

Ecocriticism: Crossing Boundaries between Human and Non-Human Spheres in Jamil Ahmed's *The Wandering Falcon*

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Abstract

Jamil Ahmed's The Wandering Falcon envisions the ecological landscape of the tribal areas of Pakistan as the first setting of man when he primarily trod the earth. Relating that every individual contains in his or her essence a "tribal gene", Jamil Ahmed empathises with the tribesmen of Balochistan, transforming them into everyman regardless of time and space. The brutally all-consuming natural terrain of Balochistan is highlighted through the four natural classical elements such as the wind, earth, water and fire, which according to ancient Greeks formed the basis of analysis in understanding both the natural and the material world. These non-human spheres whether it be the blistering wind of a hundred and twenty days, the wasted, barren land where the borders of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan meet, the waterhole where thirst ridden men find momentary respite or the fire and armour that the tribesmen always carry, demonstrate how the path between the natural and the human has refused to coalesce in harmony despite the struggle of the Pawindahs, these foot people, to keep it so. The dynamics of intervention are made more vividly clear through the character of Tor Baaz, whose name means the wandering falcon, and where he becomes a symbol of both human dissonance and the unforgiving non-human forces operating on man. Ironically enough it is through his character that Ahmed tries to provide a significant pathway where conflict and conservation of an old way of life overlap. Roaming the peripheral spaces amid tribes in the land, Tor Baaz becomes that liminal sphere within boundaries or borders that resist change to the new, adopted civilized way of life. Thus, Jamil Ahmed's ecocriticism not only endeavours to imagine a sustainable post-conflict framework but also subverts myths of barbarism regarded with tribal areas by the feigned world of civility.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Tribal man, Human, Non-Human, Borders

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Introduction

Ecocriticism is a generally known term that acknowledges the relationship between literature and ecology of a text while emphasizing what role nature

plays and how it impacts numerous thematic or linguistic concerns in that literary text. Broadly, ecocriticism revolves around nature and its various forms venturing into identifying its implications in literature. Nature

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becomes the primary forefront in which the dynamics of the novel operate, impacting on characters, symbols, motifs and themes of a literary text. Ecocriticism is an evolving theory that not only establishes nature as a non-human living entity but also presents nature as an existential being before the creation of man. When living nature is juxtaposed with humans, it is this complexity while analysing the ecology of a text that makes the study of ecocriticism unique. Moreover, certain recent researchers have recognized that ecocriticism not only discusses nature as a physical terrain that comprises of the natural landscape or weather conditions but is also an analysis of the environment in terms of society, politics and history that reciprocate in building up the characters in a text as much as the physical terrain would.

Ecocriticism in South Asian writers is rapidly gaining momentum as many literary writers, poets and novelists are experimenting with this genre while writing. In Indian literature most notably Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* have been predominantly discussed with regard to ecocriticism. In Ghosh's novel, man is presented as an adversary of nature, manipulating and eroding it, with the onslaught of modernity, resulting in nature being changed by man as wilderness in nature is hostile to man's touch and problematic to conserve. While *Nectar in a Sieve* establishes ecofeminism and a woman's linkage with the natural landscape around it. This displays the interdependence and non-separation of women and their connection with the

land. In Sri Lankan fiction, novels such as *The Waiting Earth* (1966) by Punyekante Wijenaike, and *Reef* (1994) by Romesh Gunsekera provide hints of ecocriticism where the writers talk about land ownership, territoriality along with the conservation of natural resources that establishes Sri Lanka's nationalism in a poignantly significant and allegorical manner.

