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The Damaged Landscape as Archive: Ecological Memory and Slow Violence in Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator*

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Abstract

The existing scholarship on Mirza Waheed's novel *The Collaborator* (2012) has mostly focused on the themes of contested national identity, the experience of trauma, political violence, and militarization. These perspectives provide a glimpse into human suffering of the Kashmir conflict, but often neglect its ecological elements, the aspects of the violence that are felt and remembered. This article offers a new approach to the scholarship on *The Collaborator* and Kashmiri literature as it foregrounds the ecological dimension of the conflict and memory. The article will discuss how *The Collaborator* reimagines Kashmir as an active ecological archive, that has been shaped over the years by the impacts of longstanding conflict spread across the land of mountains, forests, rivers and borders of Kashmir. The article builds on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, Lawrence Buell's ecocritical framework, Ursula K Heise's concept of sense of place, and Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory. The study employs close reading of text, to show how familiar landscapes, with the passage of time, are slowly becoming historical memory and spatial archives. It argues that ecological changes in the novel are not merely symbolic, but rather another archive which carries histories of disappearances, death, displacement, and prolonged militarization that remain marginalized by official political narratives. The focus of this article is shifted from political space of Kashmir towards the ecocentric space of Environmental Humanities to enrich the current work on Kashmir and draw attention towards the connection of ecological transformations, memory and historical testimony.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecological Memory, Slow Violence, Kashmiri Literature, Environmental Humanities, Conflict Literature.

INTRODUCTION

In modern Kashmiri literature, *The Collaborator* (2012) by Mirza Waheed is a unique work which complicates the valley as the familiar romantic landscape, 'the paradise on earth' or just a place for the political conflict. While the novel engages with insurgency, militarization, an examination of the ethical dilemmas posed by being alive in a war like situation, it also develops a poetic articulation of an ecological imagination, a place in which the natural world takes its place in history. Mountains, forests, rivers and border landscapes not only provide space for human action, but also shape the memories, identities and historical consciousness. Therefore, Waheed further expands the literary representation of Kashmir and claims that violence is inscribed not only upon human bodies but also the ecological landscape of Kashmir.

Much of the critical studies of *The Collaborator* have examined the novel on the themes of nationalism, trauma, militarization, political violence and postcolonial identity. Such readings have introduced the way Waheed investigates and explores the conflicting national narratives and the psychological effects of long-term conflict. Although Waheed's lyrical description of Kashmir is celebrated by critics and reviewers, rarely is it studied for how the landscape functions as an agent that remembers, witnesses, and preserves history. There has been less interest in the novel's natural world. Therefore, the relationship between ecology and memory remains a less explored dimension of the novel. More specifically, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how the natural landscape in *The Collaborator* itself becomes a material site of ecological memory, preserving traces of violence, militarization, disappearance and death.

This article addresses this gap through an ecocritical reading of *The Collaborator*. Rather, than treating landscape merely as a symbolic setting, it argues that Waheed transforms this landscape and valley as an ecological archive, a process of change and evolution that remembers the effects of the buildup and presence of military forces. Ecological memory that doesn't consist only of nostalgia for a lost homeland, but also the materials of place themselves that have been halted and transformed. The Valley preserves traces of histories that are often marginalized within dominant political narratives, particularly the histories of disappeared, death and prolonged militarization. This landscape serves as an alternate archive space and memory becomes a permanent archive in the changing nature of the landscape.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of this work is mostly inspired by Rob Nixon's idea of 'slow violence', "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). While the term applies to environmental degradation, this article extends it and it provides an illuminating framework for understanding the ecological consequences of prolonged militarization in the Kashmir Valley. Waheed depicted violence not as a series of incidents, but as a process that would gradually transform relationship between communities and landscapes they inhabit.

To analyse these environmental shifts, this study incorporates Lawrence Buell's foundational ecocritical framework, which asserts that "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (7). The perspective enables the Valley to be understood as an archive site of meaning rather than merely a setting or background for human action. This perspective gives an understanding of the Valley as an agent of production of meaning. Here ecological agency refers to the capacity of the landscape to participate in the production, retention, and communication of meaning rather than functioning only as a passive setting.

