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TERRA INFIRMA: PRESENTATION OF NATURE AND MAN OF AFGHANISTAN IN THE NOVELS OF ATIQ RAHIMI AND KHALED HOSSEINI

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ABSTRACT

The author in this dissertation discusses the ecological concepts and contextualises them in respect to Afghanistan as re-membered and represented by Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini in their novels. The researcher attempts here to relate the Afghan nature and the Afghan nation, and their relation to Afghan history and culture. Thus, the paper, with textual references, shows how the land and the peoples of Afghanistan interact and how this is re-membered in the fictions of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini.

Keywords: Nation, Nature, Culture, Ecology, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Afghanistan.

Remembering a nation subsumes, within the process, remembering the space and place within which a nation operates. So re-membering the earth becomes often an important facet of the fictional narratives of the nation. In their common capacity of Afghan diasporic writers, Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini too have also contributed to the "poetics of place" while creating their fictional representation of Afghanistan – the place and its politics. Environmental issues and geo-political contingencies are interconnected, and hence an ecocritical study of their novels may not be out of place. This dissertation attempts to show how these authors have disclosed the "ecological imperilment" (Rigby 151) of their homeland through their diasporic gaze and sensibility, just as the perpetrators of the crime against nature attempt to conceal their acts from the public gaze.

The modernist and humanist divide between Society and Nature (including the dichotomy between the human sciences and the natural sciences) in "terms of mastery and consumption" (Rigby 152) was opposed by the postmodernist and post-humanist interdisciplinary critical intervention known as *ecocriticism*. The first use of the term "ecocriticism" is credited to William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978). Rueckert proposed the wedding of science and poetry by applying concepts of "pure, biological ecology" to "human ecology, specifically literary ecology" and by problematising the grounds upon which the human and the natural communities "can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere" (Rueckert 107). Ecocriticism as a term combines the two words– "ecology" and "criticism" – and signifies an ecologically oriented literary criticism. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" – an earth-centred "approach to literary studies" with the basic principle that "human

culture is connected to the physical world," at once affecting it and being affected by it (Glotfelty xviii -xix). It negotiates between nature and culture (particularly the cultural artefacts of language/literature) – between "the human and the nonhuman": "Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theories 'the world' is synonymous with the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (Glotfelty xix). Other terms, associated with ecocriticism, are *ecopoetics*, *environmental literary criticism*, and *green cultural studies*. The focal term "eco" for ecology originated from Greek 'oikos' meaning 'house' ("Ecology 453"). Nature is "our widest home" or *oikos* as Edward Hoagland remarks and as is quoted by William Howarth in his essay "Some Principles of Ecocriticism" (Howarth 69). While, the term *environment*, originating from Old French *environ* meaning 'surroundings' ("Environment 477"), has an anthropocentric and dualistic connotation with 'man' at the centre "surrounded by everything that is not us," *eco* or *oikos* implies "interdependent communities, integrated systems, and strong connections among constituent parts" (Glotfelty xx). According to William Rueckert, this ecological poetics with an ecological vision attempts to penetrate "the economic, political, social, and technological visions of our time" because, the problem is not local or national, but global and planetary (Rueckert 114).

Ecocriticism has developed some philosophical subfields namely "environmental ethics," "deep ecology," "ecofeminism," and "social ecology" to name a few. In fact, the main objective of these associated fields of study is to identify the "root causes of environmental degradation" with a view to offering an "ethical and conceptual formulation" for man's right "relations with the earth" (Glotfelty xxi). While "ecology" denotes the bio-study of the "relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings" ("Ecology 453"), "deep ecology" (a coinage by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1972 and sometimes called "ecosophy") is an ecology movement to recognise the intrinsic values of "nature" irrespective of its usefulness to human beings, and, thus, promoting the biocentrism and critiquing the anthropocentrism of a consumerist culture ("Deep Ecology"). "Ecofeminism" is a hybrid label for a theoretical discourse that takes the insights from "feminism" for the study of ecosphere or nature, and correlates "the oppression of women and the domination of nature" (Glotfelty xxiv) and, thus, it critiques the androcentrism in other eco-theories. "Social ecology" on the other hand opposes any "centrism" at the cost of any marginal community considered as "other." It criticises bio-centric "green ecology" for its downplaying of human society; it also criticises "ecofeminism" for its gynocentric downplaying of the male part of human society; and it further criticises deep ecology for its "Malthusian thrust," its "mystifying Eco-la-la," its "disorienting eclecticism" and a "crude biologism." Murray Bookchin pleads for "social ecology" with the "project of social reconstruction that alone can spare the biosphere from virtual destruction" (Bookchin 20).

Taking into account the insights from the foregoing discussion, the novels of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini are analysed here to focus on the four neighbouring and overlapping areas, as categorised by Peter Barry, of the "outdoor environment" to show how nature and man/culture are mutually interconnected:

1. **The wilderness** that includes deserts, oceans and uninhabited places,
2. **The scenic sublime** that includes forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, waterfalls, etc.,
3. **The countryside** that includes, hills, fields, woods etc., and
4. **The domestic picturesque** that includes, for instance, parks, gardens, lanes etc. (Barry 255-56)

These four areas show a gradual passage from pure nature to human considerations. If we consider the earth as a site of nature-man encounter, then we can see how anthropocentric considerations leading to man-made disasters like global warming, war or unrest jeopardises the "pure" nature (i.e. the area under wilderness).The main focus of this paper is on the landscape of Afghanistan– the word "landscape" being used here in the sense by which Weaver-Hightower means "the natural land being transformed" by human perceptions, uses and adaptations including man-made structures (Weaver-Hightower 123). Needless to say, a concern about nature involves the concern not only about its landscape, but also its lifescape including human habitations.

The environmental pollution; its impacts on the wilderness, dwelling and animals; and the future of the earth– these are the major concerns of the most engaged ecocritics as discussed in details by Gred Garrad in his book *Ecocriticism*. These are taken into account while discussing the "nature-man" encounter in the context of Afghanistan as a victim of Cold War and the consequent civil wars of the late twentieth century, as also the war on terror of the early twenty first century. Significantly, the paper title "Terra Infirma," intertextually inspired by Carol Westberg's 2014 poetry collection of the same title (*Terra Infirma*), refers to Afghanistan as the "infirm" land with all its medical ramifications. As such, the texts selected for discussion in the present paper will be analysed with a view to describing the defilement of the Afghan land that has resulted from the nature-man encounter in the last fifty years as well as that has been re-memberred in the narratives of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini.

Before focussing on the novels of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini from the ecocritical perspectives, it would be useful to recall the geographical features of Afghanistan and its landscape in general. Afghanistan, geographically a land-locked country forming a north-eastern part of the arid Iranian plateau (Sykes 2: 5), is surrounded in the west by Iran, in the north by three Central Asian countries namely Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, in the east by China and a part of the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and in the south by Pakistan. Afghanistan has within it the Oxus valley and the Central Asian depression in its northern part, the low-lying plains attached to northern Pakistan and "watered by the Indus and its tributaries" in its eastern part, its most waterless area attached to the deserts of the Baluchistan province of Pakistan in its southern part (Sykes 2:1).

J. W. Kaye in *History of the War in Afghanistan* (vol.1) describes Afghanistan's formidable eco-strategic character opposing foreign hostility. Its north and east are barricaded by colossal mountain ranges; whereas, its south and west are bounded by vast deserts. Kaye also indicates the "general aspect of the country" as "wild and forbidding" coloured by the popular imagination and belief in goules and genii haunting the land – varied by a "gentler beauty in the valleys and on the plains, where the fields were smiling with cultivation, and the husbandman might be seen busy at his work" (Kaye 1:11).