Ecocriticism in Pakistani Literature

In Pakistani literature, the importance of ecocriticism was significantly laid by Qurat-ul-ain Haider's *Magnum Opus River of Fire*. In this novel, Haider traces the historical connection of man with its natural environment or land. The historical connection with land becomes of intrinsic value as through the civilizational ethos, Haider discovers that as a man loses his rooted understanding of nature or its environmental surroundings he becomes subject to many psychological traumas including diaspora and identity crisis. In Soraya Khan's *Noor*, the territorial rift between East Pakistan and West Pakistan is portrayed as a direct reflection of man's encroachment of nature in terms of humanistic barbarity that severed the connection of the land resulting in the creation of a new state i.e. Bangladesh. Moreover, Uzma Aslam Khan's *Geometry of God* is another primary example of how ecology is outlined through a geological pattern of cultural evolution in the historical context of Pakistan.

However, among Pakistani literary figures, Jamil Ahmed was the first among writers that emphasized Pakistan's ecological landscape especially the western half of this country and visualized the importance of its environment and the impact it had on Pakistan's political, social and foreign affairs in the geological mainframe of South Asia. Born in 1931, Jamil Ahmed served as a civil servant in the 1950s and was often posted to the remote areas of Pakistan such as the Swat Valley, northern areas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Waziristan in Balochistan. These regions are primarily connected with tribes of various clans that have lived there for several centuries. Ahmed hence got a first-hand experience of the tribal areas and the tribesmen's fascinating connection with the land. *The Wandering Falcon* (2011) is Jamil Ahmed's much-acclaimed debut novel that imaginatively brings to life human concerns in the war-ridden tribal frontiers that have been marginalized by history and time. Being a recently written novel, the existing criticism on *The Wandering Falcon* is extremely minimal, and if there is, it largely discusses the thematic concerns in the novel, revolving around the poverty-stricken tribesmen in the western half of Pakistan. The novel's relationship with ecocriticism has hardly been credited regarding the tribal areas and their deep-rooted connection with the territorial spaces that they reside within and borderlines that define their existence.

Discussion

In the novel, *The Wandering Falcon*, Jamil Ahmed brings a distinctively Pakistani way of writing into the mainstream of contemporary fiction. *The Wandering Falcon* imbibes a narrative that is both engagingly lyrical and intriguingly post-modern. Ahmed blends the inert processes of the tribal man's experience through a thread of short stories that make the mode of narration in his novel *The Wandering Falcon*, quite adaptable and changing, very much like the tribal way of life. Ahmed incorporates ecocriticism through a discourse that bespeaks the tribal existence and aims an attempt at self-discovery. This self-discovery is directly synced with the discovery of a nation, Pakistan and what it means to recognise and appreciate fully Balochistan as a part of the nation itself. Through tribesmen's collective experiences and the use of ecocriticism, Ahmed has allegorically implicated the importance of this part of the land that has remained aloof, nameless and fluid in time, with no one truly owning or appreciating it as a land that breeds human individuals.

Thus, ecocriticism becomes an important technique that portrays Ahmed's distinguished postmodern worldview at its best. The practice of ecocriticism in the novel tries to crucially cultivate harmony between tradition and modernity, body and mind, and fact and fiction. The exploration of the tribal terrain in a close and acute manner is an attempt at eradicating boundaries between nature

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and culture, language and reality aiming at presenting the process of ecocriticism as a struggle to overcome these barriers of the subjective self. The pictorial imagery and the descriptions used by Ahmed suggest how ecology mediates all our experience. Thus it is interesting to see how Ahmed blends the tribal way of life with that of the civil and urban existence of Pakistan.

The landscape of Jamil Ahmed's expression in his novel *The Wandering Falcon* is laden with a collage of nature descriptions and experiences that structurally encompass the novel in a reality that bespeaks the tribal culture, "In the tangle of crumbling, weather-beaten and broken hills, where the borders of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan meet, is a military outpost manned by about two score soldiers" (Ahmed 1). These beautifully constructed opening lines suggest, the tribal existence as imbibing literally in-between border areas of these countries like a tangle of crumbling hills, unacknowledged and battered with time. Although assaulted by time, the tribesmen remain undefeated and resilient in their capacity, constantly struggling against all natural and unnatural forms. The novel, discloses these descriptions of the land, in its most unforgiving and punitive form that bespeaks the nature of man living in these peril ridden lands. The tribes have their own laws, laws made through ancient customs that are absolute and unforgiving like the harshness in the physical outer sphere of nature. Yet within these laws abide tribesmen that are extremely

human in their capacity to err, humans that have been unable to reconcile their own inner natural instincts and desires against the onslaught of outer aggression.