The establishment of identities through recurring experiences in ecological as opposed to territorial spaces is explored through Ursula K. Heise's concept of the sense of place, which emphasizes "a sense of place as a basic prerequisite for enacting environmental awareness and activism" (33). In this study, ecological memory refers to the ways in which changes, materials, and recurring features of the natural environment retain traces of past experiences and contribute to the remembrance of conflict.

Last but not least, the theory on cultural memory developed by Aleida Assmann, "Living memory gives way to cultural memory", in which she distinguishes between living memory and cultural memory, particularly her emphasis on material carriers of remembrance, provides a useful basis for considering how physical environments can participate in preservation of historical experience (6). These four perspectives complement one another: Nixon helps explain the gradual nature of violence, Buell establishes the active presence of the nonhuman environment, Heise connects ecological space with memory and identity, and Assmann helps explain how material spaces can preserve and carry memory. Together these ideas provide a helpful frame to examine the intertextuality between ecology, memory and violence as it plays out in Waheed's novel.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, this study relies on close textual analysis, prioritizing the novel's language, imagery and narrative structure and then the theoretical framework for understanding the interpretive depth of the novel. The passages are selected where descriptions of mountains, forests, streams, borders, seasons, and other ecological spaces intersect with memory, militarization, disappearance, death, or changes in everyday life. Close reading examines the words, images, recurring patterns, and narrative contexts of these passages before relating them to the selected theoretical concepts. This selection allows the analysis to focus on passages where the landscape moves beyond a descriptive setting and becomes connected to memory, violence, and historical experience.

The focus in this argument is to make Kashmir as living ecological archive and such is what *The Collaborator* is doing here. The Valley is not merely witnessing history, it also absorbs, preserves, and communicates historical experience by its own transformation as Waheed suggests, "This stream, my personal Hades, has seen everything" (19). In mapping the histories of the Kashmir conflict into ecological change, Waheed highlights the limits of anthropocentric strategies for understanding conflict literature while tracing environmental memory as a key aspect of the conflict. In doing so the novel not only contributes to the contemporary Kashmiri literature but also to the expanding field of environmental humanities by revealing how landscape becomes enduring witness of collective memory.

DISCUSSION

I. Kashmir as Ecological Memory

Mirza Waheed introduces Kashmir in *The Collaborator* not just as a political territory but as a real ecological environment. Before militarization emerges, the narrator's experience of the valley is through mountains, forests, streams, orchards, changing seasons. Nature is not merely a description of landscape; it is a basis of identity, a feeling of being at home, of being in place. Nature is the first memory, before it is political, Waheed suggests, by placing the relationship between people and the environment central of its focus. Ecological memory here can be understood as the way memories of human experience become connected with, preserved through, and recalled from particular environments and their material changes. It therefore links personal and collective memory with the physical landscape in which those experiences take place.

The novel opens with detailed descriptions of the valley, its beauty and familiarity. The narrator describes Kashmir in a way that focuses on the sensory impressions rather than its historical events, giving a delicate first account of this close relationship between humans and nature: "There are trees

here, and in their shadows the shadows of people on their daily Chores" (Waheed 11). This establishes a presence of the landscape, not as a decorative backdrop but an active presence. The mountains, forests and fields are part of the narrator's world and his childhood, so they are a part of his perception of the world. In the environmental literature, the nonhuman world is regarded as an active presence and human history becomes environmental history, as Buell suggests (7). Waheed's work on Kashmir reflects this ecological understanding which has led to the human interdependence with the surrounding environment. The landscape therefore becomes more than a place where memory occurs; it becomes a part of how memory is formed and retained.

Another concept that helps explain narrator's attachment to the valley is that 'sense of place' as described by Ursula K. Heise. Place is not an abstract concept, but rather a continuous relationship between communities and their environments (Heise 33-35). In *The Collaborator*, belonging is produced through everyday encounters where paths and fields in the villages, rivers, forests, and mountain that serve as the country's reference points. Childhood friendships, family relations and commonplace routines dominate the landscape, which is all about identity formation. This sense of place also provides the foundation of ecological memory. When people repeatedly experience the same environment, the place becomes connected with their memories, identities, and everyday histories. In this way, Heise's sense of place explains how ecological memory is formed through lived relationships with the environment.