As N. H. Dupree and T. E. Gouttierre sketched in "The Society and its Environment" in *Afghanistan: a Country Study* edited by Peter R. Blood, the Afghan landscape is dominated by mountains running in a northeast-southwest direction bisecting the country (33). These mountains have formed the Hindukush system which is "the most important westernmost extension of the Pamir Mountains, the Karakorum Mountains, and the Himalayas" (Dupree and Gouttierre 33). This system includes not only the Hindukush Mountains, but also the numerous smaller mountain ranges including the Koh-e Baba, Salang, Koh-e Paghman, Spin Ghar (also called the eastern SafidKoh), Suleiman, SiahKoh, Koh-e Khwaja Mohammad, Selseleh-e Band-e Turkestan, western Safid Koh, the Siah Band and Doshakh (Dupree and Gouttierre 33). These mountainous areas covering half of the country are mostly infertile, or at the most thinly marked with trees and puny bushes (Dupree and Gouttierre 33). Forests in proper can be seen mostly in the eastern provinces of Paktiya and Nuristan, though these are terribly diminished by war and illegal deforestation (Dupree and Gouttierre 34).

According to Louis Dupree's "regional division of human geography and ecology" into eleven geographic zones in Afghanistan, six are mountainous regions, and the remaining five zones comprise the following plains and deserts surrounding the Mountains in the north, west and southwest (Dupree 5):

1. Turkistan Plains,
2. Herat-Farah Lowlands,
3. Sistan Basin-Hilmand Valley,
4. Western Stony Desert and
5. South-western Sandy Desert.

Though there are some streams and rivers that flow seasonally, these remain empty at other times. However, there are many other streams and rivers that contribute to the following four major water-flow systems in Afghanistan:

1. The Amu Darya or the Oxus that makes the Afghan boundary of eleven hundred kilometres with Central Asia;
2. The Hilmand with thirteen hundred kilometres;
3. The Harirud (650 kilometres in Afghanistan); and
4. The Kabul (460 kilometres), the only river joining the Indus system in Pakistan before flowing to the sea ((Dupree 33).

The major dams to harness the river water for hydroelectric, and land reclamation purposes are the Arghandab Dam above Kandahar completed in 1952, the Kajakai Dam on the Hilmand River completed in 1953, the Naglu Dam on the Kabul River west of Jalalabad completed in 1968 (Dupree and Gouttierre 34). Though these major dams were not damaged by war, the consequent disturbances led to their ill functioning because of inadequate maintenance, theft of cables and siltation in the reservoirs (Dupree and Gouttierre 34).

As described by Dupree and Gouttierre, the average climate of Afghanistan is characterised by dry summers and cold winters. However, the effect of the southeast monsoon (July-September) with sporadic rain is experienced in the mountains bordering Pakistan. Though the intermountain plateaus do not face strong winds, the Sistan Basin faces severe snowstorms between December and February, whereas the desert and steppe lands in the southern and western regions face a northerly wind together with sand storms, intense heat and drought between June and September. Though lasting snow envelops the uppermost mountain peaks, the high winds brush away much of the snow from the average mountain peaks and ridges making the valleys veritable snow-traps. Fluctuating precipitation is also found all over the country, sometimes with sudden rainstorms and flash floods, transforming the rivers and streams from puddles to torrents. (Dupree and Gouttierre 35)

Domesticated animals in Afghanistan are horses used as prestige animals, donkeys used as beasts of burden, mules used as pack animals especially in hilly areas, camels used mainly in desert areas, sheep, goats, cattle, water buffalo used primarily as plough animals mainly in the Jalalabad and Qandahar areas, yak used by only the Kirghiz and other Pamiri peoples, chickens, ducks raised occasionally, turkeys raised by Afghan farmers near Kabul mainly to grace the plates of foreigners, dogs sometimes used as pet and kept by the nomad shepherds for protection, cats sometimes as pet (Dupree 47-50). Knud Paludan records that out of 389 species of birds found in Afghanistan, 231 species breed within the country (Paludan 322). Louis Dupree in *Afghanistan* informed in details about the wild and water animals found in Afghanistan (Dupree 51-54), which is not furnished here. However, while analysing the novels of Rahimi and Hosseini, the references of such animals may be made to substantiate the ecological concerns of these authors.

About 12% of about 63 million hectares (i.e. the total area of Afghanistan) comes under cultivated land (7.56 million hectares approximately) including the irrigated land (i.e. 6.2 million hectares approximately) and dry farmed land (i.e. 1.3 million hectares producing wheat and barley mainly) (Dupree 43). The major crops produced in Afghanistan are wheat, corn, barley, rice, cotton, sugar beet, sugar cane, oilseeds, vegetables and fruits (Dupree 43). Most of the cultivated lands are situated in the northern areas from the Hindu Kush Mountains. Irrigation projects were taken in the 1980s in the south and southwest to cover more farmed land in Afghanistan.

The brief analysis made above about the landscape and lifescape of Afghanistan will help us to highlight the ecological concerns in the novels of Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini. For instance, Rahimi's first novel entitled *Earth and Ashes* seems to invite an ecocritical reading. It describes places like Abqul (AbKol/AbQol), Pul-i-Khumri and the Karkar coal mine – places that really exist, located as there, in the Baghlan Province of northern Afghanistan (Adamec, *Historical and* 1: 40-41). Abqul or Ab-Kol is a village on the Kunduz River and, according to Adamec, it had around eighty houses of Ghilzais in around 1970 (*Historical and* 1: 16).This province has two major rivers i.e. the Pul-i-Khumri and the Andarab; four major mountains i.e. the Baghlan, QaraBatur, Chun Ghar, and Mar Khana; four most important passes i.e. the Rabatak, Barani, Khawak, and Salan; its economy being "primarily agricultural with the cultivation of sugar beets and cotton" and export of various fruits especially

pomegranates, grapes, and pistachio nuts; and, prominent industries being textile, sugar refining, and cement manufacturing (Adamec, *Historical and* 1: 40-41). Pul-i-Khumri is described as an industrial town famous for the production of textiles and cement around 1970 and its development began with an exploitation of nature by erecting a dam on the Ghori river to install an electric power plant, followed by a second dam in 1960 to meet the need of the province (Adamec, *Historical and* 1: 136).Water for irrigation was so adequately available by 1970 that the land of Pul-i-Khumri was brought under cultivation (Adamec, *Historical and* 1:136).The Karakar valley is famous for the Karakul sheep raised in various parts of Baghlan and there is a coal mine in the Karkar valley near Pul-i-Khumri (Adamec, *Historical and* 1: 41). It is to be noted that Atiq Rahimi's mother-tongue Dari in which he wrote the original version of this novel is the mother tongue of most of the people of Pul-i-Khumri. The inhabitants are mostly Tajiks apart from other ethnic groups. This brief geo-historical information about the location of the nature-man encounter of Rahimi's fiction *Earth and Ashes* shows how Afghanistan looked environmentally before the Russians invaded it in 1979. The "earth" that means a fertile land of Afghanistan, becomes the "ashes" that means a barren land or a wasteland as a consequence of external aggression and civil unrest.

