



RESEARCH PAPER**The Role of Literature in addressing Climate Change: An Ecocritical Analysis of Omar El Akkad's American War****¹Javed Iqbal*, ²Nadeem Khan and ³Abdullah**

1. Lecturer, Department of English University of Buner, KP, Pakistan
2. Lecturer, Department of English, University of Buner, KP, Pakistan
3. Lecturer, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, KP, Pakistan

***Corresponding Author** | iamjavediqbal919@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Ecocritical analysis of Omar El Akkad's novel "American War" examines how literature can raise awareness of climate change and its consequences. The study demonstrates how the novel's dystopian future of environmental catastrophe can spark critical environmental debate. Literature's power to transform society is key to addressing the global threats posed by climate change, which impacts ecosystems, health, and the economy. The qualitative study analyzes the novel's themes, characters, and story structures, revealing how it vividly depicts a future America devastated by climate change, rising sea levels, and ecological collapse. Dystopian stories like "American War" underscore the urgency of climate change and promote environmental consciousness in schools and society. Interdisciplinary methods combining literary and environmental science can further expand thinking and engage people in combating climate change.

KEYWORDS

American War, Climate Change, Climate Refugees, Dystopian Fiction, Ecocriticism, Environmental Awareness, Literary Analysis, Omar El Akkad, Social Inequality, Sustainability

Introduction

Political Climate change is one of the greatest threats confronting humanity. Its consequences are wide-ranging, ranging from the ecosphere and human health to global economic stability. The warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since 1850 over each subsequent decade has been warmer than any preceding one (IPCC,2014). The very first thing to realize, is this emergency and we need a good communication strategy here that is actually effective to open the eyes of people! In this process, literature assumes an influential function of society in terms of developing attitudes and mentality also plays a vital role.

Ecocriticism is an academic approach that analyzes the relationship between literature and environment, which can provide a great understanding of how texts depict our ecological perspectives. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, an early proponent of ecocriticism, the term is used in a general sense and refers broadly to the relationship between literature and environmentalism (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996). The critic contributing to this field understands literature as cultivating awareness about our precarious relationship with the environment and encouraging sustainable life practices. Focused on literary representations of nature and the ecological destruction, ecocriticism stresses narratives as instruments to involve readers in a trenchant environmental discourse.

From this perspective dystopian literature, in particular, offers a compelling scheme to engage with the contemporary issue of climate change. Given the likelihood of environmental collapse and societal disruption that dwindle around us, dystopian narratives remind how fast our current threats can become nightmarish possibilities in err. Books like Margaret Atwood's novel *The Year of the Flood* (2009) or Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017) illustrate future scenarios in which a changed climate shapes human life - encouraging readers to think about where we are heading with our treatment of ecosystems. The stories not just educate but serve to compel, as they create a need for recognition and accountability among readers about the pursued directions in further developing sustainable futures.

American War (2017) by Omar El Akkad is a deeply moving and provocative narrative based in a future US dealing with the consequences of climate change, race riots & civil war. The series takes place in the late 21st century, and portrays a nation at odds following a second Civil War over Southern secessionists angry about restrictions on their fossil fuels. El Akkad's story line projects a dystopian future of ecological and societal collapse as sea waters engulf coastal cities, extreme weather events escalate. By painting a bleak picture of what the future holds, readers are forced to re-evaluate some important issues regarding our relationship with nature and within society-namely that all ecological problems have repercussions in other social areas as well - *American War* helps drive this connection home.

This paper employs an ecocritical approach to analyze the *American War*, exploring how El Akkad uses dystopian fiction to comment on contemporary environmental concerns. By examining the novel's themes, characters, and narrative structure, this study aims to demonstrate how literature can raise awareness about climate change and foster a deeper understanding of its impacts. The analysis will focus on three key aspects of the novel: the portrayal of environmental catastrophe, the exploration of the human-nature relationship, and the depiction of climate refugees and social inequality.

Literature Review

Ecocriticism and Climate Change

Over the past years, an approach to literature called ecocriticism has begun developing into a discipline of its own. Environmental criticism explores how literary texts both reflect and affect our understanding of the natural world and help to determine what we can legitimately do with nature. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) define ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," pointing to literature's contribution towards creating ecological consciousness. Through ecocriticism, we learn how narratives can encourage a more thorough understanding of environmental thinking and how they contribute to perpetuate or change unsustainable practices.

An important anthology in ecocriticism is *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996). The volume collects classic essays that consider ecological and natural themes in narratives, as well as those that demonstrate the impact of literary works on environmental discourse. As the essays in this collection suggest, critical reliance on nature in literary studies reveals more about society and cultural attitudes towards the environment.