The mountains are quite important to the novel. They continue to resurface as an indication of stability in comparison to the instability of politics. They do not enter into conflict with the villagers, and never fight among themselves rather silently overlook the village, observing generations without participating directly in human conflict. Waheed captures this enduring presence when the narrator reflects upon the surrounding hills; "Behind the hills are the over-reaching mountains, rows and rows of them, that turns scores of shades during the day and become sad and disquieting dark at night" (4). Although these mountains are an aesthetic presence, they also bear witness to permanence beyond the life which can endure across generations. According to Aleida Assmann, cultural memory is not only stored in written archives, but also in other material environments, which also bear trace of the historical experience (6). This function of continuity without the addition of conflict, is embodied by the mountains in *The Collaborator*. What is silent and stoic about them prepares the ground for the next stage in the transformation of the landscape into a collective memory in the novel. The mountains thus begin to suggest a form of ecological agency. Their agency is not human agency, but their material presence allows experiences to remain visible and meaningful across generations.

The forest similarly contributes to the narrator's imagination to serve its purpose. Initially, it is associated with freedom, companionship, and exploration. They are no longer in the confines of the village. The narrator and his friends have a natural connection with these forests. Waheed writes: "They stand still, as if observing my every move, my every step, every thought, in total silence" (80). These are the scenes that aren't uncommon and that's the key. Waheed's image of ecological space is not pastoral; his vision is different and is realized in everyday life. The forests are meaningful because they are experienced and lived environment and space that has a cumulative memory. They are not just for decoration or aesthetics but they represent the narrator's emotional landscape. The forests therefore participate in the preservation of memory through their continuing presence and their changing condition.

At the same time, Waheed delicately reminds the readers of how even this ecosystem's balance can be easily destroyed. The overall impression may be one of stability, but the surroundings of militarized border create an underlying tension that slowly emerges. Readers are aware that under the seemingly tranquil environment, exists the shadow of historical uncertainty. In particular, it is appropriate in the context of Rob Nixon's description of 'slow violence', which embodies the slow

processes of violence (2). In the Valley too, no significant physical changes had taken place yet, but the conditions for future ecological disruption are already present.

Consequently, the opening chapters not only show a nostalgic image of Kashmir, but also an inherited relationship with Kashmir. They develop an ecological approach to landscape, memory and identity. The feeling of belonging is fostered in the Valley even as the landscape is altered in a very disturbing way for the narrator. In raising Kashmir above the level of mere a geopolitical conflict zone, Waheed sets the stage for readers to see beyond the horrors of war and human suffering caused by the destruction. It raises questions about the human relationship towards the spaces of memory, belonging and imagining home. Through this relationship between place, memory, and material space, Kashmir emerges as an ecological memory that carries experiences beyond individual recollection.

II. Slow Violence and the Militarized Landscape

The opening chapters of *The Collaborator* establish Kashmir as an ecological land but gradually chronicles the process of transformation of this land under an extended military rule. Waheed does not express violence in the form of brutal acts and armed conflicts. Rather, he imagines this to be a longer and more insidious series in which our natural surroundings become a mediator in conflict. The forest, mountains, and border landscapes have new meanings as the ordinary spaces are gradually reorganized by surveillance. The violence thus pervades and not only human bodies but also the ecology of the Valley.

This slow change closely parallels Rob Nixon's notion of "slow violence" (2). Slow violence is more challenging to spot than immediate physical violence, and may only be visible as a result of long-term consequences. For Nixon, violence becomes slow when its effects unfold gradually and remain difficult to recognize as violence because they are dispersed across time and space. It therefore differs from spectacular violence, which can be immediately seen and identified as an event. Waheed demonstrates how political conflict creates changes in the environment that not only affect human communities, but also alter their understanding of how these communities experience and understand belonging. In *The Collaborator*, this gradual process is connected to militarization rather than to environmental degradation alone. Military presence changes the meaning and use of familiar spaces over time. Surveillance, restricted movement, and military control make the landscape part of continuing experience of conflict. Thus, the application of Nixon's concept to Kashmir reveals how militarization can produce environmental and emotional effects that accumulate slowly rather than appearing as a single violent event.

