Nature and Survival: A Reading of the Novel "The Corpse Washer"

Jamshini K. S.[1] , Dr. Noushad P. M.[2]

[1]Assistant Professor, Ansar Women's College, Perumpilavu & Research Scholar, Maharaja's College, Ernakulam

[2]Assistant Professor, Maharaja's College, Ernakulam

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, literature has continuously documented human experiences, environmental changes, and manifestations of hope during times of major crises. In the contexts of war, adversity, and personal loss, the importance of studying the profound relationship between human survival and nature comes to the fore. This research paper aims to shed light on this relationship between nature and human life through an ecocritical reading of the text " The Corpse Washer."

The pomegranate tree, which represents the main axis in the story, is not merely a background for events; rather, it acts as a witness to human trauma and pain, embodying a great symbol of resilience and adaptation on both environmental and personal levels. Driven by the twin axes of global challenges and survival, this study analyzes how the protagonists draw spiritual and psychological strength from nature to overcome their grief and alienation. The novel highlights the delicate balance between the devastation caused by human conflicts and nature's inherent capacity for renewal and recovery.

Furthermore, this paper emphasizes how environmental elements in " The Corpse Washer." express hope, historical memory, and the instinct for survival. This study offers a novel perspective on ongoing academic discussions regarding environmental thought, trauma studies, and the building of resilient communities.

Keywords: The Pomegranate Alone, Nature and Survival, Ecological Resilience, Ecocriticism, Memory and Identity, Literary Studies.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The relationship between literature and the environment has always existed, with a history as old as human history itself. From the very beginning, we can see nature presented in various forms in literary works. However, unlike its restricted use as aesthetic backgrounds and mere description, it began to be presented in the modern era as a symbol of human existence and survival, which can be considered a major shift in the artistic field. Elements of nature in writings dealing with rural life, greenery, and ancient humans came to be used as powerful symbols even in political, cultural, and social issues. We have also come to understand that wars, conflicts, political and social issues, and occupations among humans leave deep wounds not only on the human body and mind, but also on the land and environment in which they live. For this reason, writers convey elements of nature to readers even in writings that share the experiences of war-torn lands as powerful characters or as symbols of resistance and protest. Here in this study, the importance of such literature is discussed.

The novel " The Corpse Washer" by Iraqi writer and translator Sinan Antoon is a world-renowned novel. The events of the novel take place in the terrifying atmosphere of Iraq after the 2003 US invasion. While this novel portrays the damages caused by war, death, division, and lost identity, it registers even more the human desire for survival and its relationship with nature. Accordingly, this study analyzes the theme of nature and survival based on this novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have addressed Sinan Antoon's novel " The Corpse Washer" and environmental symbols in war literature. While Glotfelty & Fromm (1996) laid the foundation for studies related to the relationship between literature and the physical environment, Lawrence Buell (2005) explained how environmental traumas affect literary imagination and survival. In a study conducted by Sadouni & Sadouni (2022) focusing on the symbol of the "pomegranate tree" in Antoon's novel, it was shown that natural symbols are capable of preserving cultural memories and identity amidst occupation. Similarly, Khammas's study (2023) discusses the political survival acquired by characters to escape psychological trauma and alienation in post-war Iraq.

However, most existing studies have paid more attention to the political horror of war, the psychological trauma of characters, or general ecocriticism. Unlike these studies, this study establishes its significance by focusing exclusively on nature's capacity for regeneration and resilience through the symbol of the "pomegranate tree" in the novel, utilizing the theoretical framework of "Ecological Resilience Theory" by C. S. Holling.

Significance of the Study

We live in an era where wars and environmental degradation pose a major threat on a global scale. When evaluated through such problems, this study gains great significance.

This study helps in understanding and perceiving post-war literature from an environmental perspective, away from human-centric readings. At the same time, it analyzes how nature transforms into a center of hope and survival amidst human oppression and tragedies. In addition, this study paves the way for a new discussion at the academic level on how nature endures as a symbol of survival, hope, and existence in novels set against the backdrop of the Iraq war.

