



IRREVERSIBLE DAMAGE: BONDED LABOUR AND ECOLOGICAL SLOW VIOLENCE IN AISHA HASSAN'S *WHEN THE FIREFLIES DANCE*

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Abstract

This paper examines Aisha Hassan's *When the Fireflies Dance* as a literary intervention that renders visible lived realities of bonded labour by foregrounding the interdependence of economic coercion and ecological harm. The paper will employ an eco-Marxist theoretical approach, which combines the idea of accumulation by dispossession as proposed by David Harvey with the theory of slow violence by Rob Nixon, to assert that the novel evokes the notion of bonded labour not as a one-time wrong, but as a structural state of affairs and a condition created and perpetuated through daily practices. The paper uses close textual analysis to establish how debt operates as a labour immobilization mechanism, transforming work into a lifetime commitment and sealing off mobility, health and futurity. At the same time, environmental degradation; represented by dust, smoke, heat and chronic illness, as a kind of slow violence, which gradually wears the bodies of workers and continues even after they leave the kiln, is described in the novel. The analysis also shows the reproduction of bonded exploitation in generations, as ideological repression, gendered labour, and the criminalisation of resistance, which makes survival itself a place of struggle. This paper places the novel squarely in the socio-economic and ecological context of Pakistan and draws attention to the potential of the modern Pakistani English fiction to serve as a critical archive of marginalized labour experiences. Finally, the paper argues that *When the Fireflies Dance* is a compelling critique of modern capitalism in that it reveals how land and life are robbed by exploiting them through normalized, cumulative violence.

Keywords: *Bonded Labour, Brick-kiln Economy, Eco-Marxism, Environmental Injustice, Slow Violence*

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1. Introduction

Although bonded labour has been formally abolished in Pakistan by the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1992, debt-based labour remains entrenched in the rural and peri-urban economies of Pakistan, especially in agriculture, carpet weaving, mining, and brick production. One of the largest, yet to this day understudied, locations of bonded labour is the brick-kiln (bhatti) industry, where whole families are forced into labour through an ongoing sense of indebtedness and economic exploitation. According to a landmark study by an international labour organization and the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (ILO/PILER), bonded labour in brick kilns is kept alive by advance payments (peshgi), absence of wage-related transparency, and accounting systems, which make repayment structurally impossible (ILO/PILER, 2004). Quite on the contrary, bonded labour in this industry is not an unusual or unlawful residue, but rather a standardized form of labour extraction embedded in the informal Pakistani politics.

Child labour cannot be discussed outside of this system since children regularly have to work with parents in order to reach every daily production goal. Human rights report that in the brick kilns, children are frequently recruited at very early ages and subjected to exposure under adverse conditions such as extreme heat, dust and toxic emissions without protection (Human Trafficking Search, 2024). This incorporation of labour by generations does not only perpetuate the economic dependency but also precludes any mobility in education and guarantees the reproduction of bonded labour over lifetimes. Researchers have maintained that these family-based labour regimes transform poverty into a disciplining process in which survival needs; medical care, food or marriage costs, are used as collateral to further debts (Gazdar, 2007; PILER, 2014).

More importantly, environmental degradation is also inseparable with bonded labour in brick kilns intensifying vulnerability of the workers and further dependency. Kilns are usually situated on the periphery of the urban centres, and they emit toxic gasses, polluted air and unhealthy environment that leads to chronic respiratory diseases, skin diseases and physical fatigue. Investigative journalism at Dawn has on several occasions brought attention to how this kind of environmental degradation lowers the physical capacity of workers as it also heightens their dependence on the kiln owners to make advances and to receive medical care (Ahmed, 2023). Environmental toxicity is therefore not only a by-product of the production but a situation that strengthens the economic force of coercion and limits movement.

However, even though much empirical and legal documentation has been made available, there has always been a major gap in cultural and literary analysis which focuses on the lived, internalized, and normalized ways of bonded labour within the normal course of everyday life. Policy reports and development studies are more inclined to focus on indicators that are easier to quantify; number of kilns, amount of debt, or rescue statistics,

failing to capture the affective aspects of endurance, fear and slow attrition that help keep the system alive with time (ILO/PILER, 2004). This is especially noticeable considering the ability of literature to shed some light on those areas of labour exploitation that are most difficult to quantify. Here, the, in some ways, critical gap, literary narratives like *When the Fireflies Dance* gain analytical urgency in bringing insight to the human, environmental, and intergenerational price of a labour regime that, in spite of decades of official outlawing, continues to be structurally reproduced.