At the beginning of the novel, Atiq Rahimi describes the geographical location of the place and its natural setting where the central character Dastaguir with his little grandson (Yassin) waits for a vehicle bound to the Karkar coal mine to meet his son Murad working as a miner:

> With your back to the autumn sun, you are squatting against the iron railings of the bridge that links the two banks of the dry riverbed north of Pul-i-Khumri. The road connecting Northern Afghanistan to Kabul passes over this very bridge. If you turn left on the far side of the bridge, on to the dirt track that winds between the scrub-covered hills, you arrive at the Karkar coal mine .... (*Earth* 10)

This narrative of the geographically real places links the historical temporality with the hints of the presence of the red army affecting not only the Afghan people but also the land of Afghanistan:

> An army truck, a red star on its door, passes over the bridge. **It disturbs the stony sleep of the dry earth. The dust rises.** It engulfs the bridge then settles. Silently it covers everything, dusting the apples, your turban, your eyelids . . . You put your hand over Yassin's apple to shield it. (*Earth* 11, Highlight made by me)

Rahimi has used the geographical term "earth" in its ordinary geological sense throughout the narrative. Dastaguir observes the dry earth in its stony sleep (*Earth* 11). He remembers his wife's voice in the courtyard warning him that God will punish him in the grave by filling his with earth and by turning his body to earth of a tobacco field (*Earth* 30). He desires to step down from Shahmard's truck and to prostrate himself on that earth and those stones that have kissed his son's feet (*Earth* 45). His tired and weak legs seem to burn inside his shoes as if into the *depths of the earth . . . its molten centre*. His entrance through the passage of the foreman's building seems long and deep and going *right down to the depths of the earth . . . down to furnaces of molten rock* (*Earth* 60). He takes *a pinch of grey earth* between his fingertips and places it under his tongue in absence of his naswar box which he has left behind for Murad (*Earth* 72).

Associated with the term "earth" is Rahimi's frequent use of the word "dust" in the sense of man's mindless battering of the earth's surface and despoilment of the objects thereon. The road at the bridge connecting northern Afghanistan and Kabul represents the deteriorated condition of the Afghan administration in the province at that time. The roads demanding attention for repair is dusty and the frequently plying heavy vehicles spread dust on everything around. For instance, Dastaguir who has been waiting at the bridge for three hours, finds his cloths to have become "dusty" (*Earth* 9); his turban has been heavy with dust and its original colour has been turned into grey with *the sun and the dust* (*Earth* 11); the apple in little Yassin's hand has become dirty (*Earth* 9); the army truck with a red star raises dust that *engulfs the bridge* dusting the apples, turban, eyelids etc. (*Earth* 11); the dust fills his mouth and nostrils (*Earth*12); when truck-driver Shahmard speeds the vehicle "onto the property of the mine," the guard beside his hut disappears in *a cloud of dust* (*Earth* 45); Dastaguir's gaze *lost in the valley, in its black stones, its dust and its scrub* (Earth 47); the military truck coming from the opposite direction at high speed raises clouds of dust that *erases the lines of the valley* (*Earth* 54);

Dastaguir remembers the fatal demolition of his village where he stayed amid ruins till he *turned to dust* (*Earth* 52); his vision of his daughter-in-law running naked within a *black billow of dust* or a *veil of black dust* covering her body or her disappearance in a *cloud of dark dust* (*Earth* 54-55); when Shahmard drops him at the entrance of the mine and the *truck moves off*, he remains *nailed to the ground in a cloud of dust* (*Earth* 60) etc. – all these numerous allusions cited above amply testify to Rahimi's concern with the environmental defacement of his homeland in time of the Soviet aggression.

The Russian bombing of Abqul is also described by Dastaguir in terms of "dust." He grieves that cannot understand why God found his people punishable by reducing the village to dust (*Earth* 31). When he saw the sudden explosion with fire and clouds of dust, he ran towards the house through the dust and fire (*Earth* 32) and he found the house to have become a grave for his wife, his other son, that son's wife and their children (*Earth* 33).

The presentation of the coalmine as a geological part of the earth is also significant. The exploitation of these mineral resources has a negative effect on nature and man. When Dastaguir reaches the Karkar coalmine and the big-bodied foreman in military uniform places his hand on Dastaguir's shoulders, it seems to him that *the mine with its big hill, its coal and its square cement buildings* rests on his shoulders (*Earth* 62). The miners black in coal coming down the hill of the mine as others climbing up (*Earth* 58), the foreman with his *big black teeth* hidden beneath *a dirty moustache* and a smell of coal (*Earth* 59), Dastaguir's vision of the coal-apple (*Earth* 54) – all these indicate how Nature pays man back for his intrepidity. Dastaguir's anxiety that the mine may have collapsed and his son has been entombed in coal is suggestive in fact of the risk and danger man faces in such mining (*Earth* 65) – in such purposed, yet mindless human action against Nature.

The air-pollution because of the coal-mining is noticeable also. When Dastaguir leaves the bridge in Shahmard's truck and it runs into the territory of the mine (*Earth* 45), his eyesight goes dim. He finds the air not refreshing as it is thick, heavy and dark (*Earth* 57). Again, while returning from the Karkar coalmine, he finds the air to have become thicker, heavier and blacker (*Earth* 70). The effect of the human despoilment of Nature is noticed on the tired and black faces of the miners who are climbing down the hillside (*Earth* 70).

"Ashes" is the other term of this novel's title. It too has marked environmental dimensions. Images from this nightmarish vision of fire and ashes as well as shouts and wails of the bomb-decimated village Abqul (*Earth*18) haunt Dastaguir at times. Mirza Qadir's information of the Russians's brutality in reducing the entire village to smoke and ashes, introduces this basic story (*Earth* 23). While narrating the story to Mirza, he informs how his daughter-in-law, traumatised by the bomb while bathing, vanished naked into the "smoke and flames" (*Earth* 33). The image of the polluting "smoke" takes place also on many other occasions in the novel. The wooden hut of the guard Fateh is full of smoke with the smell of coal and "wisps of smoke" fly from its little window. Dastaguir is concerned of Fateh's physical state because of this air pollution, and he wishes that the smoke has not suffocated him (*Earth* 12). Cigarette smoking, an air-polluting human action, is recurrent in the narrative. The guard's putting his half-burnt cigarette between his lips (*Earth* 12, 45), Hashmet Khan (a soldier in military uniform)'s asking for a pack of cigarettes from Mirza Qadir (*Earth* 28), Mirza Qadir's putting a "cigarette into the corner of his mouth" and lighting it while conversing with Dastaguir (*Earth* 27), his breaking off to light a cigarette while telling the story of Zohak (*Earth* 34), his tossing the cigarette butt away while commenting on the logic of war (*Earth* 37), the truck-driver Shahmard's partially-smoked cigarette resting behind his right ear with its scent filling Dastaguir's nostrils (*Earth* 46) and later on his lighting it and inhaling "deeply" before narrating the life-story of Mirza Qadir (*Earth* 48) – all these add to Rahimi's purposed narrative of man's heedless misuse of natural products to despoil his internal nature.

The issue of sound pollution is also raised in this novel. The boom of explosion that often shatters the tranquillity of the Afghan hills and valleys at once highlights the strife-torn condition of Afghanistan during the Soviet rule, and makes Rahimi pitifully aware of the despoilment of nature. This explosive sound as a tool of terror is a recurrent audio-image in his subsequent novels too especially in *A Curse on Dostoevsky*. However, to what extent it can harm the survivors (especially children), is brought to the fore in *Earth and Ashes*. The Russian bomb that erased a whole village in a moment has deafened the little boy Yassin. He is at a loss that things do

not make any sound since a few days ago (*Earth* 15). He cannot realise that his hearing and rather he thinks that others have become mute. He tries to make a sound with the clack of colliding stones, and also by crushing an apple between two stones. The child raises the question why these stones make no noise (*Earth* 15). He thinks that the Russians have taken away the voices and sounds from Afghanistan. When man's communication with nature gets snapped, their existence is jeopardised. Yassin's world, for instance, is now found to be another world – the world of silence (*Earth* 15, 38). Rahimi seems to suggest here that such sound-silencing terror has been the legacy of the Soviet bombs in the tender minds of many Afghan children.

