

**ECO-TRAUMA IN AFGHAN AMERICAN LITERATURE: FROM WAR-TORN  
LANDSCAPES TO ECOLOGICAL GRIEF**

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**Abstract**

*This study attempts to explore the ecocritical concepts and ideas within the framework of trauma studies. The two emerging literary ideas are combined to analyse the traumatic experiences and detachment from nature. Nature is worshipped and acted as an epitome of allusion, imagination and attribution in the classical literature but now the nature or the changes in the nature echoes the mindset of the people. Afghanistan, a war torn country is the finest example for the devastated landscape and destructive society. The war, confusion and violence had affected the landscape and the mindscape of the people. This study focuses on eco trauma from literature point of view with the example of Hosseini and Qaderi selected works. It emphasizes the traumatic experiences of the people and exploited nature through the lens of memory, migration and emotional grief.*

**Key-words:** Ecotrauma, Afghan American, Emotional grief, Trauma

**Introduction**

The twenty-first century has witnessed an increasing scholarly interest in the intersections between trauma, memory, and the environment. While trauma studies initially concentrated on individual and collective memory of wars, genocides, and forced displacement, contemporary criticism has expanded the field to include ecological dimensions of trauma. The concept of eco-trauma, building on both trauma theory and ecocriticism, recognizes that landscapes themselves carry the marks of violence and that human suffering cannot be detached from the environments in which it occurs (Caruth, 1996<sup>1</sup>; Albrecht, 2019<sup>2</sup>; Nixon, 2011<sup>3</sup>). Afghan American literature provides a compelling case study for this intersection because of the long history of war, displacement, and ecological devastation in Afghanistan. Writers such as Khaled Hosseini and Homeira Qaderi represent the Afghan homeland not merely as a geographical site but as an affective, wounded, and remembered landscape.

This paper explores eco-trauma in Afghan American literature through a close reading of selected works by Hosseini and Qaderi. Hosseini's novels consistently depict ruined orchards, polluted rivers, and barren mountains that mirror the devastation of Afghan society. Similarly, Qaderi's memoir evokes the destruction of domestic gardens, flowers, and urban spaces as part of the trauma experienced by Afghan women. Together, these texts demonstrate that war and exile are not only political and social traumas but also environmental ones. The landscapes of Afghanistan become symbolic archives of grief and resilience, binding memory and ecology within diasporic consciousness. The emotional response of the characters are interrelated to the damaged environment.

**Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Ecology, and Literature**

Trauma theory emerged as a field of literary and cultural criticism in the 1990s, spearheaded by scholars such as Cathy Caruth (1996) <sup>1</sup> and Dominick LaCapra (2001) <sup>8</sup>. Caruth emphasized that trauma often resists direct representation, emerging instead through fragmented narratives, silences, and haunting returns. LaCapra distinguished between acting out and working through trauma, highlighting how literature provides a symbolic space for grappling with the unspeakable. Afghan American literature, with its constant return to the ruins of Afghanistan, exemplifies both dimensions of traumatic representation.

Eco-criticism, meanwhile, has brought attention to the relationship between humans and their environments, emphasizing how cultural narratives shape and are shaped by ecological realities.

Glenn Albrecht (2019)<sup>2</sup> coined the term solastalgia to describe the existential distress experienced when one's home environment undergoes irrevocable change. Rob Nixon (2011)<sup>3</sup> further introduced the notion of slow violence to denote environmental destruction that unfolds gradually yet devastates entire communities. When these perspectives are combined with trauma theory, eco-trauma emerges as a vital framework for understanding how war, displacement, and exile devastate not only bodies and minds but also landscapes and ecosystems. In Afghan American literature, the recurring image of ruined orchards or polluted rivers functions as an embodiment of both ecological grief and cultural trauma.

### **Eco Trauma**

Eco-trauma refers to the psychological, emotional, and social distress caused by ecological crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and natural disasters. It includes conditions like ecological grief, eco-anxiety, and solastalgia, and is often studied at the intersection of psychology, trauma theory, and environmental sciences. The term "ecological trauma" began appearing in scholarly writing in the 1990s, largely within ecopsychology and trauma studies. Early formulations came from Robert J. Lifton (1990s), who discussed "psychic numbing" in the face of nuclear threat and ecological catastrophe followed by Joanna Macy, an eco-philosopher and activist, also used trauma-related language to describe humanity's emotional responses to ecological destruction in the late 1980s–1990s.

At present, the term "eco-trauma" was increasingly used in psychology and environmental humanities to describe trauma connected directly to ecological degradation.