The Wandering Falcon begins with such a story of a man and a woman who have eloped together and run from their respective tribe. The woman being the tribal chief's daughter had an impotent man as her husband and consequently eloped with her father's servant. Ahmed's descriptions of them roaming a desolate landscape in absolute helplessness is synonymous with universal stories such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Adam and Eve*, where the protagonists in question had exceeded the laws of their territory and were hence ousted from there forthwith. Later in the novel, it is stated that "Adam was the first Baluch on this earth" (32). Thus Jamil Ahmed grants the tribal story and the Baluch people, a universality, transforming them into everyman and gives them an empathy that has been previously denied to this part of the land. Moreover, this transformation of Baluch people into everyman indicates Ahmed's transcultural approach, because certain boundaries or limitations may be transgressed by anyone in a culture or region and then labelled as a sin. This novel consistently reprimands how mankind has conditioned boundaries for one another whereas the question, who defines these limitations remains questionable. Why is it that those bred and born under English school systems govern and decide a certain way of life as acceptable or unacceptable? Hence,

highlighting the Baloch people as Adam, Jamil Ahmed transcends the borders and the culture of Pakistan and evokes a *primaevae* natural truth of man regardless of time, history or space.

Similarly, land, as an ecological element is not specific to a particular culture or region. The land is stretched endlessly beneath man, it is man that develops culture around a specific piece of land. Wherever man is, the land is synced psychologically with man. However, it is the closing of the borders around Balochistan that has resulted in men born and bred inside to be specific to its terrain. Therefore, this landlocked region has refused to evolve or coalesce transcultural elements within its framework. According to Opsopaus the fact that “The Earth, is cool and dry, passive and rigid, a principle of structure and materialization” (n.pag), has become the psychological make-up of the men living in the tribal regions. Jamil Ahmed embodies these attributes of the earth and links them psychologically, with the tribesmen. While focusing “extensively upon physical reality”, that reflects the earth, Ahmed tends to point towards their “qualities such as perseverance, inflexibility, realism and pragmatism” in the tribal men. For example, in the novel, Ahmed states that the “pervading silence of their land had taught their people to be deliberate in their actions and slow in response to their emotions” (29). The rigid, hard natural terrain has a directly proportional link with the tribesmen's psychological makeup and what the author tries to convey is that these men

must be understood in their own context without a comparison with those who are born and bred in a different ecology. The evidence of the tribesmen's separate state of mind and their ability to look at things differently is portrayed through the words, “what seemed to them a palace was in fact the local post office” (Ahmed 29). This divide or distance in the perception of tribesmen is something that has developed over a history of conditioned upbringing that has refused to coalesce the mind of the tribesmen with that of the laws and rules of the society associated with civilization.

At the beginning of the story, the “unearthly expression” (Ahmed 3) on the woman's face, depicts disharmony between the land and the human psyche, demonstrating how the tribesmen's own laws can at times be a barricade to their natural instincts. Thus, not only does this establish her severed connection with the land but also reflects her dismantled psychological reality. Similarly, in the story of the woman whose husband owns a bear for a living, the woman is symbolically paralleled with the bear. By doing this, Jamil Ahmed further highlights the antagonistic connection of the woman with her natural animalistic *primaevae* instincts which is only brought out in the woman's hostile interaction with the bear. Land represents the natural instinctive needs and behaviours of humans. But, somehow these *primaevae* instincts or their natural human nature has remained buried within. Thus, through analogies with physical nature, Ahmed

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connects with the disparate psychology of the tribal people with and within their own land.

