



Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews

Chakraborty, K. (2023). Ecocriticism in Bangladesh: Reading Environmental Concerns in Selina Hossain's Short Stories. *Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews*, 2(4), 16-23.

ISSN 2827-9735

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1996.02.04.82

The online version of this article can be found at:
<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

Published by:
The Asian Institute of Research

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Ecocriticism in Bangladesh: Reading Environmental Concerns in Selina Hossain's Short Stories

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Abstract

Having a historical legacy of the relationship between culture and nature, literature in Bangladesh has always incorporated ecological concerns. The study aims to explore the cultural attitude towards nature and environment in Bangladeshi short stories. It is observed that literature explicitly and implicitly aims to define and impart values with profound ecological implications. Hence, it has become an urgent matter these days to address the environmental concerns that have also seen to be impeding or challenging the aesthetic sensibilities. However, this study explores how environmental disasters in Bangladeshi short stories highlighting both life and fiction explicitly ties the representation to global reality. For the purpose of research, the study intends to analyse Selina Hossain's short stories that talk about the inseparable relation between human and nature. However, the narrative in the selected short stories allows for a literary exploration of the relationship between Bangladeshi people and the natural resources available to them. The depiction in the text raises and addresses questions, which should be at the heart of the critical meta-discourse environment studies. This paper analyses ecocriticism in "Death", "Khoai Nodir Baak Bodol", and "Longor Khana" authored by Selina Hossain.

Keywords: Environmental Degradation, Ecocriticism, Human Exploitation, Social Injustice, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Just after the independence acquired, the newly born Bangladesh faced many nature-induced and human created problems. The people were striking with political and social uncertainties as the country was grappling with the national problems. In post-independent Bangladesh, environmental damage, along with other social changes, is nowadays a burning issue which consequently makes the climate change inevitable. Moreover, Bangladesh, being occupied by the huge Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta, is most vulnerable to climate crisis. Because of its having tropical climate, it faces hot temperatures throughout the year. The climate characteristically involves frequent floods, storm surges, tropical cyclones, tidal bores and tornadoes. Having various altitudinal length, Bangladesh is susceptible to rising sea levels due to global warming, presupposing the low-lying lands will get submerged first. As a result, Bangladesh in the recent past, has experienced two severe cyclonic storms, respectively Sidr (2007) and Aila (2009) that have caused extensive damage to the lives of the people and their shelters. The detrimental effect of these storms continued with post-disaster diseases as well.

Aila, a severe cyclonic storm battered the coastal areas of Bangladesh, particularly Satkhira and Khulna, inflicting huge tidal surges and flooding in 2009. More than a million people lost their homes and had to migrate from their regions. Thousands of houses, livestock and other properties in coastal areas of Bangladesh were swept away, people migrated towards northern and hilly regions. While reporting some background of the top cyclones since 1960, Dr. Md. Rashed Chowdhury in an article titled "Cyclone Aila and climate change" published in *The Daily Star* in 2009 points out:

May 25, 2009: Tropical Cyclone Aila hit Bangladesh. This is the time when the equatorial Pacific Ocean is expected to be transitioned from La Niña to ENSO-neutral conditions, ending the 2008-09 La Niña. However, the equatorial Pacific has been found to be warmed (i.e., El Niño like event) to the positive half of the neutral range, after weak La Nina conditions ended early last month. While most of the dynamic and statistical models forecast that during the May-July season there is an approximately 75% probability of maintaining ENSO-neutral conditions, some model forecasts stated that the probability for El Niño conditions rises to 45% (*The Daily Star* 2009).

These investigations show how these violent storms intensify the threats of cyclone in Bangladesh as a result of global climate change. Aila ripped through the Satkhira district near the port of Mongla, and flooded many areas still recovering from Cyclone Sidr in November 2007 which had an immense toll on human lives and subsistence. This devastating cyclone killed "3,500 people and made at least a million homeless" (*Reuters*). Moreover, the surge subsequently, resulted in migration at a grand scale and landlessness.