### **Landscapes of Loss: Khaled Hosseini's Fiction**

Khaled Hosseini's fiction repeatedly demonstrates the inseparability of human trauma from environmental degradation. In *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013)<sup>4</sup>, the narrator recalls a village "surrounded by barren fields. Once, apple orchards had thrived there, but war had left the trees lifeless stumps." This line encapsulates the symbolic collapse of both ecological and cultural continuity. Dr. Maria Liny Jenifer (2020)<sup>7</sup> argues in her doctoral thesis that Afghan landscapes in Hosseini's fiction act as mnemonic sites, where individual memories of displacement are entangled with ruined geographies.

Similarly, in *Sea Prayer* (2018), Hosseini juxtaposes past ecological abundance with present displacement. A father recalls, "I remember the rivers of my youth, clear and singing, and orchards in bloom," while preparing to flee across a dangerous sea. The ecological imagery in this text does more than provide setting; it functions as a metaphor for the loss of homeland and cultural belonging. Eco-trauma here manifests as solastalgia, the grief of witnessing ecological destruction and being unable to return home to a familiar landscape (Albrecht, 2019)<sup>2</sup>.

Even Hosseini's earlier novels, *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), integrate eco-traumatic imagery. In *The Kite Runner*, the once vibrant streets of Kabul are described as "wounded" and "broken," littered with debris, while in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Laila witness the collapse of domestic gardens and courtyards, reflecting the broader collapse of Afghan social life. The destruction of spaces once associated with fertility and domesticity highlights the gendered dimensions of eco-trauma.

### **Gendered Eco-Trauma: Homeira Qaderi's Memoir**

Homeira Qaderi's *Dancing in the Mosque* (2020)<sup>5</sup> provides a poignant account of eco-trauma from a gendered perspective. Her recollection of bombings is intertwined with images of domestic gardens and flowers destroyed: "When the bombs fell, the walls of our home crumbled, and with them the roses my mother tended so carefully." Here, eco-trauma is not abstract but deeply embodied, linked to the maternal act of nurturing both children and gardens. The destruction of roses signifies the collapse of cultural memory and intergenerational transmission.

Qaderi's memoir also illustrates how eco-trauma persists in exile. As she is abroad, she

remembers the landscapes of Afghanistan as both cherished and painful. This duality epitomizes solastalgia, where memory of the homeland is saturated with grief at its destruction. By presenting eco-trauma through the lens of women's experiences, Qaderi broadens the discourse beyond war to include the domestic and environmental dimensions of suffering.

### **Memory, Diaspora, and Ecological Grief**

Eco-trauma in Afghan American literature cannot be separated from diasporic memory. For exiled writers, landscapes of Afghanistan function as symbolic spaces of return. Hosseini frequently depicts characters haunted by memories of mountains, rivers, and villages, linking trauma to ecological loss. Qaderi similarly invokes domestic gardens and city streets as lost worlds, reconstructing them in memory as acts of cultural preservation. As Jenifer (2024)<sup>6</sup> notes, ruined landscapes are central to Afghan cultural trauma, acting as repositories of collective grief.

Diasporic writing transforms ecological grief into a form of cultural testimony. The reconstruction of ruined environments through literature ensures that ecological trauma is remembered alongside human suffering. This blending of ecological and cultural memory reflects Nixon's idea of slow violence (2011)<sup>3</sup>, where environmental destruction is recognized as an enduring, transgenerational trauma.

### **Towards an Ecologically Conscious Trauma Reading**

An ecologically conscious approach to Afghan American literature recognizes that trauma extends beyond the human psyche to include damaged environments. War ruins not only lives but also mountains, rivers, orchards, and homes. By foregrounding eco-trauma, scholars can better understand the inseparability of ecological and cultural suffering. This approach resonates with current directions in trauma studies, which increasingly emphasize the need for interdisciplinary frameworks that address both human and environmental grief.

Such a perspective is particularly urgent in the context of Afghanistan, where decades of war have produced widespread ecological devastation alongside human suffering. Hosseini and Qaderi's works remind readers that to heal trauma, one must also remember and restore damaged landscapes. Afghan American literature, thus, offers a powerful call for ecological and cultural reconciliation.

### **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that eco-trauma is a crucial lens for understanding Afghan American literature. By analyzing works of Hosseini and Qaderi, the paper has shown that landscapes act as living witnesses to war, exile, and cultural grief. Eco-trauma highlights the continuity between human and environmental suffering, emphasizing that war devastates not only societies but also ecologies. Incorporating trauma theory, ecocriticism, and Jenifer's own scholarship, the paper underscores the importance of recognizing environmental grief in diasporic writing. Ultimately, Afghan American literature reveals that cultural memory is inseparable from ecological memory, and that healing trauma requires acknowledging the wounds carried by landscapes as much as by individuals.

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