Environmentalism was an issue of the world politics in 1960s and 1970s; for the growing environmental dangers including global warming facing our planet were coming to affect the political agenda big way. *Earth and Ashes* seems to suggest that Rahimi was not impervious to this. Pul-i-Khumri, being one of the growing Afghan cities in 1960s and 1970s, the urbanisation and industrialisation of the region had an ecological impact. The environmental change of Afghanistan is noted when Yassin shouts for water and Dastaguir's eyes search water from the hills to the dry riverbed, and then from the riverbed to the dry lips of his grandson (*Earth* 20). Though the guard Fateh and the shopkeeper Mirza Qadir gave him water for Yassin, the scarcity of water is suggested through the description of the dry river, the natural source of water in the valley. When Dastaguir is near the coal-mine, he finds his tongue so dry that he imagines it as a charred piece of half-burnt ember and a silently burning piece of coal; his dry throat cries for "water" (*Earth* 57). The image of dryness and thirst is noted both in human and natural terms. The desiccated riverbed north of Pul-i-Khumri, black stones and scrub on it, scrub-covered hills, the stony silence of the dehydrated earth – all these aspects of the landscape typify the "pitch and roll" of the valley – the valley which is dried out and covered in thorny bushes (*Earth* 14).

Gregory Bateson, in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, observes that human beings are always and inevitably a part of the ecology, and are psychologically affected by the "charm and the terror of ecology" (504-05). Rahimi's fictional characters in *Earth and Ashes* reflect this aspect of ecological reasoning. The landscape with its dryness and its dusty hues made greyer by the autumn sun, affects human psyche with a mood of sadness. The environmental background reflects the sorrow that has ruined the guard Fateh (*Earth* 26), Mirza Qadir's sorrow for his dead wife who has been killed in turn by sorrow at their only son's run-off for military job under the Russians, the miners with tired and black faces, a group of them mourning the death of their family members in Abqul carnage, Yassin's sorrow for the death of his mother and others, and above all Dastaguir's sorrow for the same reason. Besides, the environment at the coalmine reflects painful mood of Dastaguir when he comes to know that, the Soviet administration that has destroyed Abqul, has now entrapped his son Murad by selecting him as a model mine worker for training (rather indoctrination) considering him as an enlightened, hard-working youth committed to the revolution (*Earth* 68-69). The aggrieved old man finds similar kind of sorrow that lies in the heart of Mirza Qadir whose eyes seem to fly about and seek responses from all objects including the hill and the coal. Dastaguir imagines that the hill has devoured his son and the coal has "blackened his bones" (*Earth* 65). It may remind us of Wordsworth's lines from *The Excursion*:

> Whate'er exist hath properties that spread
>
> Beyond itself communicating good
>
> A smile blessing or with evil mixed. (Book IX 10-12)

In fact, man resides in nature and nature resides in man. This nature-man mutuality has been referred to in many pages of *Earth and Ashes*. The bridge with its rusty iron railings connecting the two banks of the dry riverbed, the road passing over this bridge to connect northern Afghanistan to Kabul, the dirt track between the "scrub-covered hills" from that bridge to the Karkar coalmine (*Earth* 10), "the black wooden hut of the guard posted at the road barrier," "wisps of smoke" with coal smell escaping from its little window (*Earth* 12), Mirza Qadir's shop with "a small wooden stand with three mud walls" and his compassionate dealings with Dastaguir (*Earth* 17) – all these details in the novel show how man with their movements and dwellings becomes a part of nature. Similarly, the Abqul village with its flora and fauna once was a part of Nature that inspired Dastaguir in the moments of distress for Murad's six-month imprisonment four years ago. He would disappear into the

garden to catch the day's last rays, sit in the midst of the plants, and open his laden heart to the earth and to the flowers (*Earth* 30).

As noted by Michael Titlestad in *The Ongoing End: On the Limits of Apocalyptic Narrative*, the turn of the 20th century witnessed the Anthropcene with the leading human impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems – the emergence of apocalypticism and bioterrorism (1-3). *Earth and Ashes* is a product of such times and consciousness. For instance, the autumn sun that keeps Dastaguir and Yassin warm, and nature that soothes and relieves in normal time, induce the terrified visions in Dastaguir's exhausted mind haunted by war-time memories. The demolition of the whole village with his family by the Russian tanks before the eyes of Dastaguir and his grandson gives a sense of apocalypse that permeates the narrative. The mountain, its rocks and the riverbed take the form of the hell in his visions:

> The rocks are slowly becoming hot; they're turning red. It is as if they have become coal and the mountains are one great furnace. The coal catches fire, erupting from the mountain and flowing down the dry riverbed towards you. You are on one side of the river, Murad is on the other. (*Earth* 17)

He shouts in his nightmarish vision and asks Murad to stay where he is now and not to cross the river of fire so that he does not get burned. Murad, the lone representative of his family, to have survived the Soviet barrage, goes through this hellish experience after knowing the story of his village and family. Dastaguir is going through this hell of fiery visions and listens to the voices of the dead – the voice of his wife:

> Dastaguir, tell him to stay there. You cross the river. Take my apple-blossom patterned scarf with you and go and wipe away his sweat. Take my scarf for Murad.... (*Earth* 17-18).

Even the eatables like apples in his vision become fuel i.e. coal-apple (*Earth* 54). The mine gives the apocalyptic sense of the burning molten centre of the earth – "all the way down to furnaces of molten rock" (*Earth* 60).

This apocalyptic experience which Dastaguir undergoes is revealed in his memory of his wife. He remembers that she would warn him of his addiction to tobacco or naswar that, after his death and until the Day of Judgement, his mouth would fill with earth and his body would change to earth that would grow into a tobacco field. She would also chastise him that in Hell he would burn in the flames of tobacco leaves for ever. Bereaved of such a beloved wife and a loving family killed by the Russians, Dastaguir interrogates himself if he has yet to face the Judgement Day considering the fact he is already burning and so he needs no flame of Hell and no bonfire of tobacco (*Earth* 30). All these instances illustrate Rahimi's planetary consciousness mixed with his sense of ecological apocalypse.

The animals – wild and domestic – are part of nature. But the canvas of this short novel is too precise to stuff every aspect of nature. As the focus in this novel is human tragedy, a few animals have been mentioned in the passing and, yet, they have definite functions in the theme and structure of the novel. The part of the Karkar valley, rich with mineral resource (i.e. coalmine), starts near the bridge on the dry river north of Pul-i-Khumri; the location with the dryness and coal-dust-heavy air is not suitable for the growth of grass and trees that are found in other places of the hills. Only scrubs and thorn-bushes typical of a dry land are found. This lack of green grass and deep forest/jungles, water and fresh air, has made this place uninhabitable for animals. Though the Pul-i-Khumri district of Afghanistan is famous for sheep farming, it appears that this part of the district is not fit for this.