Hossain, with a view to bringing ecological education and awareness, narrates the life of such affected people as a central tenet of action on climate change in Bangladesh. She appeals to the reader to be attentive to historical and contemporary attitudes to nature and areas, such as; Satkhira, Khulna, Patuakhali, Mongla etc., little known outside this country. The people, here have diminishing strength to encounter calamities combined with their lack of ecological knowledge and awareness culminate in the massive rate of destruction. Her impassioned critique reinforces the places in the narratives as regions where nature shows its violent face. However, remaining still ignorant amounts to the serious denigration of ecological knowledge and awareness, and thus, contributes to multiplying the miseries of the people. The topography of the place comes to be emblematic of the tenuousness of human categories of meaning, especially in relation to the bond between human and nature.

The efforts taken by the Government along with the development partners and NGOs to implement early warning systems, cyclone shelters and relief allocation systems, remain insufficient. But, the scientists and intellectuals are concerned about the permanent measures taken to prevent these phenomenal disasters and eventually protect the earth and humankind. Climate crisis caused by increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases and human-caused emissions leading subsequently to these severe cyclonic storms. Measures adopted in the time of these havoc alone will fail the long-term idea of sustainability. Public awareness needs to be accelerated as well since the development paradigm of a country incorporates how development should be carried out properly. However, literature as a field of study encompasses discussion on human beings and non-human environment. Pranoto (2014) claims that "green literature has several criteria. These criteria also emphasize that green literature has a vision and mission of awareness and enlightenment that is expected to change the lifestyle of the destroyer to become the nurturer and nurse of the earth" (cited in Budi Arianto, Suminto, and Anwar, 1269).

The purpose of literature is to appeal to human's finer instincts. It involves discussion and thus draws attention to various socio-human issues, one of which is prominent nowadays is environment. In the name of ecocriticism, it views and delineates the rich array of fictional and non-fictional writings focusing humans' changing relationship to the natural world. It validates its existence and the growing need of this kind of study in literature. Literary texts help in enriching and transforming our knowledge about the current situation of climate change. In so doing, they exemplify the contribution literature can make to the theoretical project of environmental studies. The physicality of different environmental manifestations and their textual representations evoke a conceptual account of places and lives. However, critics have defined ecocriticism in various ways. A few of them relevant to this study is discussed. According to Glotfelty (1996), "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xix). Commenting on the importance of attachment to place in the life and unity of a community, Buell, in his *The Future of Environment Criticism* (2005) says, "Ecocriticism,

however, has tended to favor literary texts oriented toward comparatively local or regional levels of place attachment” (68). The scholars are relentlessly trying to draw our attention to the imminent threat to the natural space. In an essay in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Glen A. Love claims “The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (237). Kevin Hutchings (2007) illumines the definition in this manner:

One of ecocriticism’s basic premises is that literature both reflects and helps to shape human responses to the natural environment. By studying the representation of the physical world in literary texts and in the social contexts of their production, ecocriticism attempts to account for attitudes and practices that have contributed to modern-day ecological problems, while at the same time investigating alternative modes of thought and behaviour, including sustainable practices that would respect the perceived rights or values associated with non-human creatures and ecological processes” (172).

However, all these definitions focus on the environmental issues and concerns, ecological awareness to save humankind and the earth. This study highlights how environmental issues are reflected in Bangladeshi fiction and how its implications are filled with ecological awareness.

