

## Unveiling Environmental Disasters in Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* (2003): An Eco-critical Study

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores Uzma Aslam Khan's novel Trespassing (2003) from an eco-critical point of view and attempts to unveil the reality of urbanization, modernity, and capitalism by showing their harmful effects on the living as well as non-living entities of the environment. Through the lens of Sessions' Deep Ecology (1995), the present study reflects Khan's environmental concerns. Trespassing (2003) demonstrates the domination of humans over the environment. It highlights the cruelty of human beings towards animals to meet their own ends. In light of deep ecology, the paper attempts to show the inherent worth and intrinsic value of non-human life. The textual analysis brings to light those parts of the novel which show harmful impacts of human progress on the environment. The present study aims to show interruptions of humans in the natural world which consequently lead towards environmental disasters and crises.*

**Keywords:** Deep ecology, Pollution, Brutality, Environment, Urbanisation, Capitalism.

### INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is the analysis of literature from an environmental point of view. The term "ecocriticism" was first introduced by Rueckert in 1978. In such a study, texts are evaluated and analyzed with respect to their harmful or helpful effects environmentally (Rueckert, 1978). Ecocritics analyze the literary works from an environmental perspective in order to comprehend the cultural and technological advancements that have given rise to the current environmental disasters. Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism in *The Ecocriticism Reader* as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. 18). "Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 18). By studying the literary texts from an earth-centered point of view, ecocritics try to bring awareness to the human population so that we can realize what we are doing to our environment. For instance, we cut down trees and vegetation, alter the land, and keep interrupting wilderness in the name of progress and human development (Glotfelty, 1996). Deforestation is increasing due to urbanization, science, and technology. Due to this harmful human activity of deforestation, carbon dioxide is increasing in the atmosphere because trees are the natural source of carbon dioxide absorption (Negar &

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Jean 2014). All of this is fragmenting our planet and could possibly result in more flooding, desertification, famine, eco-wars over diminishing resources, and the like. Moreover, human activity is affecting not only individual species but whole ecosystems. Additionally, smog, chlorofluorocarbons, and other harmful pollutants are depleting the ozone layer leading to global warming, which is causing an imbalance in the planet's climate (Yuksel, 2014).

Furthermore, capitalism is consuming all the natural resources, which are already limited. In the name of an emerging economy, consumption at the household level is increasing day by day (Hansen & Wethal, 2015). Nearly 60% of greenhouse gases are the result of household consumption (Reisch et al., 2021). Asia has taken the leading role in the consumerist market (Hansen, 2020). Many Asian regions have become consumerism domains for frozen chickens, giving rise to a global middle class (Koo, 2016). As a result of overconsumption of non-human life, the environment is being negatively affected. Overproduction is depleting the natural resources of Earth, which is worrisome not only for future generations but also for the current ecosystem (Rafi-Ul-Shan et al., 2018). We are not in harmony with our surrounding environment and consider ourselves above nature and other species (Garrard, 2004). Hence, Deep ecology strives to find a balance and harmony between humanity and the environment. It focuses on the inherent worth of both human and non-human entities of the ecosphere. Deep ecologists suggest that we must find a happy medium between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism in order to make our planet whole and balanced (Sessions, 1995). Moreover, the proponents of this philosophy assert that the human population must be controlled because deep ecologists do not see humans as the most important species on Earth; instead, they regard them as one of the many equal entities of the ecosystem (Garrard, 2004).

