Suleiman, and her childhood love interest, Ghafoor. After initial reading, the researcher moved towards the second stage of the close reading, which is the interpretive reading stage. In this stage, a text is read again more carefully, and the reader annotates it (Kain, 1998). All of the important passages, sayings, and chunks are highlighted. The researcher makes notes during this stage (Mehmood, 2023). Therefore, by applying this technique, the current researcher made notes and wrote relevant ideas along the margins of the book. One colored marker, yellow, was used to highlight references related to nature and its various perspectives. This stage helped a lot in the data collection. After collecting data, I focused on the third step of close reading, which is the critical reading stage, where the annotated key words, passages, or phrases are examined in this stage (Kain, 1998). It is noted that there are significant connections, repetitions, and contradictions in a text. Saeed (2023) says that in the critical reading stage, repetition and similarities in the text are found, and readers critically annotate the work. Likewise, the researcher found many conflicts within the novel, and among those conflicts, the nature and its association are the most notable struggles. Critical reading stage assisted the researcher in deeply analyzing the text and finding out its multiple sides. By following the third stage of the close reading, the researcher reached the last stage of the close reading, which is the writing stage. In this stage, the reader is ready to write a conclusion of the reading based on the provided evidence of the text (Kain, 1998). The current researcher started writing her article once she compiled all of the information from the text. She critically analyzed the selected chunks, sayings, and quotations, and then she initiated the write-up of the article. She continuously used the text of the book during her write-up to observe and notice every suitable detail of the novel.

Findings and Discussion

After close analysis of novel and application of Glotfelty’s concept of Ecocriticism, it is found that nature is represented in three ways in Khan’s novel “Thinner than Skin” (2012). These three ways are:

1. Attractive Role of Nature.
2. Liveliness of Nature.
3. Nature: Source of Survival.

For Glotfelty (1996), nature is the combo of animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, and the body. For her nature in its multiple forms is a vital part of the environment that charms and attracts. This same attraction of nature is present in the novel “Thinner than Skin (2012). In this novel, nature is explained and appreciated in its diverse forms. Several mountainous ranges, glaciers, valleys, rivers, lakes, forests, trees, and animals are picturized to depict their beautiful role. In this connection, the study of Nazir & Abbasi (2020), supports the present study. Both of the researchers have a view that nature appeals to humans’ senses. That’s why humans regard natural beauty. It is witnessed through the sensual perceptions of Nadir, who is also attracted by nature, and he

appraises three beautiful valleys of Pakistan: Kagan Valley, Hunza Valley, and Rakaposhi. All these valleys are surrounded by forests of different trees and are responsible for adding more splendor. The Kagan valley is explained by Nadir in these words: “a lush alpine forest full of lush alpine forests! Trust me, when we leave here, you’re going to miss all the green. You won’t get that high up. And it does have glaciers. And it gives us more time together. You’ll love the cabin, you’ll see. It’s by the river, and we’ll have time for the lakes” (2012, p.32). Similar to Kagan valley, Hunza valley is also lovely. Nadir elaborates on this valley and highlights its distinctive features “along the valley’s waist rose an erect forest of poplar trees, somber witnesses to the misdemeanors of earth, sky, and ice. Across the valley floor sprawled terraced fields, all the way down to the Hunza River” (2012, p.274). Hunza valley is covered with the forest of poplar trees, and makes the adjacent area fascinating, while Rakaposhi has its unique attraction and is different from the other two valleys. Nadir wonderfully shares his views regarding Rakaposhi as “to my left rose the silver fin of Rakaposhi, bright as a mirror, graciously illustrating the truth of her name: luminous wall, some called her by an older name, Dumani, mother of mist. But she was free of clothing today.” (2012, p. 281-282) So, all these textual paragraphs about the three valleys show unparalleled features of natural beauty. In this modern world, where technology has bound humans, people are busy and do not have meaningful time for one another. During that time, humans need a short break for mental relaxation. Glotfelty also agrees and states “the modern estrangement from nature as the basis of our social and psychological ills (1996, p. xxi). Therefore, nature fascination enables people to be united and to live side by side to make long- lasting memories of life. The visits to the valleys bring freshness to human mood, add more colors to their lives, and make them alive. The heights and outlooks of the above- mentioned valleys are so charming that people enjoy seeing these heights without any fear. The gorgeous construction of the valleys makes them luminous and gentle. This attractive representation of nature compels humans to take a short pause from worldly affairs and enjoy the company of beautiful valleys, trees, mountains, and rivers. This is the reason that people around the world visit the northern areas of Pakistan just to take a break from their daily hectic routine and calm themselves mentally. Likewise, Tariq (2025), motivates taking a break from everyday life and exploring the relationship between humans and nature.

Khan has defined the liveliness of nature through the words of Ghafoor, who says, “everything alive is in movement, and everything that moves is alive. Wind and water, flowers and bees” (2012, p. 193). Water, wind, and flowers are alive because they move, act, react, and transform. This is verified by Nadir, who considers “I grew to love the language of glaciers. They galloped and groaned, cracked and crept. They were foul-mouthed. They were serene” (2012,p.97). Nature is full of all living characteristics; it feels, acts, and reacts according to the external environment. There is movement in flowers, water, wind, and bees, and it presents the view that they are active and flourishing. This movement is the sign of their liveliness. Likewise, glaciers groan, crack, creep, and become serene as well. It displays the liveliness of nature that acts and reacts like humans. Glaciers are sometimes serene, but in danger, they crack, groan, and creep. It means these natural things even detect hazards and react accordingly. They do not need human help, but naturally, they took a step by themselves.