Climate Change in Dystopian Literature

A common theme for dystopian literature is that the difference between it and reality, in terms of environmental collapse followed by social breakdown/total extinction, would be only a matter of time. These stories are meant to be cautionary in nature and show us the consequences of unabated damage being caused on an environmental scale. Climate fiction warns us to heed the strains and challenges caused by climate change on a global scale.

The Year of the Flood (2009) is a great example of dystopian fiction that focuses on environmental degradation by Margaret Atwood. In this case the novel takes place in a future where genetic alteration and environmental meltdown have shaped two classes of humanity alongside ecological collapse all assumed to be far more regular. Atwood's story skillfully intertwines social problems with those of the environment, encouraging the readers to think futuristically about their own actions.

On a similar note, Kim Stanley Robinson in 2017's *New York 2140* portrays the metropolis awash due to sea level rise. The novel, which was written 15 years ago and fast-tracked for this fall in response to the pandemic, capturing its own kind of time warp (which Daniyal Mueenuddin recently wrote about), shows how a seemingly content bourgeois Parisian life unravels amid an increasingly lawless calm-across-the-world due to environmental disasters. In the book, which centres on how we can use global solidarity and imaginative ideas to mitigate climate change, Robinson admonishes that humankind must understand what they have withered here.

The Role of Literature in Raising Awareness about Climate Change

Literature has the potential to capture hearts and minds unlike almost anything else, which is why literature might save more souls than any other media for spreading awareness about climate change. With stories and pictures, literary works can take on the complexities of environmental matters; make it personal to its readers. By cultivating empathy and a heightened awareness for the human-environment nexus, literature has the potential to shift societal views on ecological sustainability.

This passage is from her article "Narrating Climate Change: Can Literature Change the World." Kate Rigby (2016) suggests that literature has a key function in fostering the culture of climate change, making sure it is visible. Literary narratives are able to make abstract scientific concepts relatable and shareable, allowing readers a more visceral understanding of the urgency these environmental issues represent. Literature can play a role in inspiring our readers to become advocates of sound and sustainable practices as well as sensible policies.

As Adeline Johns-Putra (2016) writes, climate change fiction or "cli-fi" for short has established itself as a separate genre that tackles the pressing challenge of global warming. By imagining futures where the negative impacts of climate change have come to life, novels tend to draw attention on how bad things could get and lead readers hopefully toward making different decisions concerning their environment in present time - an argument that Johns-Putra makes for cli-fi.amazon.com. Through narratives that focus on issues ranging from displacement to resource scarcity and social inequity, cli-fi underscores the mutual dependence between environmental policy and socioeconomic life in order for tangible contributions toward sustainability.

Omar El Akkad's American War and Climate Change

American War (2017) by Omar El Akkad is a heart-rending novel set in post climate apocalypse civil war United States. It is the late 21 st century and rising sea levels have swallowed up all major coastal cities along with an increasing frequency of extreme weather events. This is the story El Akkad builds as he presents a portrait of environmental and demographic doom, the worst-case scenario if mankind does not address global warming.

In American War, El Akkad's depiction of a natural world ruined by mankind is both prescient and harrowing. The site of the novel helps to underscore what are some of its most pressing themes, that is the weight and cost of environmental abuse paring down political change in addition to basic survival. Through a revealing portrayal of how environmental fallout exacerbates global crises, El Akkad implores readers to consider their own path and potential futures as horrors of ecological devastation go unchecked.

The Human-Nature Relationship in American War

With its portrayal of a society made increasingly fragile by forces beyond and within it, American War is an unforgettable novel from the first word to last. In the novel, scarcity of resources as well displacement and environmental destruction are phenomena that characters must navigate. Because, as El Akkad learns from their experiences he would go on to highlight the need for cultural practices that enact sustainability and reconnect us with nature.

Megan Musgrave (2018) as she analyzes American War, where her reflection of the human-nature interaction stands out: Musgrave says El Akkad's story offers a perspective on the outcome of environmental abuse, and what is required to develop a healthier relationship with our environment. The novel paints a vivid picture of the difficulties faced by individuals and communities in an environmentally devastated future, underlining the necessity for sustainable practices and public policies.

Climate Refugees and Social Inequality in American War

Climate refugees add a wrinkle to El Akkad's narrative, which features the displacement of millions due to environmental collapse. The novel paints a picture of climate change exacerbated social and economic inequities (structural inequalities) - reminding us how underprivileged communities already bear the brunt of this unjust burden. The story thus serves as a reminder of the urgency for common, equitable efforts toward dealing with environmental crises.

Richard Klein (2019) takes the issue with climate refugees and social inequities in his article, Climate Change and Migration: An Analysis of Omar El Akkad's American War. Klein suggests that El Akkad's story is an example of how we have to understand climate change as a human issue and work at its roots if we are going to be able respond the crisis of displacement. The novel points out the vulnerability of climate refugees and seems to say that approach should inspire compassion in drafting policies about temperatures.