The work holds importance as it contributes to the Pakistani English literary criticism, labour studies and environmental humanities. On the one hand, it predicts the experiences of the marginalised labouring subjects in a socio-economic landscape that tends to be overlooked in the mainstream of literary analysis and so it counters dominant literary storytelling that focuses on urban, elite, or cultural issues. Second, having the brick kiln read as a place of labour legibility and environmental damage, the work of the study intersects the literary representation with the actual circumstances of bonded labour reported by human rights organisations, showing how literature can serve as a critical record of the systemic exploitation. Third, the study raises the voices of the victims and places the novel in a wider context of discussions about labour exploitation, environmental degradation and social justice, providing information about how debt and environment interact to determine human endurance and social immobility in Pakistan.

2. Thesis Statement

This study argues that *When the Fireflies Dance* depicts bonded labour in Pakistan's brick-kiln economy as a structurally sustained condition in which debt, labour exploitation, and environmental harm converge to produce enduring forms of unfreedom and social immobility.

2.1. Research Questions

1. How does *When the Fireflies Dance* portray bonded labour as a normalized structure of coercion within brick-kiln industry?
2. In what ways does the novel represent debt as a mechanism that restricts mobility and reproduces dependency?
3. How does *When the Fireflies Dance* integrate environmental degradation into the narrative of labour exploitation and social immobility?

2.2. Literature Review

2.2.1. Bonded Labour and the Brick-Kiln Economy in Pakistan

The study of bonded labour in Pakistan has been known to focus on its structural persistence even after the official abolition. The International Labour Organization and Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (ILO/PILER) report Unfree Labour in Pakistan, detailing the functioning of debt bondage in the brick kilns in terms of advance payments (peshgi), wage regulation and obscured accounting practices (ILO/PILER, 2004,

pp. 9-15), is one of the most detailed early interventions. The report points out that employees are mostly left in the dark regarding the exact sum due, as it states that “*the calculation of debt is controlled almost entirely by the employer, making repayment practically unattainable*” (ILO/PILER, 2004, p. 13). This non-transparency turns debt into a permanent state as opposed to a temporary one.

This analysis has been strengthened by subsequent Pakistani scholarship, which has placed bonded labour in the wider context of the informal political economy. According to Gazdar, the reason why unfree labour is still present is not the absence of law but the fact that informality permits coercive relations to be disguised as contractual and voluntary (Gazdar, 2007, pp. 8792). He notes that “*socially embedded arrangements in which economic dependency is naturalized as moral obligation*” (Gazdar, 2007, p. 90). Peshgi in the brick-kiln industry is often consumed to satisfy the needs of survival; a medical crisis, a food shortage, or a wedding bill; and thus, making the very state of poverty an instrument of labour discipline.

2.2.2. Labour, Class, and Marginalization in Pakistani English Fiction

The critical analysis of Pakistani English fiction has grown enormously in the last twenty years, but there has been little continued interest in labour as a key analytic category. A large portion of the extant literature has addressed the themes of identity, migration, religion, terrorism and elite urban alienation. Shamsie notes that Pakistani Anglophone literature has been frequently interpreted through the perspective of “*global visibility and metropolitan readerships,*” that can alienate local material conditions of class and labour (Shamsie, 2017, p. 182). Consequently, working-class characters are often used as bystanders and not as structurally positioned characters.

Here, the critique of postcolonial literary studies by Mufti is especially educative. His critique is that cultural circulation has been overvalued in literary criticism, and that this mode of cultural production threatens to disconnect literature to “*the historical realities of labour, dispossession, and everyday survival*” (Mufti, 2016, p. 41). Although Mufti does not write directly concerning the brick-kiln industry in Pakistan, his emphasis on rejoining literature to political economy is an essential critical direction to read the literature that prefigures labour exploitation.

The studies that mention class in Pakistani fiction are usually indirect. Kanwal (such as Pakistani women writing) involves issues of power and marginality, but many are addressed on domestic or symbolic, but not labour regimes (Kanwal, 2015). Even in describing poverty, it is often treated as a state of affect or morality and not as an outcome of economic structures. Therefore, places like the brick kilns; where labour, debt and environment meet, are barely subject to ongoing literary scrutiny.

2.2.3. Environment, Labour, and Progressive Damage in Critical Scholarship.

The other weakness of the current literature is the fact that it isolates labour exploitation and environmental degradation. Research on bonded labour in Pakistan tends to recognise the existence of dangerous working conditions but dismisses them as minor issues. But the ruin of the environment in the brick-kiln societies; contaminated air, noxious gases, excessive heat, and unhealthy living conditions are vital factors in exacerbating the susceptibility of the workers. Dawn reporting on investigations reveals that many kiln workers have respiratory illness and physical deterioration, with environmental exposure diminishing worker capacity and increasing reliance on employers to receive medical help (Ahmed, 2023).