Emotionally, the Valley is transformed before it is physically transformed, and much of the novel's affect is created as the reader follows this process. Familiar routes change from safe to perilous, forests become restricted zones, and ordinary movement is replaced by constant caution. The narrator recounts this changed nature by describing the presence of soldiers and military surveillance; "You could see army pickets on either side of the valley ..." (Waheed 4). It makes clear that militarization progressively reconfigures the narrator's perception of spaces that had previously been experienced through childhood familiarity. The previously familiar landscapes now have a sense of uncertainty and fear. Although no changes have been made to the Valley's location, the emotional significance has changed. In this sense Waheed shows how environmental violence is not always physical; it can also be the change in the relationship between humans and environmental space. This is where Nixon's idea becomes especially useful. The violence is experienced through an altered relationship with place. The landscape does not need to be completely destroyed for violence to become environmentally meaningful.

The most evident transformation is in the forests. At the beginning of the novel, they have been characterized by curiosity, freedom, and companionship. However, when the conflict escalates these very forests become associated with disappearances, secrecy and death. In this observation of the

landscape of the woodland, Waheed documents this change: "Look at that forest they have just scorched" (46). Although the physical world is not gone, its symbolic, and emotional significance has changed profoundly. Lawrence Buell argues that environmental literature challenges the assumption that nature is a backdrop for human life (85). Waheed's ecological thinking develops this idea by showing how nature affects emotion, recollection, and action. The nature has an impact on emotion, recollection, and action of the narrator transforming the landscape while also affecting the character's psychology. A transformation of the land equals transformation of character's psychology, as it impacts on emotion, memory, and action of the narrator.

The bodies of the young men, who died as they attempted to cross the country's border in the hidden valley are the most powerful image of ecological violence in the novel. Whereas death is usually staged in dramatic battle scenes in Western movies, Waheed shows the cumulative effects of battle on the landscape. The narrator finds himself in a valley of dead bodies amidst grass, rocks and trees, "Wretched human remains lie on the green grass like cracked toys" (Waheed 8). Waheed's narration is comprised of actions rather than affect, adding to the emotional effect of the scene. The birds continue flying by, nor to grass growing, and the seasons continue to change. Nature around these bodies continues alongside the violence, creating an unsettling coexistence between ecological continuity and human destruction. The Valley comes to memorialize lives forgotten from history. Violence is consequently ecological, political, as it changes forever the relationship between environment and people inhabiting it.

The concept of 'solastalgia' by Glenn Albrecht et al., in "Solastalgia: the distress caused by environmental change" (2007), further illuminates the narrator's experience. Albrecht defines solastalgia as the distress caused when people remain in their homeland while experiencing changes in environmental conditions. The narrator's experience can be productively read through Albrecht's concept of solastalgia. Places that were once familiar are now associated with fear and grief. Geographically, the home remains, but it becomes an unrecognizable place. Waheed thus makes it clear that even when there is no physical displacement, ecological and emotional loss can occur. Solastalgia deepens the emotional dimension of slow violence because it describes the distress produced when a familiar home is changed while the person remains in it. The narrator therefore experiences loss without necessarily leaving the Valley. His homeland remains geographically present, but its emotional and ecological character is altered by militarization. Solastalgia thus connects the environmental transformation of the Valley with the narrator's changing sense of belonging.

Another element of the militarized landscape that is important is silence. Silence is used to ensure peace in the opening passages and a cohesive environment. But where serious conflict arises silence takes a different meaning. It is not the tranquillity of a state of isolation rather it reflects surveillance, absence, and suppresses memory. The narrator observes, "The stillness of the trees. They don't rustle, their leaves don't hiss and murmur and crackle, they just don't make any sound" (Waheed 79-80). This silence does not show the absence of history, but an overwhelming presence. Each silent valley and forgotten path seems to have its lives of violence. Ecological space becomes saturated with memory, that is, it anticipates its future role as an archive of history.