Carl Jung states that “the four elements [earth, water, fire and air] are not only material and spiritual forces, but also facets of a human being. Their varying combinations result in different personality types”. Carl Jung's “conceptualization of intuition, sensation, thinking and feeling as the four basic archetypes or components of personality is ... a derivation of Empedocles' ancient theories about fire, earth, air and water”. Fire, earth, air and water are manifestations of moods and personality that express human emotions. Ahmed clearly states this when he is narrating about the tribes of the Mahsuds and the Wazirs, “Nature has bred in both an unusual abundance of anger, enormous resilience, and a total refusal to accept their fate” (86). Thus, not only is nature responsible for making them who they are but also for their inner disharmonies. Anger is an expression of fire, the resilience that Ahmed talks about is representative of the earth. Thus, this theory by Jung links the human and non-human elements together signifying how the outer nature cannot be kept at bay from the inner nature of man as they're naturally synced. This inability to reconcile human boundaries with those of the land is the root of all historical dichotomy in the tribal existence. An acute example of this is given when in the novel the government has decided to close the international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan

resulting in an abrupt close of seasonal migration of the tribes between these borders. This migration is their natural form of existence, the tribes must migrate to the highlands with the onslaught of spring and return to the plains as autumn approaches where their animals can find food, water and respite from the harsh winter. Nature is synchronized with the tribal way of life, like the soul is to the body, as the narrator in the novel proclaims, “it would be like attempting to stop migrating birds or the locusts” (Ahmed 46) if the tribesmen are stopped from migrating. The closing of the borders, marks the divide and rift created among the nomads or Pawindahs, the foot people not just against the governing authorities of Pakistan or Afghanistan but also defining a “death of a centuries-old way of life” (54) that harmed no one and yet was brutally and completely demolished. The foot people or Pawindahs have a direct connection with the land as they are habitual of walking on foot in the harsh natural terrain. Interestingly, this nomadic existence doesn't allow for transculturation to take place. This is because the tribesmen over centuries have refused to transform themselves according to the so-called civilized society. Nowadays, transculturation is considered an inevitable norm, that is bound to happen at some point in time and in an attempt to precipitate transculturation by society, the inherent culture of a region like Baluchistan is destroyed. However, what Jamil Ahmed tries to proclaim is that transculturation should mean an acceptance of an individual way of life

rather than an imposition of a general way of life onto a specific region.

The second primordial element, water, in *The Wandering Falcon* is demonstrated as a symbol of respite, relief and the inevitable flux of time and change that dissolves and eradicates distinctions. It is by the waterhole that Tor Baaz, the boy whose parents have just been killed finds momentary solace. The waterhole provides nourishment and security in the desolate and harsh terrain. In the last paragraphs of chapter one, the author seems to relate the tribesmen's lives to that of living "at the edge of the waterhole dipping their beaks in the water and flying away back into the sun" (Ahmed 18). Ultimately, the tribal people only experience a fleeting hour of comfort, naturally returning to their harsher existence as a form of nature's calling. Nature returns them to unnatural habitats where they have learnt to live naturally and survive for years. The tribesmen's existence is always in a flux continuously moving or mobile, searching for the basic necessities of life but ironically their movement is fixed and resolute within a periphery consisting only of the unyielding rugged lands of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and bordering parts of Afghanistan.