The concept of slow violence introduced by Rob Nixon offers a critical vocabulary that can be used to comprehend such circumstances although it has seldom been used in reference to Pakistani labour contexts. Nixon defines slow violence as “*a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space*” (Nixon, 2011, pp. 3). He points out that it is the normalization of this type of harm, the fact that it is not spectacle-immediate, that makes it so normalized. Although the work by Nixon is about environmental injustice in the world, it is relevant to the issue of brick-kiln labour in that it focuses on slow harm, which is manifested in day-to-day exposure, not the sudden disaster.

The current body of eco-critical South Asian studies is largely concerned with large scale ecological disasters or rural displacement, and the industrial labour environment is under-theorized. Therefore, the convergence of labour through debt and environmental toxicity is a theme that is still under-researched in the literature.

The available literature taken as a whole exposes three important limitations. To begin with, socio-economic and legal analyses of bonded labour in Pakistan are full of documentation, but seldom engage with the lived, affective, and narrative aspects of exploitation. Second, the literary criticism of Pakistani English has tended to marginalize the labour and political economy in favour of cultural and identity-based readings. Third, the issue of environmental degradation has been considered peripheral instead of part of systems of labour control.

The work adds to the Pakistani English literary criticism in the sense of anticipating labour and environment as an important interpretive issue and showing how fiction can clarify aspects of exploitation that remain hidden in the context of policy. The literature review therefore sets the intellectual backdrop of the current analysis besides explaining the originality and the need of the study.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper uses a combined political-economic and eco-critical approach that unites the notion of accumulation by dispossession as proposed by David Harvey and the theory of slow violence as put forward by Rob Nixon to analyse bonded labour, debt and

environmental degradation in *When the Fireflies Dance*. Instead of considering economic exploitation and ecological suffering as different spheres of life, the framework represents them as interconnected processes by which modern capitalism maintains long-term domination over marginalized working groups. Through the description of a family in the novel caught in a brick-kiln economy, a debt is not only a financial debt, but a structural state that immobilizes the body in unhealthy spaces where injuries are produced slowly and become habitual.

This structure is based on Marxist *political economy*, specifically the observation of Karl Marx that workers are free in the dual meaning of the term; free in law but economically dispossessed by the fact that they are separated by the means of production. (*Capital*, Vol. I). The labour regime in *When the Fireflies Dance* is based on this contradiction between formal freedom and material coercion. The workers in the brick-kiln do not legally become slaves, but the lack of essential needs, debts, and the lack of possible alternatives make them do it. Nevertheless, the analysis of wage labour provided by Marx is not sufficient to explain the debt-based bondage on which the world of the novel is organised and, therefore, the reformulation of Marxist theory by David Harvey is necessary.

When the Fireflies Dance can be explained within the framework of the theories offered by Harvey and Nixon as one and the same. Accumulation by dispossession describes the structural factors that render the family immobile: debt, spatial confinement and economic coercion and slow violence describe the experiential fact of that immobility: the toxicity of the environment and unremitting labour grinding away bodies. Staying is imposed by dispossession; slow violence is the nature of staying in the long run. Through the combination of these frames, the paper proves that bonded labour in the novel is perpetuated by the intersection of debt-based dispossession and environmental attrition that creates a type of violence that is systemic, persistent and politically created, rather than accidental or extraordinary.

4. Research Methodology

This paper makes use of a qualitative, interpretive research approach that relies on intimate textual examination of *When the Fireflies Dance* by Aisha Hassan. The research is based on the eco-Marxist framework and the theory of slow violence to analyse the representation of bonded labour, debt, and environmental degradation as a set of interrelated structures of exploitation in the novel. The chosen textual excerpts are examined to address the socio-economic and ecological aspects of labour in the Pakistani brick-kiln economy. The contextual support has been provided by secondary scholarly sources so that a theory-based literary analysis can be undertaken where the foregrounding of literature is conducted as important point of knowledge about marginalised labour experiences.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. The Brick-Kiln (Bhatti) as an Ecological Regime of Exploitation

When the Fireflies Dance creates the bhatti not as a passive environment but as a complete ecological and economic regime where human labour and environmental degradation are closely interwoven. The novel repeatedly shows that the brick kiln is not just a working place, but it is a toxic ecology that is being designed in a specific way to ensure maximum extraction and minimum cost of human life. The eco-Marxist interpretation of the novel is that the environment is not merely a casualty of the capitalist production but a production of its own as a mode of exploitation. Smoke, dust, heat, and illness are built into the labour process itself, so that exploitation is carried out at the same time, on both the land and the body.