There have been some emerging writers and scholars who have started incorporating eco-consciousness in their writings in independent Bangladesh. Among them, Syed Manzoorul Islam’s novel *Shakuner Dana* (2013), Rafiq Azad’s poem “Pardon me O Blowing Generous Infinite Wind”, Fakrul Alam’s essay “Rabindranath Tagore and Eco-Consciousness” (2012), Ahsanul Kabir’s essay “Nature and the Imagery of Bird in the Works of Jibananand Das” are some notable works. Selina Hossain, being the President of Tarupallab, an organization for promoting knowledge of tress, bears the legacy of an environmentalist. Moreover, the publication of her *Galpashamagro (Collected Short Stories)* in 2010 is typically regarded as a starting point for raising public awareness of environmental crises in post-independent Bangladesh. Even long before that, the dangers of global warming, the destruction of the rainforest and air pollution have reached a certain consensus not only in Bangladesh but around the world. While keeping in mind the extremity of environmental danger and the dire necessity of awareness of environmental crises in the earth, she strongly believes that South Asian writers should include rapidly changing environment through their works and the glaring injustice that has been given by developed countries to developing countries in matters of climate change. In “Death”, the creation of the protagonist, Jabbar who loses his home and entire family to the fury of cyclone Aila, is an attempt to raise awareness of environmental crises. This is further reinstated in Hossain’s remark as she says in her talk to *The Daily Star* in 2010 titled An Author’s Environmental Concerns, “The writers will have to speak in the language of the heart of the people who are victims of climate change, their pain, and their protest and resistance so that there is a universal appeal” (Pallab Bhattacharya, *The Daily Star*). She reaches the height of an activist because of this universalism in her short story “Death”, in which the presentiment of the story does not confine it in a setting of Bangladeshi village, rather places it in any cyclone-ravaged corner of the world. Hence, Jabbar’s predicament becomes the predicament of any victim of environmental disaster.

This paper examines how profoundly Hossain’s writings about the riverine local people and the monumental effect of climate crisis will shape the view of contemporary Bangladeshi fiction. Hossain expresses direct and explicit ideas about the havoc wreaked on human’s social and psychological being, and the need for human to stand up for the environment because the threat is impending on us at an alarming speed. This paper addresses how environmental crisis is bringing change not only in the physical existence but also in the psychological entity as well. In all the stories to be discussed, Hossain is so deeply concerned and moved by the plight befalling on humans due to nature-induced disasters by global warming, she is charged to find a solution to save humankind from danger and the destruction of the ecosphere through her writings. Remaining persistent with this spirit, she not only visits the cyclone affected areas but also participates in disbursing relief to the survivors.

In an interview with *The Daily Star* in 2010, Hossain says, “Environment and literature are not two different things and environment could not be seen separately from state policy” (Pallab Bhattacharya, *The Daily Star*). The primordial stage where people had close connections with nature needs to be reestablished in the wake of ecological crisis. Hossain’s holistic view on life enables us to reestablish our connection with nature, and raise awareness of the pollution of commercialized culture. Characters in the stories under discussion showcase the stark reality of the consumerist world and henceforth, implicates a possible suggestion to lead man out of the

endangered world, helping rebuild the harmonious relationship between humankind and nature. The famous ecocritic Lawrence Buell highlights the importance of an increasing amount of literature dealing with “compromised, endangered landscapes” and “marginalised, minority peoples and communities” everywhere (cited in Alam, 97).

2. Environment and Society

Industrial revolution has a profound impact on the bond between humankind and the natural world. Moreover, the society that has emerged as a repercussion of industrialisation has marginalized nature as well as human for fulfillment of their essentials. Over the years, as matter of fact, nature appears to have come in the way of progress. The focus, rather, has shifted to taming or civilizing nature. The time witnesses the exploitation of water, forests and other natural resources that consequently lead to their collapse. Eventually, it culminates into the subsequent exploitation of minorities such as indigenous people who have traditionally respected the natural world that sustain them. Bangladesh being a small but densely populated country has the worst effect of it. This condition is further reinforced in Nishita Ivy’s article, as she quotes a report of the Department of Environment, Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013, “The natural environment of Bangladesh has been under continuous pressure due to unplanned urbanization and industrialization” (11). Apparently, it looks like an advancement in the face of rapid commercial expansion, but Bangladeshi narratives have not yet entailed that much the havoc it caused on plants, trees, forests, birds, skies, rivers, canals etc.