According to , "every element of the rural idyll is torn apart by some agent of change" (1), and it can be seen that the tribesmen's lives in this context remain similar. This element of change is represented by water. However, sometimes even water appears to be

hostile in similitude with and adopting the overall harshness in nature, "no water other than a trickle among some salt-encrusted boulders which also dries out occasionally, manifesting a degree of hostility" (Ahmed 1). Water is also scarce in this part of the world, adding to their harsh existence and giving more room to the rigidity represented by the earth. Water in the Greek interpretation is referred to as Primordial Chaos, where water represents dissolution, transformation and a formless entity constantly changing or moving. Water is symbolic of the ever-changing and impermanent life of the tribal men who cannot remain constant at one place. It is their norm and custom as any other form of existence is alien to them. However, in constant contrast with the civilian or governmental accord, the tribal way of life is viewed as chaotic and completely in rival with what they define as normality. Ahmed narrates that the tribal way of life "constituted defiance to certain concepts ... concepts such as statehood, citizenship, undivided loyalty to one state; settled life as opposed to nomadic life, and the writ of the state as opposed to tribal discipline" (38). These concepts are those that the world associates with civilization, rejecting the old ways of tribal life, forgetting them as a form of undisciplined, formless or baseless existence.

Moreover, the third element wind or air interestingly sweeps in the entire mood of the novel itself, Ahmed narrates that, "Nature has not remained content merely at this. In this land, she

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has also created the dreaded bad-e-sad-o-bist-roz, the wind of a hundred and twenty days" (1). Wind generally is a corrosive element in nature that erodes away existence as one knows it. But the wind in this region of Baluchistan exceeds all limits in its capacity to destroy. It not only blows consecutively for days on end but also envelops individuals in its "alkali-laden dust and sand" (1) in the depth of winter. The element of wind commemorates the direction of what is to follow in the tribesmen's lives, whether it is the onslaught of danger or a warning. Wind commences the advancement of the winter season, a season that portends a change in the lives of the tribesmen. For winter means migration from the harsh coldness of the mountain tops to the plains, in a long and perilous journey; "Gusts of high winds had raged over the mountain tops... Winter was coming early this year and the mountain people were wondering whether to risk staying for a few weeks longer in their huts or start moving ... on their three hundred mile annual journey to the plains" (Ahmed 143). Winter also means a harsher existence not only because a short winter means less time for gathering their sustenance but also because winter becomes the "time of raids, kidnappings and robberies" (Ahmed 87). The element of wind not only defines the element of change in the direction of the tribesmen's lives because change is evident for them as these wandering men cannot have steadiness in themselves but as a natural calamity that the tribesmen must abide in. Even in the form of wind, nature has remained harsh, the winter or

dry cold winds are corrosive and do not allow respite and are unforgiving in its wake.

The fourth element, fire, is the core element that links the entire tribal history with the historical happenings of this region with respect to Pakistan, Afghanistan and other countries that have waged a war against the tribal areas. Ahmed narrates a story of seven men who come to the police station for talks with the authorities, Baloch people who have seen their own Sardar removed without their consent and have faced the loss of death equally as the opposing side and yet are willing to have a parley. But nobody is willing to understand where the problem stemmed or to understand the Baloch perspective and why they were actually retaliating against the authorities so. The Baloch people's willingness to be given a platform to raise their voice is demeaned as the magistrate only perceives their side of the story as an acceptance of the crime, giving a complete disregard to their perspective. Ahmed foreshadows this untimely and abrupt dismissal of the problem by saying, "Before the evening lamps had been lit, the trial was over" (33). Fire is an element that reeks of passion and spontaneity, but the fire of the Baloch people is doused so completely unapologetically that it never even pricks the conscience of those responsible. Ahmed narrates after the death of these seven men that "these men died a final and total death ... what died with them was a part of the Baloch people themselves. A little of their spontaneity in offering affection and