Instead of focusing on discrete events of political significance, Waheed chooses to portray the militarization as a step-by-step ecological process, thus truly extending a literary vision of the conflict. Violence is demonstrated to transform not only the lives of the humans who experience it, but also the environmental landscapes that are considered places for memory and identity to exist. The Valley is no longer a site of historical events, but one of the main victims of history. But so is the afflicted terrain given a different life as well. Its scars show traces of what is not included in official narratives.

III. The Valley as Historical Archive

In the concluding passages of *The Collaborator*, the Valley goes beyond the function of a place of ecological belonging or militarized terrain. It becomes the basis of a historical archive which despite its changed state retains memories that are lacking from official political narratives. The mountains, forests, rivers, and abandoned places testify to the absence and acts of violence and are witnesses to the vanished lives. As a consequence, the novel redefines memory as an ecological act of remembering and becomes a study of memory in its material surroundings. In this process, the landscape develops a form of ecological agency. It does not remember like human subject, rather, its agency lies in its capacity to retain material traces of past events. One of the reflections made by the narrator shows this transformation. "This stream, my personal Hades, has seen everything but knows not what to say. It just flows, briefly contemplating things in its small, cyclical green pools at every small bend, and then moves on. That's what rivers do: move on, no matter what" (Waheed 19).

The significance of this text is that it makes the landscape into historical memory. It is absence, rather than belonging that is left in each familiar place. It is not the Valley in memory anymore, but the Valley can therefore be read as becoming a material form of memory. This is one of the significant features of Waheed's works in the contemporary Kashmiri literature. Instead of seeking out history elsewhere, as in political or personal narratives, he puts it on the ecology of the Valley itself. *The Collaborator* works towards developing this idea of transforming ecological space to become an alternate archive. The mountains, forests, and the valleys have greater significance in the history because they have witnessed disappearances and losses and have endured prolonged conflict over the years. Unlike the authority in institutions, their authority lies more with their physical endurance. The landscape remains a reminder of the past even when the corresponding records are not available or subject to change or erasure. Here Aleida Assmann's distinction between living memory and cultural memory becomes important. Living memory depends on active human recollection and communication. Cultural memory can survive through material forms and carriers of remembrance. In the novel, the Valley functions as such a material carrier. Its mountains, forests, rivers, and other spaces retain traces that can outlast individual memory.

Grass and flowers cover the valley where the young adults went missing, while repetitive scenes of the valley appear in people's memories. The ecology of memory is strengthened by the fact that the same image of the hidden valley with young men buried in it is repeated over and over in people's memories. Waheed deliberately refuses to isolate the dead from their surroundings. Rather, they slowly disappear into the ground to be part of the landscape. Areas of grass surround them, birds fly over them and the passing of the seasons silently encroaches upon their remnants. The narrator observes: "In places they have grown in great numbers around the fallen and the decaying. You can see bright yellow outlines of human forms enclosing darkness inside" (Waheed 14).

The dead are not erased by nature nor is there any glorification of the dead. Instead, Waheed's imagery makes the process of ecological incorporation appear almost intentional. Human history is no longer distinct from environmental history; they merge and become inseparable. In the Valley, memory is preserved in a different physical condition, rather than through monuments, or with official ceremonies. Waheed grants narrative agency to the Valley. Instead of using institutional archives or political rhetoric the landscape witnesses, recalls and narrates the history without speaking. Ecological space becomes a witness space and helps preserve histories that would be lost otherwise. This agency remains material rather than literal. The landscape does not speak, but its physical traces make remembrance possible.

The desire to go back to nature, infused into the novel by the relentless implementation of natural phenomenon, only makes the theme of memory more nuanced. Despite of the destruction all around them, rivers continue to flow and vegetation continues to grow. However, Waheed subliminally tries

to avoid the simplicity of the image of healing here. Ecological endurance does not erase historical trauma. Instead, the natural environment carries the accumulated traces of violence within its own rhythms.