Problem of the Study

Wars and occupations inflict severe damage and losses not only on humans, but also on the environment. Simultaneously, the main problem of this study is how humans in a land of war utilize nature to overcome the inner wounds they suffer from, to maintain signs of life, and to transcend crises. This study raises the question of how the symbol of the pomegranate tree in Sinan Antoon's novel " The Corpse Washer" aids in the survival of both humans and nature.

Objectives of the Study

- To study environmental themes in the novel " The Corpse Washer"
- To evaluate how the "pomegranate tree" endures in the novel as a symbol of survival between human life and death in a land of war.
- To uncover whether nature grants the novel's characters psychological and spiritual strength to escape the psychological trauma caused by war.

Design and Methodology

This study relies primarily on qualitative and textual analysis. Alongside this, a theoretical framework is utilized for further analysis. For this purpose, C. S. Holling's "Ecological Resilience Theory" is primarily employed. This theory explains nature's ability to recover and be reborn amidst disasters and shocks. The symbol of the pomegranate tree in the novel is examined in light of this theory. Sinan Antoon's novel " The Corpse Washer " is analyzed as a primary source, while environmental studies, general essays, and articles related to the relationship between nature and literature serve as secondary sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

❖ The Pomegranate Tree: An Environmental Symbol and Its Significance Between Life and Death

Sinan Antoon's novel " The Corpse Washer " embodies the life of the Iraqi people in the modern era. Despite terrifying war conditions, Sinan Antoon portrays the pomegranate tree as an important environmental and symbolic axis reflecting concepts of survival and hope.

The water resulting from washing the bodies of victims who fell in the fierce war and the attacks following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq flows toward the base of this tree. This tree grows in the courtyard of the mortuary (maghsal), which is the workplace of the protagonist's father, Jawad Kazem.

The text also accurately emphasizes while describing the location of the mortuary: “It turns into a small channel that takes the water to the small garden adjacent to the place rather than the sewer, so that the washing water does not mix with stagnant sewage water” (Antoon, 2012, p. 25).

The narrator describes how the tree grows despite the harshness of death surrounding it, saying: “It has been drinking the water of death for decades, yet every spring it puts forth leaves, blossoms, and bears fruit... The roots of this pomegranate tree, like me, are here in the depths of hell” (Antoon, 2012, p. 254).

Through analyzing the text, it becomes clear that this tree is not merely an ordinary natural element in the background of the story; rather, it is a living organism that redefines both death and life.

The pomegranate tree grows daily by drinking water filled with fragments of death, tears, and blood stained with pain. Yet, despite these sad and crisis-filled conditions, it neither dries up nor withers. Instead, it remains a flourishing tree that grows wondrously and overflows with fruit. We can understand its blossoming with ripe red pomegranates and green leaves as a form of resistance against occupying forces and corrupt authority. In a country where people feel afraid even just to live, and are denied opportunities even to speak out against violence, the author presents the pomegranate tree as a powerful symbol standing tall, drinking the water of death, as if it were a response to all forms of injustice.

This tree plays both an environmental and symbolic role simultaneously; it stands as an element linking the world of the dead with the world of the living. At a time when human bodies are scattered by weapons, military technology, and bombs, this tree remains steadfast in that soil, absorbing blood and water.

This deep connection is manifested in the text when the author mentions the rituals of shrouding and dealing with the dead: “Then Hammoudi went to the small garden and brought from it a palm frond, which he gave to my father, who broke it into two pieces and placed one of them to the right of the dead person along the length of the arm between the collarbone and the hand, and the other to his left in the same place, to lift away from the dead person the torment of the grave, as he told me later. Sometimes he would place two branches of sidr or pomegranate instead of the palm fronds” (Antoon, 2012, p. 33).