Rahimi has mentioned a common insect namely the "ant" with which Yassin is busy playing. Yassin mixes the earth, the naswar (spat out by Dastaguir on to the ground), and the ant (attracted by the naswar) with a jujube stone. When the "insect squirms in the green mud," and the soldier Hashmet Khan walks unconsciously over it, Yassin tries to dig out it from the "footprint left by the soldier" (*Earth* 28-29). Yassin cannot find it out as the ant, mud and naswar are "stuck to the boot of the departing soldier." Thus, the ant becomes the symbol of all those innocent Afghans and the elements of nature that were annihilated by the soldiers. The pity and pathos with which Rahimi has narrated the story of this ant becomes a parallel to the story of Dastaguir's family, to the similar stories of thousands of such other families. Yassin's observation of the ant's fate brings out not only his

own traumatic experiences, it also adds an eco-feminist dimension to this novel, reminding us about Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Fly"—the fly being a symbol of undeserving human catastrophe and death.

Before its demolition, Abqul as a village must have had not only human inhabitants, but also its rich flora and fauna. Dastaguir's consciousness about the presence of an owl perching far above a ruin or in a deserted graveyard is revealed in his comparison of himself with it. He remembers his little garden where he would sit in the midst of the plants and open his over-burdened heart to the earth and plants four years ago (*Earth* 30). He refers to a cow while ruminating on the carnage of his village that his brother-in-law, lying next to a dead cow in the demolished barn, laughed as he sucked milk from its stiff udder (*Earth* 52).

Women and children, who have little scope to go outside home according to the norms of the Afghan culture and society, have become the major victims of the carnage, along with the domestic animals like cows. Dastaguir remembers that women were entombed alive and the house became a grave for his wife, his other son, his daughter-in-law and their children (*Earth* 32-33). Nature, woman and their children intermingle in the nightmarish day-dream visions of Dastaguir while waiting at Mirza Qadir's shop. He senses damp and cold, smells clay, and sees a large garden without blossoms or foliage with narrow muddy paths edged with bare oak trees (*Earth* 41). He sees in vision his daughter-in-law Zaynab sitting naked under a tree, lifting the little girl from the ground, wrapping her in the apple-blossom scarf, kissing her on the cheek, and then carrying her away. He sees also Yassin being naked in a jujube tree and having given his grandmother's apple-blossom scarf to his mother for wrapping his little sister as it is cold. All these sights make Dastaguir to wonder about how Zaynab, a four-month pregnant woman a few days ago, has quickly given birth her daughter and how quickly the baby has grown (*Earth* 41-42). In his next vision, Dastaguir feels snowflakes land on his skin and covers the garden paths while Zaynab laughs and sprints from one tree to the next one and runs nakedly across the snow with the baby girl in her hands without any foot -print in the snow though the sound of her steps echoes through the garden (*Earth* 42). In one of his visions, when he was in the running truck and watching the rocks and scrub passing in the opposite direction, Dastaguir hears his wife's sweet voice about her apple-blossom scarf and sees her at the foothills, racing at the same pace as the truck. When Dastaguir lets the scarf waft out of the pane, she dances while running after the cloth dancing through the air (*Earth* 56-57). Thus, the intermingling of the images of nature and woman covers a significant part of the narrative.

The vision-painting of nature in its green snowy beauty with the two pleasant women who do not exist in their earthly forms now, can be contrasted with the vision-painting of a hell-like nature with black mountains and the stony river-bed burning in a flowing fire. Significantly, it is this river of fire that the living adult males (their respective husbands) namely Murad and Dastaguir full of anxieties and sorrows have to cross for each other's sake with the memories of those happy women inhumed alive in a fatal moment. It is symbolic of what Afghanistan with its ecology was and is before and after the Soviet occupation. As Dastaguir remarks that, Zaynab has been bound for Paradise, that the living are burning in the Inferno and that the dead are luckier than the living (*Earth* 55). Needless to say, this difference in the respective conditions of the dead and the living has much to do with the degeneration of nature from its pristine fertility to its present barrenness.

Atiq Rahimi's *A Curse on Dostoevsky* also displays the novelist's an ecological concerns as it studies more intimately the interconnection of the human and the non-human worlds, which is the ecocritical basis of a text according to Cheryll Glotfelty (Glotfelty xix). The story of the Valley of Lost Words as told by Kaka Sarwar in this novel, for instance, serves as a fitting ecocritical comment in the context of the fictional village of the pleasant and honest people invaded and destroyed by the history forgoers, the science pretenders and the shady politicians:

> But what they didn't realize was that in this valley there were not only human beings. The houses, the trees, the rocks, the water, the wind, the air, the birds, the snakes … everything in this valley could remember the people, its history, its wisdom, and also the barbarism of the tyrants! (*Curse* 161)

In fact, the ruination in nature of which human dwellings are part also, tell a lot of how purposed and heedless acts of man on nature violate the norms of peaceful coexistence in the natural ecosystem. Rahimi has

suggested how wars have affected Afghanistan's environment including its wilderness, scenic sublime, countryside, and human dwellings.

Air pollution affects the atmospheric background of the story. Dust, smoke and sulphur of war are the recurrent images across the whole narrative. This novel depicts Kabul during the time when Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was resisted by the Mujahedin. How these wars affected the environment of Kabul is portrayed, for example, when the main character Rassoul faces the suffocating air in the draught-affected Kabul waiting for fresh wind and rainfall in 1372 Afghan calendar (i.e. 1994):

> It lets everything stagnate: the sulphur of war, the smoke of terror, the embers of hatred. The fatty stench of burning clings to your skin, seeps into your bones. Better to smoke one of Nana Alia's cigarettes than to breathe this stifling air. (*Curse* 93)

The air in Kabul was so polluted that, in *Saqikhana*, the persons including Rassoul prefer to draw in hashish and fill their lungs through the chillum than breathing out the sulphurous air of the city (*Curse* 119).While depicting the atmosphere of the holy shrines of the Shah-e-do-Shamshira-Wali mosque and mausoleum situated by the Kabul River, the narrator remarks that the rosewater covers the sulphur of war and the smell of pigeons (*Curse* 155).

Through the portrayal of the milieu of the Shah-e-do-Shamshira-Wali mosque and mausoleum, Rahimi presents an intermingling bond between Nature and Culture. For example, when the protagonist Rassoul reaches there, and he protects himself from the heat of the sun in the shade of the "Wish Tree," it is observed that its boughs are wreathed with the innumerable shreds of coloured fabric (*Curse* 155). Here, human culture has superimposed a wish-fulfilling attribute to a "Tree." Needless to say, knotting coloured ribbon on the tree brings no good to it ; yet, human reverence to this representative of nature, and non-violence to creatures in the premises of the mausoleum have made it a safe place for the pigeons, the birds that symbolise *peace*.

A sense of ecofeminism is represented through the narration of a cat chasing the pigeons when Sophia's brother was playing with them at their home (*Curse* 34) as reinforced later on with the cat chasing the pigeon in the shrine (*Curse* 156).The cat in becoming a beast of prey symbolising the masculine depredation and the pigeon in becoming a victim symbolising feminine deprivation are narrated in juxtaposition of the caretaker's driving away of Sophia from the shrine (*Curse* 153) and the corrupt mujahedin leader Amer Salem's chasing of Sophia to satisfy carnal desires (*Curse* 80-81).

Human penetration into the wilderness is a concern of the ecocritics. It is an age-old anthropocentric culture penetrating into such wilderness for sport and for food. This is represented through Rassoul's memory of his childhood experience with his father taking him every autumn to hunt the migratory birds in a large lake near Jalalabad. It was before the Russians had invaded the country (*Curse* 128). Rahimi narrates this wilderness to show how the following wars caused havoc throughout Afghanistan.