Selina Hossain being one of the pioneering writers is prompted by the issues of environmental degradation and its effects on the lives of the riverine local people. She strongly recognizes the destructiveness of industrialization towards the natural environment and deals with the issues in her work. “Death”, “Khoai Nodir Baak Bodol”, and “Longor Khana” stand as her most explicit warning of an ecological crisis. She was the only writer to talk about climate change issues and how literature can bring it into sharper focus among the masses at a SAARC Literature Festival held a few years back at the India International Centre. Her concern with environment and the relationship between humankind and the natural world is best expressed as she said in an interview at *The Business Standard* in 2021,

"With more time passing by, we have now forgotten that trees are our real guardians, ancient story-tellers, providers of food and, most importantly, providers of clean air. We need to leave this place pure enough for the next generation to breathe." (Kamrun Naher, *The Business Standard*).

Lawrence Buell et al., while talking about the implications of ecocriticism, argued in a paper titled “Literature and Environment”, “...the arts of the imagination and the study thereof – by virtue of their grasp of the power of the word, story and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern – can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of ecodegradation that afflict planet Earth today” (418). Hossain with her skillful art and craft tries to raise our awareness of the urgency of the situation. The merging of fictional and factual histories and regions is important to decode the severity of the current situation of local residents. However, devastating environmental hazard created by the increasingly rising mills and factories depicted in “Longor Khana”, exerts a powerful influence on their own lives and the communities, all of which depend on the physical environment and its bounty. Even when a voluntary organisation from a municipal area arrive to disburse relief to the Jute Mill workers who were living in a dilapidated condition after the mill gets shut without a prior notice, the local administrative people threaten the relief provider. The placement of toxic facilities in low-income communities where Nur Ali lives with his family means that these communities are often the hardest hit by environmental problems, such as the indigenous people in Death, whose homeland and lives are totally degraded and destroyed by climate change. In “Khoai Nodir Baak Bodol”, Monu Mia, a by-product of industrialisation, blatantly disregards all his duties and responsibilities towards his children and bed-ridden aged father just for occupying the Khoai formed island. Hence, ecocritical perspective in literature envisages the dire need to preserve nature, instead of destroying it.

Effects resulting from climate change are magnitude in scale as is seen in the selected stories the characters are starving for lack of food and medical facilities. The most affected among them are children and the elderly people in the families. When water quality and public health are in risk, Nur Ali, Jabbar, and Monu Mia depend on Kochu Shakh (Taro stem), and thus, again indicating how nature saves man from total extinction. People find solace in nature in time of scarcity from eternity. But, the people who could take initiative to bring the change seem to be unmoved. However, Nur Ali senses the crisis that “One day kochu shakh (Taro stem) won’t be available – eventually grasses will disappear – trees will turn barren – all these are going to be extinct someday if people finish them by eating” (“Longor Khana”, p. 639). Hossain’s frustration and anger finds an outlet in Nur Ali’s final words as he turns back and gathers the courage to say sarcastically “Mr. Police, the butt of your government is huge and fat...why don’t you kick there” (“Longor Khana”, p. 642)?

The destruction caused by humankind results in the rise of sea levels, the transformation of the coastlines, as well as engendering deadly cyclones. Moreover, the ecosphere is fundamentally changed with global warming. “Death” captures a subtle account of the devastating effect Aila had on Bangladesh in 2009. Hossain has maneuvered the plot of the story in such a manner as to storms are not used as literary devices only. Rather they have got interwoven into the thematic unravelling of the story. Instead of discussing only the plight of the people caused by the tidal surge, I’m going to focus on the importance of the use of natural elements (here they are storm, river, kochu shakh/taro stem, khichuri (a dish of rice and lentils), etc. in terms of the manner of relationship it holds between the nature and humans. However, in the beginning, Hossain portrays the gust of wind that keeps blowing all day and makes Amina’s life more miserable with old and shabby sari which is the only piece of cloth left to her. She prepares us for the “keyamot” (destruction of the earth) that is going to befall on the family by the nightfall. In *Death*, the protagonist Jabbar loses his home and entire family to the fury of Aila.