Uzma Aslam Khan's novel *Trespassing* (2003) can be studied from an earth-centered approach. The novel reflects how human activities affect the environment and lead to environmental disasters. Khan (2003) cleverly entitles her novel *Trespassing*, which generally means an invasion or breach. Hence, the title of the novel foreshadows a kind of invasion. Soon, it is revealed that humans trespass on the natural world and manipulate it for their own benefit. *Trespassing* (2003) unveils the sad reality of modernity and urbanization. It shows the true picture of capitalism and how it affects biodiversity and the environment. Khan (2003) uncovers human brutality towards biodiversity and their insensitivity towards the natural world as a whole. Set in Karachi, the novel shows the destruction of the environment at the hands of humans. The story focuses on the life of Dia, who produces silk from silkworms, and Daanish, who is fond of collecting shells. Both of these characters are shown to be interfering in the natural world for their own benefit and amusement. For instance, the production of silk symbolizes the anthropocentric attitude of humans. The silkworms are boiled in hot water, and then after they die, the silk is taken from their cocoons. The whole process of silk production reflects human cruelty to biodiversity to meet their own ends. Similarly, Daanish disturbs natural life just to amuse himself and fulfill his hobby. Furthermore, Khan (2003) also mentions the polluted atmosphere of Karachi, hinting at the fact that smoke and noise from industries and automobiles have caused different types of pollution. Khan (2003) achieves this by

narrating Daanish's thoughts when he comes back to Karachi after a long time and finds the atmosphere hazy, noisy, and polluted. Thus, by analyzing the setting, symbols, and dialogues of *Trespassing* (2003), the present study attempts to explore the different ways in which Khan (2003) highlights the environmental crises and disasters in her novel.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the harmful impacts of human progress on the environment?
2. How do human beings selfishly use animals to meet their own ends?
3. What is the inherent worth and intrinsic value of non-human life?

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Sessions' Deep Ecology (1995) serves as the theoretical framework for the present study. This position is one of the four radical forms of environmentalism. It focuses on three main things: 1) The well-being of both human and non-human life on earth and their intrinsic value and worth, 2) The compatibility of a smaller human population with the sustainability and progress of human life and culture, 3) The requirement of a smaller human population for the growth of non-human life. Sessions (1995) asserts that the growth of the human population at the current rate is posing threats to the environment. In the name of progress and development, humans are depleting the natural resources of the planet, leading to possible scarcity (Sessions, 1995).

Capitalism is blamed for environmental disasters and crises, as it not only causes deforestation by consuming farming lands, forests, and fields for industrialization and housing schemes for the growing human population, but also pollutes the environment with industrial smoke and chemical waste. Smog and other harmful air pollutants like carbon monoxide and chlorofluorocarbons are the main causes of ozone layer depletion. Due to deforestation, the global crisis of climate change is getting out of hand. As forests help regulate the climate, their depletion is affecting the ecosystem and the biosphere. The loss of biodiversity is one of the major global environmental crises caused by an increase in the human population (Sessions, 1995). Many plants, animals, and wildlife are threatened with extinction as their natural habitats are being destroyed because of global warming, pollution, and deforestation. One of the major reasons for the loss of biodiversity is human cruelty. Humans use different animals to meet their own ends. For example, sheep are used for making wool and silkworms are killed with brutality to make silk, etc.

Furthermore, deep ecology also firmly believes that dualism, which promotes the hyper-separation of humans from nature, is the "origin of environmental crises" because when humans alienate themselves from nature, they feel superior to it and thus, violate it for their own purposes. Therefore, deep ecology puts forward a "monistic" and "primal identification of humans and ecosphere" (Garrard, 2004, p. 21). An egalitarian attitude towards all living and non-living things in the ecosphere is needed (Cooper & Palmer, 1992). Non-living things should also be given intrinsic value, as "it is not being alive or being sentient that qualifies an entity or form for intrinsic value" (Garrard, 2004, p. 22). Being one of the radical forms of environmentalism, deep ecology shares some features

with environmentalism, as both require a decrease in the human population and promote the welfare and preservation of natural resources (Sessions, 1995). However, deep ecology is different from environmentalism because of its emphasis on the inherent value of both human and non-human members of the ecosphere. The latter is purely ecocentric, whereas the former promotes a balance between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism.