Through this, the author reminds us via the novel that life will blossom anew after any major destruction. By portraying the growth and flourishing of this tree, he silently questions the devastation imposed by wars. The novel affirms in strong language that even in terrifying conditions where humans cannot protect themselves, nature possesses a wondrous capacity for survival and rebirth. This is what makes nature a symbol of resistance against occupying forces and power.

In addition, the pomegranate tree holds deep historical significance in the Iraqi cultural context. The pomegranate tree, which has been considered a symbol of fertility and abundance since the ancient Mesopotamian civilization, transforms in post-war Iraq into a symbol for restoring a shattered identity. While bombs and machine guns destroy the country and its people, the tree standing in the mortuary courtyard with its roots deep in the earth and its head held high reminds us of the resilient identity of the Iraqi people that occupying forces cannot destroy.

We can understand that this element of the pomegranate tree is not merely a literary creation, but rather a guardian of memories and cultural symbols passed down through generations.

❖ The Psychological and Spiritual Relationship Between Characters and Nature

The crises faced by the novel's characters, led by "Jawad Kazem" reveal the extent of deep psychological trauma and social crises they suffer from due to war and ongoing violence. Jawad Kazem, who aspired to be an artist and sculpt life-breathing artworks, finds himself ultimately forced to practice his father's profession, where his life turns into a harsh reality forcing him to wash the bodies of the dead falling in war and elsewhere. Caught between his dreams and desires on one hand, and the bodies of the dead he must confront daily on the other, the pomegranate tree and the surrounding nature emerge as the sole sanctuary granting him psychological and spiritual peace and hope in life. Jawad himself, who initially refused to approach this tree or eat its fruit, is seen in the novel gradually becoming attached to it, resorting to it to forget his pains and find serenity.

Through textual analysis, we can understand that the natural elements in the mortuary such as the miniature garden, water, and the pomegranate tree function as a form of indirect psychological therapy to alleviate the mental pressures resulting from seeing ruined buildings and mutilated bodies outside.

This spiritual and psychological intervention of the tree is manifested even in Jawad's dreams and nightmares, where the tree symbolizes psychological therapy and trauma simultaneously. The text says: “I see Reem standing naked in an orchard full of pomegranate trees whose flowers have bloomed... When I reach her and embrace her, the right pomegranate falls and rolls on the ground. I bend down to pick it up and see small red patches multiplying on my arm. I turn back and see Reem crying and trying to stop the waterfall of blood from the spot where the pomegranate was” (Antoon, 2012, p. 32). The intertwining image of pomegranate fruits and blood in his nightmares confirms that the tree is not merely a simple sanctuary for serenity, but rather a mirror reflecting the depth of psychological trauma and internal conflict Jawad experiences between the pain of death and the hope of life.

Going to the pomegranate tree and contemplating it grants Jawad immense peace for a temporary escape from the world of violence, blood, the sounds of bullets, and death.

This spiritual and psychological attachment appears clearly when Jawad sits in front of the tree after washing a child's corpse and chants to it to alleviate his grief: “In recent months, I got used to sitting on the chair I placed in front of it to converse with it, for it has become my only companion in this world... O pomegranate tree, have mercy on the infatuated, my body has wasted away and my soul has melted, and my bone has shown... What is my sin, I wonder, that has afflicted me? I have no sins at all, except the love of the beloved” (Antoon, 2012, p. 253).

Nature grants characters a hidden spiritual energy to confront fear and despair, and to survive psychological collapse. Humans in conflict zones need not only physical shelter, but also physical and psychological nourishment to restore their energy. Analyses prove that every element of nature portrayed in the novel acts as a mirror reflecting the characters' hope and resistance; whenever Jawad sees a new flower or fruit growing on the tree, he realizes that life has not completely ended, and that there are ways to move forward despite all pains.

The trauma and pain left by war in souls are often beyond words to explain. The silent dialogues Jawad conducts with the pomegranate tree become a solution to these internal conflicts.