The increasing rate of cyclones means the collapse of the ecological system. The coastlines of countries are changed forever, breaking off like crust. It rains the whole year due to climate change. Houses, plants, and animals are deluged with great frequency which allows no time for the characters even to protect themselves. As Jabbar says, “The way the water of the sea is roaring, it will surely wash away the houses, if mother could float on this fence, would possibly survive” (“Death”, 2010, p. 643). Environmental crises affected people directly, in fact and in fiction, forcing them to run for life. In the beginning of the story, “Khoai Nodir Baak Bodol”, Hossain gives a depiction of the Khoai which the two sides of the river breaks down and endanger the lives of the people during monsoon. But, Monu Mia remains unconcerned about the misfortune that befalls on the villagers rather get amused by the exuberance of the river and secretly wishes to have the same spirit as the river.

3. Exploitation of Environment and its Potential Threats

Like the other developing countries of Asia, Bangladesh faces the worst case of environmental problems due to rapid growth of economy, population, urbanization and dependency on vehicles as research studies show. Marginal people, such as boatmen and fishermen of the riverine delta alongside factory workers are always the most affected when living closer to the resources of pollution. The natural scientists, authors, literary critics, anthropologists, and historians of Bangladesh are expressing their concerns over the environmental problems and identifying them as the root of social problems. Deterioration of environment inevitably impedes not only the social growth of Bangladesh but also accelerates social injustice of all kinds. Hossain’s critique of exploitation reinforces that we need to embrace and celebrate the essence of humanity in the real sense by supporting and recognizing the communities close to climate. However, many stories have candidly addressed episodes of ethnic attacks, displacement and the like of these social injustices. However, Bangladeshi short stories are yet to significantly feature climate change which have severe implications for sustainable development. More emphasis should be given on in the portrayal of the lives of the victims of climate change and environmental degradation to raise awareness among mankind. As Singh says in an essay on environment, “Through literary works, Ecocriticism tries to bring attention to the need to reassess man's connection with his environment” (577). However, Jabbar, Nur Ali, and Monu Mia in the chosen stories are the victims of this environmental exploitation.

Environmental exploitation often leads to human exploitation. In “Death”, Jabbar and his family, the economically impoverished riverine indigenous people lost their homes to climate change. In real world too, indigenous communities globally face some of the worst environmental hazards. Monu Mia in “Khoai Nodir Baak Bodol”, finds no valid reasons for letting his sons continue going to school rather, decides to engage them in sowing In “Longor Khana”, seeing the family run out of anything to eat, Tajun, the eldest daughter of Nur Ali, breaks out the news of khichuri (a dish of rice and lentils) that is going to be distributed as relief. The narrative unveils the extreme hunger and deprivation of basic rights that lie at the heart of this indigenous community. However, social justice and environmental justice stand as binary to each other. As per Adamson et al., in the Environmental Justice Reader (2002), “environmental justice can be defined as the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment” (cited in Clark, 88). Social injustice threatens the well-being of indigenous people and their families, as articulated in “Longor Khana”:

Do people really get isolated when there is no means to earn money? Nur Ali sleeps on the veranda and coughs hard, rises again, and then again lies down. Time flies for an indeterminate period of time. How long? Nobody cares. Eventually, coughing ends. Nur Ali has been having this since the last few months. But no medical aid is available (637).

Characters depicted in the stories are treated as commodities in “Death”, “Khoai Nodir Baak Bodol”, and “Longor Khana” and the predators who exploit are also the victims of climate change. Likewise, Jabbar, Amina and his mother and children in “Death” are victims in face of the injustice, exploitation, and cruelty of the world. They must stay forever on alert in order not to be devoured by the forces of nature, such as, cyclones, tornadoes, droughts or by other forces of climate change. Jabbar relentlessly tries to figure out what to do for survival and finding no better options leaves his senile and sick mother tie up with a fence with a hope that she will be able to float and thus, survive. Jabbar is a typical case. He is hunted, runs away to seek shelter, and finally is left to live in despair and disillusionment and utter shock.