The Valley thus becomes an archive transcending the boundaries of politics. It remains a reminder of names that have faded from official documentation and retains experiences that aren't readily found in other dominant political narratives. These include disappearances, unrecorded deaths, military presence, restricted movement, and the experiences of people living with prolonged conflict. They also include the environmental changes produced by militarization. Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence is played out to its best effect here since the effects of militarization on the environment follow in the wake of the particulars of conflict (12-14). Violence goes on not just in the memory of man but in the changed landscape, the traces remain embedded in the landscape beyond individual episodes of violence. The ecological archive therefore does not simply replace official history. It supplements it by preserving experiences that formal records may overlook. At the same time, it challenges official narratives by making absence and material traces visible. What is missing from institutional records can remain present in the landscape.

Ultimately, *The Collaborator* proposes a different notion of historical remembrance. The Valley is not just a place of victimization, but a place that also holds collective memory. Ecological shifts are equally forms of testimony for those found in mountain, forest, river, and border landscapes, who stand as witnesses to what has gone before. In this sense, the landscape becomes a material carrier of cultural memory. It carries traces of experiences beyond the limits of individual living memory. In this potent environmental imagination, Waheed redefines the possibilities of Kashmiri literature and the field of Environmental Humanities by demonstrating that landscapes are not just parts of history, but also help in the preservation of history.

CONCLUSION

Generally, *The Collaborator* has been read as a novel of political strife, militarization and trauma. These approaches have contributed to a greater critical dialogue on the contemporary Kashmiri literature, but they tend to focus on the suffering of the people and give less attention to environmental changes. This article argues that Mirza Waheed has presented the concept of Kashmir as an ecologically active archive that paints a picture of its gradual metamorphosis, providing a record of cumulative effects of conflict on the Valley. Landscape, whether local or distant, is not just a geographical backdrop to history, it is an active player in that history.

The discourse has revealed Kashmir to be a homeland, where forests, rivers, and seasonal cycles are in constant interplay, forming earliest experiences of identity and home for the narrator. Drawing on Ursula K. Heise's idea of sense of place, the present article has revealed that the feeling of attachment to Kashmir is related to daily interaction with the nature, rather than political allegiance to an abstract vision of Kashmir (33-35). However, familiar landscape quickly becomes part of militarization and these same landscapes take on new significance. The analysis of the ecological impact of conflict is based on Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence, which suggests that the ecological effects of war are slow moving and affect physical environments and human relationships with place (2-3). The violence presented is therefore not just a political event, but a process over an extended length of time within an ecological system.

The final section shows that wounded landscape is ultimately an alternative archive of history. Through Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory, this study has suggested that the valley preserves histories that frequently remain absent from official narratives. The mountains, forests, rivers, and border landscapes silently hold the traces of disappearance, loss and militarization and over the course of time become a medium for historical testimony. Waheed thus challenges anthropocentric theories of memory by suggesting that landscapes play a crucial role in retaining collective memory.

The most important aspect of this article lies in the novel idea to present the Kashmiri landscape as an ecological archive instead of just being a setting for political conflict. This view contributes a new strand to scholarship that brings Environmental Humanities into dialogue with Kashmir studies and considers ecological transformations a significant facet of historical memory. Finally, Waheed invites readers to acknowledge that history of Kashmir is not written only upon human bodies but upon the valley itself where damaged landscapes become witness to life and history that cannot be erased.

This study is limited by its close reading of a single literary text. Its findings therefore cannot be generalized to all Kashmiri literature or all experiences of ecological violence. Future research can extend this approach by examining other Kashmiri writers and texts that represent landscape, displacement, militarization, and environmental change. Comparative studies can also explore how ecological memory operates across different conflict regions. Such research can further connect ecocriticism with conflict literature and environmental justice.

By placing landscape at the centre of the study, this article also extends the scope of conflict literature. Conflict is shown not only through human suffering and political events but also through the gradual transformation of the environments in which those events occur. The ecological archive therefore adds an environmental dimension to the study of conflict and its historical memory. It suggests that damaged landscapes can preserve forms of testimony that remain outside conventional political and historical accounts. In this way, *The Collaborator* demonstrates how conflict literature can also become a literature of ecological memory, environmental loss, and material remembrance.

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