Rassoul recalls his last trip with his father when he was eleven years old in 1978 sixteen years back since he is now twenty-seven years old (*Curse* 29) in 1994 (i.e. 1372 solar Hejra) – a time of the Mujahedin civil war (*Curse* 231). They undertook the journey with a donkey to carry their hunting equipment and to guide them through the featureless deserts and valleys to a wild landscape near an enormous reed field surrounding a large lake. His father tied their donkey to a lone dead tree near the field before hunting migrant birds. They waited in a makeshift shelter for these birds. Their dozing off with a lovely peaceful sleep-inducing whistling tune of the reeds-caressing tender wind, the dusk having already enveloped the field in a strange sad and disturbing fog, the falling of the night in the wild, the frightened and frightening braying of the donkey at the two wolves snarling and prowling around to trap and hunt it, his father's shooting one wolf to death, their futile journey back with the exhausted and bewildered donkey through the hills and fields to the same spot of the dead wolf near the lake, his father's shooting of the donkey in rage among the waiting and howling wolves, the gunshot causing the panic-stricken birds screeching and flying above the reed field, and finally their walking back to their village taking a weary long path in that hazardous night (*Curse* 128-133) – all these vignettes of the hunting adventure in wilderness allegorically represent the state of affairs in Afghanistan, in the last quarter of the twentieth

century, of the war-time of the shooter and the shot, of the hunter and the hunted. The grenade attacks and bombardments on the planes and hills, on the villages and the cities since the Soviet occupation in 1979 through the mujahedin civil war of the 1990s to the U.S. war on terror after 2001 have jeopardised the "outdoor environment" like the wilderness, the scenic sublime, the countryside, and the domestic picturesque of Afghanistan.

A UN Environment Programme (UNEP) survey report (2003) found that twenty years of war have affected Afghanistan's environment so adversely that its rebuilding is now compromised. For instances, 99 percent of the Sistan wetland has become dry by 2002 though previously it was an important haven of waterfowl; 50 percent of conifer forests have been reduced in Nangarhar, Kunar and Nuristan provinces; pistachio woodlands in Badghis and Takhar provinces have been badly degraded; and, excessive loss of vegetation and deforestation, dry land cultivation and excessive grazing have led to serious soil erosion from wind and rain (UNEP 11). *A Curse on Dostoevsky* gives a glimpse of draught and dust in Kabul of 1994: "The city of Kabul ... waits for the rain to bring an end to the drought. ... It would raise all the dust that had covered the city and every inch of people's lives, and chase it away. … But it blows no longer" (*Curse* 93).

The desolation of Afghanistan is objectified through and reflected by the drab and dreary Afghan landscape wherein the dust and the ashes of a wasteland mirror the inner crisis and destitution of the population. Thus, we may safely wager that Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* and *A Curse on Dostoevsky* do not lack the "objective correlative," the alleged absence of which in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* T. S. Eliot decries.

The environmental change that wrought havoc on Afghanistan is depicted in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as well. The long drought in Afghanistan since 1998 owing to meagre snowfall and rainfall was so acute that farmers all over Afghanistan were leaving behind their dehydrated lands and their sold-off goods, and were roving village to village searching water, moving to Iran or Pakistan or settling in Kabul (*Thousand* 286). The Kabul River was found bone-dry and became a public toilet with "human waste and rubble" then (*Thousand* 286). Kabul witnessed water tables so low that shallow wells had desiccated and the deep wells were so limited in number that people, especially women like Laila and Mariam had to wait hours in queues for their turn (*Thousand* 286). The worst year of this drought was 2000 as Hosseini narrates that villages in Helmand, Zabol and Kandahar were filled in with nomadic communities in search of green pastures with water for their cattle; and when the scarcity of water and grass caused these animals to die, they reached Kabul and lived in temporary slums by the Kareh-Ariana hillside (*Thousand* 295). This long drought ended with knee-deep snowfall in winter of 2002-03 followed by the April 2003 rainfall making the Kabul River flow once again; and in spite of the muddy streets, Afghans welcomed this rain bringing a hope of green Afghanistan and a green city of Kabul, as Hosseini noted (*Thousand* 396).

The ecological character of Herat is seen through Laila's tour to the village Gul Daman near Herat. Towards beginning of the narrative, while describing the childhood (1959-1974) of Mariam living with her mother in a mud house called "kolba" at that village, Hosseini paints the environmental details of the wide and flowing stream of Gul Daman (*Thousand* 9). Towards the end of the novel, the same place is visited three decades later by Laila to pay homage to late Mariam, and the said stream was found completely dried up though other natural beauties retained their past glory (*Thousand* 387).

The pastoral aspect of Afghan nature is evoked through the description of a village like Gul Daman and its natural setting by a sharp hill two kilometres north of Herat; an uneven dirt track branching uphill from the main road between Gul Daman and Herat; knee-high grass with white and yellow flowers edging on either side of the track winding uphill and leading to a plain field with soaring poplars and cottonwoods and wild bushes in clusters; the track ending upright to the trout-filled river rolling down from the Safid-koh mountains around Gul Daman; a circular grove of weeping willow trees with the clearing at the centre in their shade; Mariam and her mother living in a "kolba" in this clearing on the outskirts of Gul Daman; their waking in the mornings listening to the far-off bleat of sheep and the sharp-shrilled music of a flute played by the Gul Daman's shepherds leading their herd to the hillside grasslands; Mariam and Nana milking the goats, feeding the hens, and collecting eggs; etc.(*Thousand* 9-15).

How outward nature lives a soothing effect on human nature is shown in this novel when Mariam, in her married life in Kabul, remembered the green of Gul Daman in her tough times. Even after she killed her husband Rashid to save Laila, and she was in jail awaiting the death sentence, the memory of this pastoral green consoled her. In the night before her death by shooting, she dreamt of her childhood tutor Mullah Faizullah, her mother Nana and Mother Nature around her childhood "kolba":

> Mullah Faizullah twirling his rosary beads, walking with her along the stream, their twin shadows gliding on the water and on the grassy banks sprinkled with a blue-lavender wild iris that, in this dream, smelled like cloves. She dreamed of Nana in the doorway of the kolba, her voice dim and distant, calling her to dinner, as Mariam played in cool, tangled grass where ants crawled and beetles scurried and grasshoppers skipped amid all the different shades of green. The squeak of a wheelbarrow laboring up a dusty path. Cowbells clanging. Sheep baaing on a hill. (*Thousand* 358-59)

Hosseini presents, towards the end of the novel through Laila's visit, the picturesque setting of Gul Daman with all its beauties to show that even after two decades of war, the endangered environment of Afghanistan can be rejuvenated like pastoral areas existing near Herat. Laila's observation of the people living in mud-houses in the lap of nature at Gul Daman, the road connecting Gul Daman to Herat; the path branched off that road, snaking beneath the plants and bushes; either side of the path with a "kaleidoscope of wildflowers" and buttercups peering through the little undergrowths; the swallows twittering overhead and the swift chatter of grasshoppers by the feet; a cloud of mosquitoes flying before the face; the lower mountains in the distant horizon, a few poplars, some cottonwoods, and various natural bushes; the dried up stream, the weeping willows arranged in a circular grove; Mariam's kolba with the lone empty windowpane, the door-less entrance to the kolba, flies buzzing inside, a large fluttering spider-webs, Russian inscriptions on one of the wall proving the presence of Russian soldiers in the 1980s, a bird's abandoned nest in a corner and a bat hanging in another corner (*Thousand* 396-390) – all these details show that the place has either retained or regained the vegetation and greenery, flora and fauna which was there three decades ago. The poetics of place shows here a perfect equilibrium between nature and man. This side of Afghanistan show the elemental nature of Afghanistan – the typical feature of the Afghan homeland that survives the tests of the times.