Environmental disasters are not just a physical experience but a potent psychological experience as well. All the characters experience an ecological event while living in the areas affected by climate change. Hence, the local people living in disaster prone areas confront nature, suffer the loss of homeland, disconnection with nature, and the loss of a sense of belonging. It is thus, evident that the physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing of humans is how strongly tied with nature and its sources. Nonetheless, their physical pains caused from climate catastrophe are far less than the psychological traumas. All of them suffer from the loss of their loved ones, get disconnected with their dearest ones, lose social ties and eventually become traumatic. As Marcus Arcaño quotes in an article in *A Climate Institute Publication* (2019), “... people coping with severe weather conditions can experience serious mental health symptoms, including post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety” (2). However, the characters in “Death” are abused and traumatic. In “Death”, after the natural disaster wreaks havoc in his village, Jabbar fails to recognise it as the village where he was born and brought up. Jabbar has to leave his mother alone by tying her with ropes around the fence. Her yells for survival leaves Amina helpless and numb. Jabbar says, “The roofs of neighbourly houses are toppling, trees are being uprooted” (“Death”, p. 643). The way the family floats in the gusty waves is indescribable. The horrendous experience of that cyclone-hit night leaves an indelible mark in his life. The mental state of Jabbar is best understood from the author’s remarks in the last, “Jabbar does not look at Sagir. He keeps running with heavy breath. He cannot understand at which corner of the village he will get the pleasure of returning home” (“Death”, p. 645).

In “Khoai Nodir Baak Bodol”, Monu Mia connects himself with that river. He nurtures an ambition to possess the entire riverine island. The location and the flow of water of the river has a tremendous influence on the thoughts and desires of Monu Mia. His desire fumes with the fuming of the river. Later when the chairman declares that the pathway of the river will be cut through his land, Monu loses his balance, shrieks and gets disillusioned. “In a state of despair, he halts at the bank of the Khoai. The Khoai is now a dream to the whole village. But, Monu Mia envisions that darkness is letting his feet drench into the Khoai” (“Khoai Nodir Baak Bodol”, p. 124).

“Longor Khana” is a tale of Nur Ali and his family where everything appears to be at discord at the very onset due to climate crisis. Lack of food and hunger is a rife in the conjugal life of Nur Ali and Kajol Banu. Hossain

allows us to see how these factions affect the children in the family. Their eldest daughter Tajun shows her disregard for the social ties. The unjust treatment the family receive from the administrative people also symbolizes the moral degradation of the whole community. Poverty, hunger and crimes emerge with environmental deterioration. Nur Ali finds himself neglected, desolate, uncared and deserted by his society and becomes traumatised. Disasters and the subsequent injustices cause catastrophic imbalance in the society as well.

4. Conclusion

Environmental disasters pose a potential threat to our existence on earth at an alarming rate. Hossain's stories represent the environmental crisis. She, with an adroit skill and dexterity intertwines the physical injuries associated with environmental disasters and the psychological difficulties that local residents face. Through these stories, Hossain gives a message of changing our thoughts on the age-old bond between man and nature and tries to raise an awareness of the urgency of the environmental degradation. The representation of ecological reality in Bangladeshi short stories is an attempt which deserves critical acclaim and an awareness of the current ecological conditions. Her astonishingly courageous effort has to be lauded. The attempt has been made here to appreciate the manner of her inclusion of a greater reality which gives a newer dimension to an ecocritical perspective. It is worth noting how disasters ensued by climate change here powerfully controls the destiny of the characters involved. The rendition of both nature and human-induced disasters, however, in the short stories compels us to examine it from literary and humanitarian angles.

Funding: Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent Statement/Ethics Approval: Not applicable.

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