The story of Nadir and Farhana shows that nature itself is not just alive, it also makes human beings feel alive. The lives of both of the characters are turned by nature. Nature is so vital and meaningful that it leads towards the correct destiny. Nadir was initially wondering the streets of America for finding his future. When he received disapproving remarks from Americans and faced humiliating questions as “why are you, Nadir Shaikh, wasting time taking photographs of American landscapes?” (2012, p. 13), he realized that his right place is his own country and his photography does not need any other coverage because his own country is full

of natural scenarios. Finally, Nadir returns to Pakistan and begins to capture the country's natural scenery through his camera. He closely observes Pakistani glaciers and mountains, and nature photography gives him charm; therefore, he makes it the purpose of his life. He preserves and protects nature and observes it minutely in his own country, Pakistan.

Nature is so powerful that even after passing many years of life without the company of nature, one still feels the attractive role of nature. Farhana lives in America, but is too eager to visit her motherland, Pakistan, to observe its natural beauty; therefore, she takes such a topic for the study which needs visit her homeland to witness its natural beauty. Her research topic "A comparative study of glaciers in northern Pakistan and northern California" (2003, p.60-61) opens the door to visit the mother country and its natural beauties. Farhana takes nature depiction as a meaningful part of her life. The study of Roy (1997), also favors the current research that nature, being a living force, influences human life.

Natural resources are the basic means of survival. Humans use these natural resources for their survival and develop a lively connection with nature. Human bodies are made up of water; they need air to breathe and need fertile land to produce nutritious food (Gallo, 2014). There are many forms of nature that humans enjoy and use for their benefit. People take benefits from nature in different forms, such as water, valleys, sun, glaciers, mountains, and trees. Khan has explained many uses of nature. Among them, the first usage is of the sun and water, both of which are used for farming. Nadir describes the scene when the farmer enjoys nature as "across the valley, a farmer was nurturing his field with water he'd probably help create. The sun was creeping off the glacier's lip and onto the dark gravel. He stopped to enjoy the light" (2012, p.209). It shows farmers' love to work and grow fields under the sunlight and with water. Both sunlight and water are natural resources of survival. So both sources are used by farmers for growing field.

The main usages of water by humans are discussed in depth by Khan. According to her, there are multiple roles of water in human life. Water in mountainous areas comes out of rivers, lakes, and glaciers. This water is extremely fresh, clean, pure, and cool. One of the main roles of water is irrigation in mountainous areas. People do irrigation by getting water from glacial melt. This water of glacial melt is transferred to different lands through irrigation channels as Nadir notes "for thousands of years people had survived, with varying degrees of success, by building irrigation channels from glacial melt" (p.161). Glaciers are melting, and residents of the area get water and use it for irrigation. Another attribute of water is narrated by Nadir through the past story of Mughal queen Noor Jehan, and tells readers about the healing power of river water "The Mughal Queen Noor Jehan paused on her way to Kashmir. She was suffering from an eye infection and decided to dip her hands in the water to wash her face. The water was so cool and pure that her eyes were cured. Ever since, the river has been called nain sukh, that which soothes the eye (2012, p.13-14). This indicates the importance of river water that attracts the passerby and removes their pains like Queen Noor Jehan. Water is the treatment agent that cures human diseases.

In addition to this, river water has the power to pull out the dirt and pollution of humans and purify them. Ghafoor in Kagan valley purifies himself and believes that water washes out pollution, dirt, and abolishes tiredness of humans (2012, p. 255). Thus, water, being a natural source, performs the duty of drinking; it is the source of irrigation, heals humans by escaping their diseases, washes out filth and dirt from human bodies, and purifies them.

Moreover, nature is used for the treatment of diseases. Maryam, a steppe woman, knows very well the better usage of natural things in mountainous areas. Therefore, she uses trees for the treatment of diseases. When Maryam is not feeling well, she uses leaves of the juniper tree for rest in the winter. Khan observes this and declares, "Her cheek was pale, her eyes dark as a cave. Of course she would pick her beloved juniper tree to rest on, the one whose leaves she

smoked, whose bark she burned, whose berries she roasted”(2012, p.267). The leaves of juniper tree are used for smoking, the bark for burning, and the berries are used as food. A Single tree is used for multiple purposes. Along with the juniper tree, the stem of a fern is used for a toothache. Maryam uses the stem of a fern for her daughter Kiran: “the slender stems of the Kakwa fern glistened jet and violet, glossy emerald fronds tossed as proudly as the filly tossed her mangled mane. In the past, when Kiran complained of a toothache, a malady she was prone to, Maryam had boiled those fronds and left the water to cool. Kiran would sip it later, her pain gradually subsiding” (2012, p. 299) while pistachio’s bark is used for the treatment of cough by Maryam “over the years, she had cured the cough of all her children with the tissues of pistachio bark” (2012, p.302). Hence, juniper, fern, and pistachio are utilized for remedies of different diseases. Nomads do not need doctors for their treatment. Nature is their nurse and doctor. Third, nature is also the source of food for humans and animals. Maryam gives the gift of pears, apricots, potatoes, and maize to newly arrived guests, Farhana, Nadir, Wes, and Irfan, as Nadir states, “a boy with brown curls strode towards us bearing gifts. Pears and apricots, potatoes and hot maize bread” (2012, p.73). It shows nomads’ hospitality and respect for outsiders. This example manifests the view that natural products are the happiness-creating factors among humans. Not only human relations are made strong with these natural products, but even healthy affiliation is created among humans and animals. Maryam has a resilient connection with animals. She brings a peach from the forest for her hungry goat Loi Tara and Namasha, mare, and they eat the fruit keenly “she went into the forest and brought back something more tempting than an egg from a sedentary farmer. A peach, covered in golden down with a blush of crimson. There was no hesitation. Loi Tara burrowed her sweet lips in Maryam’s palm. Namasha bucked her once. Loi Tara did not stop eating” (2012, p. 298).

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