When human relationships disintegrate and are torn apart by war, the tree stands as a companion to their path and life. The fact that nature creates new life at a time when humans fight and kill each other is the primary factor giving Jawad hope. Even small creatures and birds that come to the tree's branches or seek shelter in its shade represent in the novel a reminder of a world free from wars.

❖ Application of C. S. Holling's Ecological Resilience Theory

When examining the novel based on the "Ecological Resilience Theory" developed by ecologist C. S. Holling in 1973, this novel can be considered an accurate model of how an ecosystem deals with severe shocks and fractures. This theory posits that when an ecosystem is exposed to sudden external disturbances, it does not completely collapse; rather, it possesses a dynamic capacity to absorb those shocks, self-organize, and reach a new state of equilibrium.

This capacity for resilience clearly appears in the pomegranate tree and the surrounding environment mentioned in the novel. War is a powerful environmental and human disturbance that seeks to destroy an entire country. However, the novel manifests nature's wondrous capacity through the pomegranate tree to absorb this external disturbance represented by death-water stained with blood, turning it into an essential element for building its own life. The tree does not resist the disturbance by surrendering and perishing; rather, it adapts to it and transforms it into life. How can a people under the rule of war and violence resist and triumph? They have no choice but to absorb reality and find peace to move forward with their lives.

This ecological resilience and adaptability are manifested in the presence of birds as a symbol of hope amidst devastation, as seen in the scene of the bulbul landing on the tree's branches: "A beautiful bulbul landed on one of its high branches, so the branch dipped slightly... It began to chirp sweetly as if it knew my grief and complaint about the distance of paradise, so it came with a voice from it" (Antoon, 2012, p. 254). The bulbul's singing on the branches of the pomegranate tree represents a call of life and environmental renewal defying the sounds of death and explosions.

Therefore, the resilience of the pomegranate tree reflects the resilience and survival capacity of the Iraqi people and their culture. Just as the tree returns to blossom again after every attack or difficulty, the Iraqi people also try to restore their life and identity from among the ruins of war. Thus, this study indicates that ecological resilience is not merely a purely scientific concept, but a great analytical tool recording the struggle and resilience of humanity and nature in contemporary war literature.

The concept of the "Adaptive Cycle" mentioned in C. S. Holling's theory can be read very clearly within the context of the novel. This theory discusses the stage of ecosystem reorganization after suffering collapse. While cities, buildings, and human souls collapse in Iraq due to bomb shelling, the pomegranate tree reorganizes its internal biological system to produce new flowers and fruit. This dynamic movement of nature, undefeated by the destruction of war, transforms into an inspiration granting humans the ability to persist and survive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Comparative Study with Other Works: Other prominent works related to Arabic war literature can be subjected to study from this same environmental perspective (Ecocriticism).

Interdisciplinary Studies: Further studies can be conducted by linking Arabic literature with environmental sciences and sociology.

Translation Studies: The presentation of natural symbols in translations of this novel into different languages can be examined, as well as presentation styles in both languages.

CONCLUSION

The novel " The Corpse Washer " presents stories of war, pain, death, and unfulfilled dreams. But when hopes end, the author presents nature and its creatures as a symbol of courage to live and self-dignity. We can see the pomegranate tree behind Jawad's mortuary growing and flourishing as a symbol of nature's protest. Just as it drinks the water of death and provides the fruits of life, this idea is embodied in the final page of the novel when Jawad emphasizes complete identification with the tree, saying: "I used to think that life and death are two separate worlds with clear boundaries between them, but now I know they are intertwined... I am like the

pomegranate tree... As for my heart, it has become a withered pomegranate, pulsing with death, falling from me every moment into a bottomless abyss... Only the pomegranate tree... knows" (Antoon, 2012, p. 255).

The author reminds us through the novel that life will blossom anew after any major destruction. This study also affirms that nature and its creatures certainly help humans searching for ways to overcome the environmental and social crises they face on a global scale to find peace and give hope to life. Humans are not the only ones helping humans survive and exist; rather, even when they look at nature with hope, they feel the comfort of peace.

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