It offers to form a bridge between humans and non-human entities of the environment, including biodiversity, natural resources, and the like. It is noteworthy that this position is not without objections from proponents of other positions. One major objection raised against this position relates to misanthropism, as it advocates for a reduction in the human population. Cornucopians see deep ecology as an enemy of the human race (Gerrard, 2004). Deep ecology has also been criticized for its pantheism, as it poses a clash with religion, mainly Christianity. Religious scholars are not in favor of deep ecology because they feel that by bringing humans closer to nature, it is taking them away from God and Jesus Christ.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The present study is based on a qualitative approach to research. Textual analysis has been used as the tool for collecting data. This method of analysis is used to assign meaning to the text (Frey, Botan, Friedman & Kreps, 1999). With the help of this method, the text of this novel is analyzed from an environmental perspective, highlighting areas and dialogues that reflect environmental disasters caused by human activity. Textual analysis of the setting and dialogues of *Trespassing* (2003) highlights that humans are the biggest and foremost threat to the natural world. In the name of progress and development, humans are destroying the environment and depleting the natural resources of the planet. Moreover, the analysis of setting, symbols, and the dialogues of different characters in *Trespassing* (2003) makes it possible to see and acknowledge human cruelty towards biodiversity and the loss of ethical behavior when dealing with the objects of nature.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

Khan's *Trespassing* (2003), from its title, foreshadows some kind of breach. Upon taking an ecocritical view, it is revealed that *Trespassing* (2003) highlights many environmental disasters and attempts to raise awareness among its audience. The novel reflects the harmful effects of modernity, capitalism, urbanization, and consumerism. Some of these environmental crises are discussed below:

### **Pollution**

Pollution is one of the major environmental disasters caused by industrialization and automobiles. It is directly proportional to the human population, meaning that as the human population increases, so does pollution. This is the reason why deep ecology advocates for a reduction in the human population (Sessions, 1995). Khan (2003) also demonstrates the harmful effects of overpopulation on the environment in her novel. Set in

Karachi, the most populous city in Pakistan, *Trespassing* (2003) addresses different types of pollution. When one of the main characters in the novel, named Daanish, returns to Karachi after a long time, he finds it polluted and suffocating. The air is unclean, and the noise from the traffic is quite disturbing. "The sky was a light gray haze and the leaden heat immediately stifling. Not a star shone through" (Khan, 2003, p. 37).

Even at 3:30 in the morning, when it is still dark outside, Daanish is unable to see a clear sky or breathe clean air. Previously, when he used to lie down beside the window in his room, he could enjoy the beautiful scenery outside. But now, all he sees are "antennas, sooty rooftops, and telephone wires. There were hardly any trees" (Khan, 2003, p. 151). He can no longer enjoy the peace and serenity due to all the noise pollution. His growing frustration is evident when he says: "Noise, always noise. Construction, neighbors, children on the street, generators, loudspeakers. Never a moment of natural silence" (Khan, 2003, p. 312). Moreover, he observes people walking down the street, throwing wrappers out of their pockets onto the sidewalks or roads. He speculates that "beauty and hygiene were to be locked indoors, adding to their value. No one bothered with public space" (Khan, 2003, p. 40). These lines reflect the insensitivity and carelessness of human beings towards the environment. Dirt and dust have covered the entire city of Karachi, taking away its natural beauty. However, people do not seem to care or pay attention to their wrongdoings as they are too busy with their routines. In modern times, everyone is caught up in the economic race to make life better and more comfortable (Sessions, 1995). Khan's (2003) sense of lamentation about the current situation in Karachi is reflected in Daanish's father Shafqat's words when he reminisces about the clean old days:

"He'd pointed to the dense smog choking the city and frowned. 'It was a different country then. Barely twenty years old – roughly your age. Cleaner, and full of promise. Then we got ourselves into a war and were cut in half. What have we done?'" (Khan, 2003, p. 42)

In just two decades, the entire landscape of Karachi has undergone a dramatic transformation, unfortunately, for the worse. The once- enjoyable Karachi beach, renowned for its refreshing sea breeze and ideal for outings, has fallen victim to the destructive forces of "silt and human waste," resulting in the loss of its natural beauty.