something of their graciousness and trust” (34). Fire as an element of nature has been deliberately beguiled by Jamil Ahmed, deceptively by representing it through the unnatural, i.e. the guns and armour the tribesmen use. This artillery that the tribesmen always carry with them is integral to their natural way of survival and living. Existence for the tribesmen is inconceivable without the fire that they always sling around their shoulders. As in ancient times the natural cultivation of land bred food, Mullah Barrerai states that battle or war is a tribesman's natural way of earning a living, by saying that “two reasons that were being given for the gathering of the tribes against the British government, one was religion, and the other was money” (Ahmed 22). The tribesmen's uncertain futures are linked with the armour that they are synced with. This fire that kills others is primarily a reason responsible for the fire of the kiln or stove that cooks and prepares food for them in their private domains. Thus, the warm hearth in their homes is directly linked with the forced battles they must be involved in and hence the ambivalent nature of their home remains constant throughout their existence and so does their widespread dislocation. Significantly the element of fire brings out the most distinct form of marriage between the human and non-human elements i.e. that of the unflinching heroic warrior spirit and the modernized weaponry adopted to achieve their ends. The seeming blend of both elements arbitrarily defines the roots of tribal existence.

Across the tribal belt, “Ahmad's expansive and intimate voice accentuates the smallness of the characters' lives while offering vivid glimpses into each individual's struggle for dignity and a foothold in the world”.

The dichotomy between the natural and the unnatural remains blurred when “a migrating herdsman accepts both an unexpectedly lush pasture and a relentless sandstorm his way...in the land that nourishes and bedevils them” . Contradictory elements of nature within and without a tribesman's life have learnt to co-exist for a resilient survival.

According to Johnson “Nature conventionally is that which is distinct from the human” (n.pag). Nature consists of “a constellation or cluster of qualities and attributes – the nature of a thing, or person. Nature is primal, the 'natural'. Nature invariably implies ontology” (Johnson) and, within this interpretation, the most vital part of nature is the “concern of systems of belief and religious traditions of the world” . Throughout the world, the concept of nature is undoubtedly “influenced substantively by theological and religious orientation. Religion, then, is a “natural” approach to the study of nature” (Johnson). Thus, religion being an integral part of the tribesmen's lives forms a natural part of their existence. Just as Mullah Barrerai uses religion as a bait to survive, Dawa Khan, in an iconic scene in the novel, shows how the spheres drawn by the governmental policies refuse to

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transcend their limitations even in the face of the same religion, the only aspect of commonality that exists to unite these provinces as one nation. Jamil Ahmed narrates this when Gul Jana's tribe needs mere water for their animals as they had been travelling for two days and if the animals didn't have the water they will die. However, the army officers cannot allow them to cross into their vicinity. Gul Jana believes that she can oust the differences between her tribe and the local government by carrying the Koran over her head, "The camels must not die. I am going with a Koran on my head. Nothing can happen to me" (Ahmed 18). Jamil Ahmed demonstrates that the modern civilized world remains indiscriminate even to the sanctity and sacred values of religion, "They had hardly gone fifty yards when two machine guns opened up from either side and mowed down the camels. The firing was indiscriminate. Men, women, and children died. Gul Jana's belief that the Koran would prevent tragedy died, too. Dawa Khan fell dead in the raking fire" (Ahmed 18).

To conclude, *The Wandering Falcon* imbibes qualities of impartial rigidity in its natural descriptions. The dry ravines, dry winds and the corrosive hardened and dry earth breathe men that are fixed and structured, defined by their own form as opposed to moist and expansive surroundings that maybe adaptive to civilizational changes. These are men defined by their own shape and bounds but never understood in it by the outside world, in their own

context. The Mahsuds, Wazirs or the Afridis are separate clans living in the western belt of Pakistan and yet each of them is defined and governed by their own natural and territorial boundaries. By relating and delving deeper into the stories of each of these tribes, Jamil Ahmed crosses their natural and human spheres that had remained enclosed for centuries. *The Wandering Falcon* is an attempt to foreground that transculturation of humanities in a postmodern world is extremely essential. This will not only eradicate darker myths related to marginalized regions such as Balochistan but also create a coherent worldview. The natural outside world has harmonised itself in the collective unconscious of these tribesmen who continuously remain very human in their honour driven capacity to err and make peace.

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