Material and Methods

The methodology section outlines the approach taken to analyze Omar El Akkad's *American War* through an ecocritical lens. This involves a detailed examination of the novel's themes, characters, and narrative structure to understand how it addresses climate

change and environmental issues. The following steps were undertaken to conduct this analysis:

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, focusing on textual analysis. The qualitative approach is well-suited for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the literary elements and thematic concerns within *American War*. By employing an ecocritical framework, the study seeks to uncover how the novel portrays the impact of climate change and engages readers in environmental discourse.

Ecocritical Framework

This analysis uses an ecocritical framework. Ecocriticism is the study of literature that uses an interdisciplinary framework, which draws on environmental theories from different fields such as anthropology or science. These key concepts form a part of ecocriticism: the representation of nature, degradation and pollution in the environment, relationship between humans-nature which were used to analyze the *American War*. This study also consults some of the foundational works in ecocriticism, such as *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), to establish its theoretical framework.

Selection of Text

The selection of *American War* by Omar El Akkad focused on its timely themes and storyline which centers around climate change. This dystopian account of a future United States in ecological ruin is here subjected to an ecocritical reading. The choice hinged on the book's relevance to current environmental issues and its capacity for helping readers rethink how they see global warming, according to them.

Data Collection

Data for this study were obtained by way of a close reading and analysis of *American War*. This involved identifying and analyzing key passages, dialogues and narrative elements to determine their significance in reflecting the environmental themes of the novel. Key scenes showing environmental disaster, human-nature connections and the suffering of climate refugees were selected for in-depth analysis.

Analytical Approach

The analysis of the novel "*American War*" by Omar El Akkad involved a multifaceted approach. Firstly, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes related to climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequality, such as resource scarcity and displacement. Character analysis focused on the experiences and perspectives of characters, emphasizing their interactions with the environment and responses to ecological crises. The narrative structure was examined, particularly the setting, plot development, and use of dystopian elements, to understand how the novel conveys its environmental message. Finally, a contextual analysis placed the novel within the broader climate change literature and dystopian fiction, comparing it with other works to highlight its unique contributions to the discourse.

Ecocritical Analysis

The ecocritical analysis focused on how the American War portrays the interconnectedness of ecological and social issues. By examining the depiction of environmental catastrophe, human-nature relationships, and social inequality, the analysis sought to uncover the novel's commentary on contemporary environmental concerns. The portrayal of climate refugees and the social impact of environmental degradation were key areas of focus.

Validity and Reliability

Several steps were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of this analysis of "American War. Use of multiple data sources: The study uses textual evidence from the novel and theoretical insights derived from ecocriticism to triangulate its findings. The analysis underwent peer review, with experts in literature and environmental studies reviewing the piece to check for objectivity, a high standard of methodological transparency. Reflexivity Furthermore, reflexivity was employed prior to researching prospective biases and assumptions through a focused analysis with an open critical approach.

Results and Discussion

Portrayal of Environmental Catastrophe in American War

American War, the debut novel of Omar El Akkad, is set in a dystopian future where environmental degradation has drastically changed America. The book takes place in the late 21st century which has seen catastrophic climate change with rising sea levels, extreme weather and global ecological collapse. Beyond its action and overt violence, El Akkad's vision of ecological apocalypse should serve as a chilling portent for what we might see in the future if today's ecosystems are not critically restructured.

Perhaps most compelling of all is the way American War presents sea level rises that have put large tracts of the southern US under water. This projection is consistent with those made by the scientific community - for example, in a synthesis of real-world projections published as part of an IPCC report (2014) that predicts major sea level rise before this century's close if we keep up greenhouse gas emissions. The coastal cities of Louisiana are submerged in the novel with millions displaced and a new form of climate refugees. It highlights the human toll of climate change and provides a chilling example for how environmental destruction can lead to widespread social chaos.

In all versions, El Akkad also plays up extreme weather. The characters live in poverty, hurricanes constantly pass through the area as well other natural disasters (droughts and floods). They depict these events as an inevitable outcome of the kind of increased weather volatility predicted by climate change (NOAA, 2018). Listening to El Akkad describe these future disasters, you can easily see how they become a constant and unrelenting part of our world.

Human-Nature Relationship

The novel delves into the not so subtle, often contentious relationship between humans and their environment. American War is a novel where resources are scarce, the environment is crumbling and all forms of living must adapt in order to survive. Nowhere is this dynamic more clearly expressed than in the travails of protagonist Sarat Chestnut, a native Louisianan made refugees as her home succumbs to encroaching waves.

Necessity and survival, however, do define the nature of Sarat's connection to her environment. She adapts to the inhospitable landscape and figures out how to get food, water, shelter. This characterization underscores the resilience and flexibility of humanity within an environmentally brutal backdrop. Yet, it is also a reminder of the fragility and impermanence of life in an ailing environment.