### **Destruction of Natural Habitat**

Sessions (1995) asserts that humans do not respect the natural habitat of other species and interfere with it. This is evidently reflected in *Trespassing* (2003). The very prologue of the novel is entitled "Death," which signifies the symbolic death of Karachi's environment as well as the death of the natural habitat of marine life due to human trespassing. The prologue shows a boy less than fifteen years old standing near the seashore, observing the turtles. This young boy speculates how "foreign trawlers have stolen their sea. They trespass. Fish once abundant close to the shore are now disappearing even in the deep" (Khan, 2003, p. 8). The whole underwater ecosystem has been disturbed

by the trawlers. Consequently, aquatic animals like fish, whose natural habitat is oceans and seas, are on the brink of extinction due to the destruction of their natural habitat. *Trespassing* (2003) reflects that human beings are greatly responsible for this ruination. The growing human population needs more food, due to which people turn to seafood and devour fish and other aquatic animals to fulfill their hunger (Garrard, 2004). Many times, fishing is done for the sake of human amusement and recreation. Hence, Sessions (1995) suggests a decrease in human population.

*Trespassing* (2003) also reflects how humans meddle with the lives of other species. The young boy encounters a man trying to steal the turtle's eggs. However, the boy attempts to stop the man, but he is kicked and beaten for his noble act. "...he hears shells split. Thud! Crack! The men are pelting him with the eggs" (Khan, 2003, p. 9). The act of using the eggs for the beating purpose symbolizes the selfishness of humankind. Human beings do not see their actions and the loss of basic human morality, due to which we fail to acknowledge our role in the environmental crises. Worster (1993) remarks:

"We are facing a global crisis today not because of how ecosystem functions but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding of our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them" (p. 27).

Worster (1993) suggests that we need a collective struggle against environmental crises. However, many of us are contributing to the disasters instead of working together to minimize them.

## **Loss of Biodiversity**

Humans manipulate biodiversity for their own purposes. They do not value the lives of other species and consider them as means to an end (Sessions, 1995). Once the end is achieved, they cast aside the used species. This is the reason that deep ecology emerged as an advocate of the inherent worth of non-human entities on the planet (Cooper & Palmer, 1992). Deep ecology conveys to human beings that we should not use animals and natural resources for our personal benefit, as it leads to the loss of biodiversity and scarcity of natural resources (Sessions, 1995). Khan (2003) illustrates deep ecologists' concerns and shows human brutality and selfishness by referring to the production of silk in *Trespassing* (2003). Dia, the protagonist of the novel, is inclined towards this activity.

The whole process of silk production stands as a symbol for the egocentric and anthropocentric attitude of the human population. It demonstrates how humans alienate themselves from nature and other species, considering themselves superior to everything else on earth, and then dominating other organisms and the entire universe because this hyper-separation makes them feel superior. The production of silk demands brutality toward the silk worms. They are put in hot water and boiled. After this, the silk is extracted

from their cocoons. The text of the novel highlights this process in these words: "...in a tub of boiling water. Almost at once, a mesh of curious fine thread separated itself from the soft ball...it shriveled and expelled its last breath" (Khan, 2003, p. 13). The entire process reflects human cruelty and inconsideration. Living organisms are killed in such a merciless manner only to provide soft clothes to humans. Furthermore, the cruelty of human beings is evident when Salaamat advises Daanish: "Feed them a lot. When they've spun their cocoon, if you want the thread, boil them" (Khan, 2003, p. 152). They feed the silkworms just so they produce more cocoons and, consequently, a greater amount of fine silk can be obtained. Hence, the production of silk is proof that humans manipulate, misuse, and abuse biodiversity for their own material gains and lead towards the extinction of species.