The element of ecofeminism is also found when Laila stays for a while in Mariam's childhood *kolba*, imagines how the little child in Mariam turns into a strong woman fighting the patriarchal agents, and identifies her with the fundamental aspects of nature:

> A woman who will be like a rock in a riverbed, enduring without complaint, her grace not sullied but shaped by the turbulence that washes over her. Already Laila sees something behind this young girl's eyes, something deep in her core, that neither Rasheed nor the Taliban will be able to break. Something as hard and unyielding as a block of limestone. Something that, in the end, will be her undoing and Laila's salvation. (*Thousand* 389-90)

Ecofeminism also sees how domestic or pet animals are compared with women. This is found in Hossaini's narrative style. Laila as a new born baby is also compared to such a cat at her first sound. Her parents smiled at each other when they heard her voice for the first time – a sound compared with the pitch of a cat's cry from its slow mewl into a full-throated yowl (*Thousand* 101). On one occasion, when Mariam's husband Rashid humiliates her, she thinks it difficult to bear his hate-speech, his ridicule, his insults, his scorn, and his movement by her ignoring her like a house cat (*Thousand* 97). On another occasion, when Rashid with his inflamed eyes tightened the belt in his grip, Mariam was shivering in fear like the goat pushed in the cage of the tiger that gazes up from its paws and growls (*Thousand* 234). This illustrates Greg Gararad's concept of ecofeminism that

> ... wilderness narratives deploy a gendered hierarchical distinction between wild and domestic animals in which the former is linked with the masculine freedom, and often predation, while the latter are denigrated as feminine servants of human depredation. (Garrard 149-150)

In one sense *And the Mountains Echoed* is Hosseini's ecoconscious journey across and beyond the land-locked Afghanistan, across and beyond the late twentieth century war times. In this journey, Hosseini's ecological awareness of the Afghan situation has attained a global perspective. Baba Ayub's journey through the deserts and mountains to see his son in the garden of the *div* on a remote mount as narrated in the metafictional folk-tale at the outset of the novel prepares us for the narrative of the "wilderness" and the "sublime beauty" of Afghanistan as well as the change that took place in its "countryside" and "domestic picturesque."

The context at the outset of the novel is of 1952 when Afghanistan had a settled administration free from war for more than half a century, and the nature represented in the first few chapters of this novel presents the typical average landscape of Afghanistan. The descriptions of the desolate village namely Maidan Sabz in a dusty flatland encircled by a chain of rocky mountains; of its hot wind blowing dust in the eyes; of the dried-up wells of the village; of the muddy and shallow water of the only river at a distance of a half of the day's walk; of the double hardships of its inhabitants to earn half the livelihood; of its comparison with more happy villages in the northern part of the valleys, with orchards and flowers, with fresh air and clear water of the running streams (*Mountains* 2) – all these details speak of the typically varied environment prevailing in Afghanistan.

The long draught in Maidan Sabz relieved with a heavy rainfall one spring, the wells and the river becoming full, the eastern hills turning green, wildflowers blooming, the children playing on the grass, cows grazing, irrigation canals draining, Baba Ayub's most plenteous harvest of pistachios in his life (*Mountains* 14) – this portrayal shows the occasional rain that brings happiness and hopes to Afghan people.

Baba Ayub's journey is paralleled with Saboor's journey on foot from Shadbagh to Kabul, and the landscape in the setting is visualised so unmistakably that Afghanistan's rugged nature seems to speak and lend an occult dimension to the narrative. Such elements of the narration are as Saboor's walking and drawing the wagon with his son Abdullah and daughter Pari sitting inside it; Abdullah's staring at the chain of jam-packed round hills, the mountains appearing soft beneath the distant sky; Saboor's feet thrusting up small puffs of sunburnt sand, and the blazing hot air, grey late afternoon, the vast difference of the hot day and the cold night in the desert; a convoy of Kuchi nomads passing them by with a dusty procession of groaning camels with jingling bells; passing by numerous dusty villages widely distributed like Shadbagh etc. (*Mountains* 23-24). Human habitat as part of nature is also described showing the interpenetration of nature and culture of rural Afghanistan:

> Small square-shaped homes made of baked mud, sometimes raised into the side of a mountain and sometimes not, ribbons of smoke rising from their roofs. Wash lines, women squatting by cooking fires. A few poplar trees, a few chickens, a handful of cows and goats, and always a mosque. The last village they passed sat adjacent to a poppy field, where an old man working the pods waved at them. (*Mountains* 24)

The fauna of Shadbagh, and the deserts and hills around are also counted within this journey-narrative especially with reference to Pari's noticing of a falcon feather behind a bolder in the desert; the feathers of doves and larks that Abdullah noticed on their journey; the feathers collected by Abdullah and preserved by Pari at home in an old tea-box containing intensely green and claret rooster feathers, a dove's white tail feather, a sparrow feather, a peacock feather brought by Abdullah from a home having a peacock at a nearby village, duck feathers, pigeon feathers etc. (*Mountains* 20, 49). These feathers represent various species of birds that abound in Afghanistan. Pari's love of the birds's feathers became a symbol of her desire to fly – to have a freedom like a bird out of the patriarchal cage as well as beyond the border of an endangered country. Love of and concern for nature which is the main thrust of ecocriticism is revealed through Abdullah and Pari's love of nature including the birds– especially Pari's love of the village dog called Shuja that considered Pari as its universe (*Mountains* 24-25).

The common trope of journey through the wild is found also in the journey of the twins Masooma and Parwana three year back in the spring of 1949 through the same desert. The change of the season from autumn in Saboor's journey to the spring in the present is to open the seasonal aspects of the wild, here the desert. In both cases the day is hot and the night is cold. The spring scene of the desert is laid bare:

> All around them, beyond the dim glow of the fire Parwana has stoked from shrubs and brittle-looking weeds, is the desolate, endless expanse of sand and mountains swallowed up by the dark. For nearly two days they have traveled through the scrubby terrain, heading toward Kabul, Parwana walking alongside the mule, Masooma strapped to the saddle, Parwana holding her hand. They have trudged along steep paths that curved and dipped and wound back and forth across rocky ridges, the ground at their feet dotted with ocher- and rust-colored weeds, etched with long spidery cracks creeping every which way. (*Mountains* 68)

The wildness of the desert in the latter case is more acute. In the former it is graced by the presence of birds, but in the present case, it is heart-rending as Parwana leaves the handicapped Masooma alone to perish in the wild desert at the latter's request. Significantly, Parwana's ears are assailed by an undefined muffled wailing sound that she conjectures to have been made either by Masooma calling her back, or by a jackal or a desert fox, or by the wind.

Hosseini looks into the "domestic picturesque" (Barry 56) of Kabul in *And the Mountains Echoed*. In Kabul, the house of Suleiman Wahdati is compared in Abdullah's imagination (*Mountains* 36), with the *div*'s fort or palace with an enormous garden full of flowers of all colours and bordered with cypress trees, the pools made of blue tiles, lush green lawns, wonderfully shaped hedges and water fountains splashing in the shadow of pomegranate trees in which pairs of children were playing (*Mountains* 9-10). The Wahdati house with its huge area able to include almost half the homes in Shadbagh, having a beautifully landscaped garden at the backside full of rows of flowers of all colours, trimly-shaped knee-high bushes interspersed with fruit trees like apple, apricot, cherry, and pomegranate, and the roofed balcony leading to the garden with a low-height railing covered with green vines (*Mountains* 36) – is an exquisite example of the domestic picturesque. The paternal house of Mrs Nila Wahdati is described as bigger and more beautiful with tall and trim cypresses decorating the driveway, along with a thick array of flower bushes (*Mountains* 79). While taking Abdullah and Pari with him to visit Kabul, Nabi was driving through a dirt-free, highway lined with cypress trees with regular intervals (Mountains 36), and this also shows how culture and nature can coexist in beauty and harmony.