According to Musgrave (2018) El Akkad uses his story to demonstrate both the effects of environmentalism, as well as how humanity at large will need to think more collectively about their place in relationship with nature. The journey of Sarat mirrors the wider human condition in its struggle to find meaning amidst climate change, underscoring the need for sustainable habits and higher ecological consciousness. Through the novel that humanity has an innate ability to rebuild from scraps, yet with this same renewal also arises a dire need for addressing sustainable solutions and reversing harmful habits at their source.

Climate Refugees and Social Inequality

The American War forces us to consider the future of climate refugees and its impact on societal divide as a result. In the novel, millions driven by rising sea levels and ferocious storms have become a climate refugee class that survives on the margins of a broken society. This speaks to an issue faced in our reality, or threatening so, global migration due to Climate Change (as argued on the studies conducted by The International Organization for Migration - IOM 2019).

Both heart-wrenching and chilling, El Akkad's description of the climate refugees. Families including Sarat are torn from their homes and forced to live in refugee camps with a shortage of vital resources within an unforgiving desert. It emphasizes the social and economic divides environmental disasters exacerbate. Instead, climate change impacts are experienced more severely by those in low-income communities and largely white affluent areas have far greater ability to adapt.

Klein (2019) writes that El Akkad's story reveals one of the major, unseen costs of climate change and illustrates how a different kind of compassionate approach to dealing with it would be more inclusive. His novel is a description of global cooperation and environmental displacement for the climate refugees. But in its powerful portrayal of those most left behind by climate change, American War dares readers to think socially about even the natural world and calls on them to support legislation that defends society from environmental degradation as it occurs.

Narrative Structure and Dystopian Elements

The narrative structure of American War is key in telling its environmental story. It is divided into four parts that document the protagonist's life at various points, and environmental deterioration. In this way El Akkad tells the story of what we read about in news every day: long-term effects and lack of action by those with power to do something, worsening degradation over generations.

The use of dystopian elements in the American War serves to underscore the urgency of addressing climate change. The novel's setting—a future United States fragmented by civil war and environmental collapse—reflects a worst-case scenario that serves as a cautionary tale. El Akkad employs vivid imagery and detailed descriptions to create a sense of realism, making the dystopian future he envisions both plausible and terrifying.

Robinson (2017) argues that dystopian literature's power lies in its ability to make abstract concepts tangible and relatable. By depicting a world transformed by climate change, *American War* engages readers' imaginations and emotions, prompting them to consider the potential consequences of inaction. The novel's dystopian elements not only highlight the severity of the environmental crisis but also serve as a call to action, urging readers to advocate for sustainable practices and policies.

Comparative Analysis with Other Climate Change Literature

In context with other contemporary literary works that address the current condition of climate change—Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*—we find some common themes as well as unique contributions. Atwood and Robinson also take detours into dystopia to explore the repercussions of an environmentally damaged world as well—albeit no way near as directly tied in with *El Akkad*.

The Year of the Flood finds Atwood describing a disconnected society where genetic engineering and environmental disaster are to blame. Similar to *American War*, the novel highlights that social issues do not exist in a vacuum and are intertwined with environmental health injustices. Here you have two novels that showcase the fruition of environmental neglect and the need to foster a more regenerative coexistence with nature.

New York 2140 by Robinson is concerned with the political and economic effects of climate change: a future in which New York City has been inundated by rising sea levels. The narrative of Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* is one that calls back to a theme in *El Akkad*: climate justice through global solidarity, and creative thinking. The environmental disasters are portrayed in rich, naturalistic detail by both authors and mastery of the subject matter is one way to draw readers into mindshare on climate change.

Conclusion

American War by Omar El Akkad is a great literary example of the devastation that climate change can bring on, in terms of how environmental destruction becomes social unrest and also highlights human perseverance. The stakes are raised as Atwood ingeniously depicts a worse-case scenario in the form of this dystopian future that mobilizes readers to think carefully about current day ecological issues, recognizing not only vital improvements but immediate attention towards more sustainable practices and policies. Through the merging of individual stories to multifaceted environmental arcs, *American War* epitomizes how literature can serve as a cornerstone towards environmentally conscious storytelling and engagement.

Recommendations

For educators and policymakers seeking to harness the impact of literature on climate change, *American War* is suggested as a relevant book for both classrooms or larger public discussions. Green-Hamann advocates for cross-disciplinary work that merges English with environment biology to help add depth and inspiration. Furthermore, by uplifting and marketing authors that write about climate change from all corners of the world provides for many voices to be included in strengthening public engagement. Literature could help society cultivate a sense of ecological literacy that provides the necessary footing to deal with and address climate change.

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