Such ecological violence manifests most of all in the gradual decline of the health of workers, especially in the character of Abu. When Lalloo takes his father to the hospital, decades of unacknowledged labour are made visible as a permanent physical injury: “*How long has he worked at the bhatti?*” Lalloo paused. “*About fifteen years.*” “*That’s a long time for the dust to irritate the lungs.*” The doctor shook his head and paused. “*I’m afraid it’s caused irreversible damage.*” (p. 208). This scene sums up the ecological exploitation of the novel. The dust of the bhatti acts as an unspoken and deadly weapon of violence, slowly turning labour into sickness. The word *irreversible* is notably important, as it highlights the fact that capitalist extraction does not just drain the labour temporarily but permanently reduces life. The body of the worker is the point where the environmental poisoning meets the monetary exploitation.

This continued damage is even further underlined when the doctor informs them that the repercussions of working in the kiln will haunt them even after they have physically left the bhatti: “*Would the fallout from working at the bhatti follow them around for the rest of their lives?*” “*When the body has to work too hard, it can cause a fever too.*” (p. 208). In this case, the novel embodies the spirit of what Rob Nixon has described as slow violence: damage that is distributed over time, much of which is not easily noticeable and is difficult to discern as violence. Environmental injustice in the novel does not simply rely on the geography of the kiln, but it travels with the body, making workers living repositories of environmental harm. To flee the bhatti does not reverse the violence that it causes, but rather the harm remains to be felt in sickness, weakness, and early decay.

5.2. Debt, Bonded Labour, and Accumulation by Dispossession

As environmental degradation undermines the body, debt acts as the main tool where labour is paralyzed. The novel foreshadows bonded labour as a state that is maintained not through physical chains of servitude but through financial terms to turn labour into life-long servitude. The bhatti workers are entangled into opaque systems of

debt which cannot be repaid structurally to ensure they remain at the mercy of kiln owners forever.

This forceful reasoning is best shown in Abu's request to Heera, the kiln owner, after Jugnu had resisted: "*'Heera Sahib,' Abu's voice trembled... 'I am willing to work for you for the rest of my life, Sir. Let him go tonight and I will make sure he never says a word about leaving again.'*" (p. 143). This text reveals the harsh economics of bondage labour. Abu presents his own life as a currency the way debt develops the future of the worker into capital-owned property. Liberty is not expressed as a right, but it is negotiated or bargained with sacrifice of the body. There is no longer any exchange of labour with wages, but the commitment of labour is made in advance as an endless commitment.

These instances are quite congruent with the idea of accumulation by dispossession that David Harvey developed when capitalist societies reproduce themselves by depriving workers of their ability to make decisions, travel, or even have a future. Dispossession does not act solely through land confiscation but through financial entrapment and making an escape impossible in the *bhatti*. The lives of workers are dictated by the time-spanning debt, which ties not only individuals but also whole families to the kiln economy..

Surveillance and group punishment are used to reinforce this regime. Punishment is done in front of a crowd to implant terror when the dissent is suspected "*'Wake up the whole bhatti,' Heera barked... 'Everyone needs to see what happens to a filthy rat who goes sneaking around.'*" (p. 142). The *bhatti* becomes a prison of labour whereby the labour is controlled by constant observation and intimidation. When discipline is turned into spectacle through public punishment, then resistance is crippled before it can turn into a group. Fear, rather than necessity, controls labour here.

5.3. Ideological Control, Gendered Labour, and the Criminalisation of Survival

The novel also shows that exploitation is not only perpetuated by economic and environmental processes but also by ideological domination. The dehumanization of resistance is systematic, which means that violence can be promoted as justified and necessary. This ideological manoeuvre is revealed through the language of Heera: "*We can't have insects like these spreading their diseased ideas to the whole bhatti.*" (p. 163). The system medicalizes resistance by turning workers into *insects* and dissent into *diseased ideas* and is inhumane. Violence is purifying and not repressive. This is ideological control in Marxist terms; domination being upheld by the way the process of exploitation is itself perceived and justified.