Hosseini's brief portrayal of Nabi's driving out of Kabul to the foothill pastoral town Paghman to entertain his partly paralysed boss Suleiman is significant in unravelling the Afghan love of nature. As Nabi records, he could at all times locate a sweet green field with a little simmering stream over which the shadow of the trees fall; they would sit on the grass to pass the time; Suleiman's left hand managed to paint, with better artistry, the trees, the hills and the bunches of wildflowers; and Nabi would listen to the breeze against the trees, gape up at the sky with the terrazzo of clouds passing overhead (*Mountains* 117). This foothill town which Hosseini paints here is in fact about 12 miles northwest of Kabul, built during the reign of King Amanullah. As L. W. Adamec records in *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan,* this town houses a royal palace, beautiful villas, an open-air theatre for the visitors on weekends during the summer, a reservoir, and water line supplying Kabul with drinking water (241). Natural woods and high mountains surround and add to its sublime beauty. But war has spoiled much of the town (Adamec, *Historical Dictionary* 241), thus, affecting the ecology of Paghman and destroying the peaceful coexistence of nature and culture.

The centuries's old giant oak tree near Saboor's home remained a totemic witness to the history of the place and memories of many individuals. It became an important landmark of Shadbag as it surpassed in height everything in Shadbagh and was the oldest living representative of the village (*Mountains* 28). The people like Saboor, Abdullah, Pari, Masooma and Parwana spent a major part of their childhood in the shadow of its enormous crown. The young ones hiking the wide branches of this age-old tree, Abdullah's grandfather tying lengthy ropes to a thick bough and hanging a swing for their flying, Masooma being incapacitated after an accidental fall from one bough of the tree etc. (*Mountains* 28) – all these are examples of how deep is the relation of such a heritage tree and the people around.

Hosseini narrates the purposed and heedless act of Saboor's cutting down the giant oak tree to erase his painful memories after his handover of Pari to the Wahdatis in Kabul, though apparently Saboor justified this act for the sake of firewood in the fierce winter already approaching:

> The very first thing Father did was take down the swing. He climbed the tree and cut the ropes with a knife. Then he and the other men hacked away at the thick trunk until late afternoon, when the old tree finally toppled with a massive groan. (*Mountains* 45)

Another landmark of Sadbagh and a sign of the human civilisation changing the face of the landscape is the old grey and bleak windmill looming over the mud walls of the village. The windmill became a summer home mostly to blue herons while they left it to the crows for their harsh croaks in winter. Its blades made a squeaky groan whenever a swift gust came from the hills, imparting a supernatural touch to the place (*Mountains* 46). Hosseini's art of nature-painting to show the ecological, economical and sociological transformation of the Afghan land is, thus, made clear through his representation of Sadbagh as Afghanistan in microcosm.

The wars in Afghanistan affected not only the landscapes, but also its life spaces. Topographical turmoil includes the displacement of the population as a result of war and the resettlement of that population after the end of the disturbance. Hosseini, in *And the Mountains Echoed*, describes the Afghan wars that started in 1978-79, forced the villagers like Saboor along with their families to flee to the refugee camps in Pakistan or elsewhere, and finally ended in a post 9/11 time. The villagers like Iqbal (Saboor's son) returned to Sadbagh to reclaim their homes and lands, but faced threat and/or death from the warlords and the drug barons. Adel's father, one such warlord, has built a large-sized mansion with high shiny-white boundary walls crowned with piercing wire in such a war-affected place. Ordinary Afghans called such mansions *Narco Palaces*. This war criminal has built this mansion by felling many acres of orchards of the old village and by illegally occupying the lands of the poor villagers, changing thereby the entire face of an Afghan village. He has killed Pari's step-brother Iqbal to usurp their land and the villagers have been forcibly displaced to stay on an infertile place in the vicinity of the old windmill. (*Mountains* 239-277, 380)

Thus, the post-9/11 Sadbagh has been transformed at the cost of nature; and a town called Shadbagh-e-Nau has come up with schools, a hospital, a little hotel and a shopping area a few miles from the location of the old village (*Mountains* 380). And, thus, the two decades's war (1979-2001) has proven disastrous not only to such Afghan villagers, but also to the nature of which they are a part.

Nature-man encounter is not merely external or physical, it is psychological as well. Nature's lifelong impact on man is shown through how Pari forgets her childhood (up to three years) associated with her birthplace (Shadbagh) after she had been adopted by the Wahdatis in Kabul and then shifted to France, and how once again finally she is able to revive those memories associated with that childhood. She in her old age visualises these when she listens to Markos's reading of the confessional letter of her step-uncle Nabi (*Mountains* 236). Her birthplace memory and the shadow of that giant oak tree haunted her like a dream before the final revelation:

> That there was in her life the absence of something, or someone, fundamental to her own existence. Sometimes it was vague, like a message sent across shadowy byways and vast distances, a weak signal on a radio dial, remote, warbled. Other times it felt so clear, this absence, so intimately close it made her heart lurch. For instance, in Provence two years earlier when Pari had seen a massive oak tree outside a farmhouse. (*Mountains* 189)

Thus, the buried memories in Pari's "unconscious" due to her infantile amnesia are fished up with the help of the associative links which Sigmund Freud calls unconscious "memory-traces" (*Freud Reader* 226, 410). Another vague memory that haunts Pari is that of the dog (Shuja) for whom she was the only friend at Shadbagh: "Not for the first time, a little puff breaks rank from the collective fog of Pari's memories and slowly takes the shape of a dog. ... She had asked Maman once if they had ever owned a dog in Kabul and Maman said, *You know I don't like dogs*" (*Mountains* 221). But finally the letter of Nabi unlocked the gate of her collective memory to visualise a sky of unfolding clouds rolling over hills, "hazy strings of mountains," entangled fruit trees in groves, "grapevines connecting little flat-roofed houses," lines of women washing by a stream, and the "creaking ropes of a swing beneath a big tree," a big dog, and a windmill (*Mountains* 237-38). Natural signs, thus, shape the personality and its impressions on one's mind help in reviving one's past self.

The land-locked landscape of Afghanistan has been compared and contrasted in *And the Mountains Echoed* with the landscapes of the sea-side countries like France and the United States and the islands (especially Tinos) of Greece through the narratives of different transnational journeys of Pari, Abdullah and Marcos (and others) respectively across and beyond Afghanistan. It has given an international perspective to the presentation not only of Afghan people, but also of nature of Afghanistan. It gives also the impression that, as Edward Said remarks: "The earth is in effect one world, in which empty, uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist. Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography" (Said, *Culture* 7).

The geopolitical struggle and competition among the powerful actors to gain control over the certain geographical territories gravely affects the nature of Afghanistan. At a farther remove, this has a devastating impact on the human population of this war-torn country. Needless to say, sensitive writers like Atiq Rahimi and Khaled Hosseini cannot remain impervious to this tragedy of history. Thus, novels such as *Earth and Ashes*, *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and the *And the Mountains Echoed* become faithful dossiers of environmental degradation and the consequent human misery.

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