Similar to Dia's interest in silk production, Daanish is inclined towards the collection of shells. Consequently, he disturbs marine life for the sake of his hobby and personal amusement. Javed (2018) remarks: "He and Dia are the epitome of modern beings who seek refuge in the natural world yet disturb it for their self-centered interest" (p. 75). Daanish's father explains to him that if the shells are disturbed, the mollusk ejaculates a purple liquid that was used for making dye by the Egyptians in ancient times. This reflects how humans have no consideration for the comfort of other beings and how they disturb their lives for the sole purpose of making something for themselves. Moreover, even after knowing about their disturbance, "Daanish plucked it out. While his fingers curled around the fragile violet husk, the animal ducked inside" (Khan, 2003, p. 42). In this way, Daanish's hobby of collecting sea shells symbolizes human insensitivity towards other organisms. He interferes in aquatic life and causes disruption to fulfill his hobby.

### **Shortage of Clean Water**

Water crises is one of the major environmental crises currently (Garrard, 2004). Due to human activity, water pollution is increasing. Industrial, chemical and human waste often flows down into the rivers and oceans due to which water is polluted. This not only threatens marine life but can also lead to the shortage of fresh and clean water for drinking purposes (Elliot, 1995). Khan (2003), exploring water crises in her novel, uncovers the real picture of urbanisation. The Indus River "which once used to be a source of pride...now represents a deadly picture" (Javed, 2018, p. 80).

Salaamat's lamentation of the destruction and loss of the beauty of Indus River can be seen in these lines: "...with the fresh water cut off, the trees were withering, and the fish dying. Many of these villagers too had to leave" (Khan, 2003, p. 359). *Trespassing* (2003) reflects how urbanisation and capitalism have altered the picture of Karachi. Due to this water pollution, both the flora and fauna are affected. The said environmental crises further support deep ecology's suggestion of a decrease in human population.

## CONCLUSION

In light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that human activities, advancements, and progress are leading our planet towards major environmental crises. *Trespassing* (2003) recognizes the presence of nature and non-human life and strives to give them privilege in human settings. Khan (2003) suggests that nature and non-human life should not only be seen as providers of resources for humans but as essential parts of life on earth. Khan (2003) brings our attention to the inherent worth and intrinsic value of biodiversity. Furthermore, the novel discusses the ethics of humans when dealing with the environment.

*Trespassing* (2003), by providing an account of many environmental disasters including pollution, loss of biodiversity, and shortage of clean water, raises awareness among its audience. It shows how 'trespassing' and interfering in the natural world can lead to the extinction of both flora and fauna. Khan (2003) attempts to raise the conscience of the human species by explaining how the production of silk brutally ends the life of silkworms. The textual analysis of the setting, dialogues, and symbols in *Trespassing* (2003) shows Khan (2003) to be an advocate for the rights of the natural world and its biodiversity.

Furthermore, the present study succeeds in showing how much deep ecology's suggestion of a reduction in human population and recognition of the intrinsic value of not only humans but also the non-human entities of the ecosphere is necessary. It has successfully proven Sessions' claim that hyper-separation and alienation of humans from the natural world lead them to dominate it. Humans have a high regard for themselves because of evolution, which leads them to consider themselves above all other species and give them no regard (Sessions, 1995). As a result, human beings overlook their needs and comfort and give them little to no importance.

Moreover, the study recommends an egalitarian approach towards the natural environment because it is only through this eco-centric attitude that humans will be able to walk hand-in-hand with their surrounding environment and create a sense of wholeness, balance, and totality. Additionally, the study reflects the importance of ecocriticism as a discipline because it raises environmental issues and instructs humans to correct their ways. It unveils the reality of modernity, capitalism, urbanization, and consumerism and shows human errors. In doing so, the study draws our attention to the necessity of rehabilitating and mending our relationship with the natural world and suggests that we should respect Mother Nature and not take it for granted.



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