This reasoning leads to the murder of Jugnu, which was done to safeguard economic order: "*He couldn't have Jugnu leading a revolt... He'd had to make sure the problem had been nipped in the bud.*" (p. 153). The term *well-organised business* discloses the managerial reasonability of this violence. Repression is no longer impulsive but a calculated measure to protect accumulation. The novel, therefore, reveals the reaction of

capitalism to the consciousness of labour through the destruction of labour instead of reform.

Gendered labour is significant in the reproduction of this system. The story of Shabnam and her education shows that the lives of women are traded between a desire and a duty: “*He didn’t fancy being the one to tell her she would have to give it all up to cook rotis for her husband*” (p. 178).

Domestic labour here is a likely fate and exposes the dependence of capitalism on gendered division of labour as a means of its perpetuation. Whereas the bodies of men are annihilated in kiln labour, women are supposed to give birth to labour power in unpaid care, sacrifice and endurance. Even the simple comforts are characterized by scarcity: “*That was another luxury... even buying them from the second-hand mundi was expensive*” (p. 176). Day to day objects like clothing are produced as symbols of dignity in deprivation, and how the survival itself becomes a kind of labour that is handled within the limited material circumstances.

The novel points to escape as a slim hope than a glorious liberation: “*Far away from the bhatti. We’re going to make a new home.*” (p. 171). But the story is always straightforward that escape will not undo the damage. Disease, recollection and terror continue and support the notion that capitalist violence is accumulative and lasting.

By its continuous portrayal of environmental slow violence, debt-based bondage, ideological repression, and gendered social reproduction, *When the Fireflies Dance* demonstrates bonded labour as a practice and practice of living. The novel shows the way capitalism not only privatizes labour and land but also life. Exploitation is a slow, torturous, and intergenerational process that exposes a system where profit is constructed on stolen breath, maimed bodies, and foreclosed futures.

6. Findings and Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the ways in which *When the Fireflies Dance* is an example of bonded labour in the Pakistani economy of the brick-kiln industry by anticipating the interrelationship between debt, environmental degradation, and social control. The analysis shows that the novel does not represent exploitation as a singular injustice and a crisis occurring on an occasional basis, but as a structurally maintained situation within the fabric of everyday life, through an eco-Marxist and slow-violence framework. The results indicate that bonded labour in the text is not achieved by coercion but instead through normalization, endurance, and attrition.

The initial significant discovery is that debt is a key means of labour immobilization. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that the financial requirements of the bhatti system are obscure, open-ended and intergenerational and that they turn labour into a lifetime commitment and no longer a contractual relationship. Debt controls not only working but also family choices, medical treatment, and marriage, keeping the workers

locked in the kiln economy. This validates the argument in the study that bonded labour in the novel is in line with the David Harvey concept of accumulation by dispossession whereby capital perpetuates itself by depriving the workers of autonomy, mobility and futurity not by enslaving them through law but through financial entrapment.

The second important discovery is the significance of environmental degradation as a slow violence. The discussion reveals that ecological damage in the novel is not an incident but an essential part of exploitation. Dust, smoke, heat and pollution are all weapons of labour extraction that slowly wear down the bodies of workers, creating chronic illness and irreparable harm. The novel depicts the way environmental violence is carried out in small steps and continues even after the loss of the physical contact with the bhatti through the failing health of Abu. This observation supports the idea of slow violence proposed by Rob Nixon because it demonstrates how ecological injustice imposes multiple disproportionate burdens on the poor yet is still barely visible in mainstream discourses of development and progress.

The third important discovery is that bonded labour is ideologically and gendered to reproduce. The novel shows how the process of criminalizing and dehumanizing resistance is carried out by language that identifies dissent as contamination and violence as a managerial requirement. Meanwhile, women labour, both inside and outside the kiln, becomes the core of reproduction of exploitation. The dilemma of education versus marriage in Shabnam demonstrates the intersection of patriarchal values and economic forces to ensure that the free reproductive labour of women maintains the exploitative system in which the human bodies of men are exploited. Bonded labour, therefore, emerges not only as an economic state but as a societal institution in the family, gender and ideology.

To sum up, *When the Fireflies Dance* is a literary critique of modern capitalism in Pakistan as it reveals how bonded labour is perpetuated amid the intersection of debt, environmental degradation, and social control. The novel shows that exploitation is not an isolated occurrence but rather an experienced state that is progressive and intergenerational. Combining the eco-Marxist approach with the notion of slow violence, the paper demonstrates that literature may serve as a critical archive of marginalized labour histories and reveal forms of unfreedom that have become so normalized that they remain invisible. The results highlight the value of literary studies in answering pressing issues of labour justice and environmental inequality, as well as structural exploitation in the socio-economic setting of Pakistan.

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