



A Study of Environmental Degradation in Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace*

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The thesis is submitted to the Department of English, Daffodil International University, during Spring 2023 to partially fulfil a Bachelor of Art (Hons) in English.

Certificate of Completion

This is to certify that Sharmin Akter, bearing student ID number: 192-10-453 of the Department of English at Daffodil International University, has completed this thesis paper as part of her academic course 'ENG 431- Project Paper with Internship' with a particular focus on an academic thesis under my supervision during Spring 2023. As far as I am concerned, this paper is a genuine work, and she has solely contributed to it with consultations from different sources, which she gladly cites in her work. It could not have been possible without her genuine interest, courage, and perseverance. I cannot thank her enough for this work. I believe she contributed significantly to the study of environmental humanities and the Anthropocene.

It was wonderful working with her. I hope she would go a long way. I wish her all the best.



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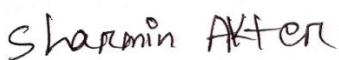
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Declaration

I, Sharmin Akter, now declare that I have read the guidelines for project paper submission of the Department of English, Daffodil International University and accept all the mentioned terms and conditions. My thesis titled “A Study of Environmental Degradation in Tahmima Anam’s *The Bones of Grace*” is my intellectual contribution to the field of environmental humanities and the study of the Anthropocene. While completing this study, I consulted with necessary and relevant sources and cited them adequately in the paper.

This project is completed during the Spring 2023 semester under the supervision of Mohammad Zahidul Islam, Senior Lecturer, Department of English, as a requirement for the partial fulfillment of my Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in English. This paper or any part of it has not yet been submitted anywhere else for degree, scholarship, or publication.

I take all the responsibilities for this work.



Date: June 3, 2023

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Date: June 3, 2023

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A Study of Environmental Degradation in Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace*

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Abstract:

Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace* is one of the novels from her Bengali tri-series, including *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*. The story gives us a strong image of the ecological crisis of developing countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan. The protagonist Zubeda is a paleontologist who travels to different countries; not only Zubeda but also most of the characters in this novel keeps traveling, some are searching for work, and others are searching for love. The village that is the birthplace of Zubaida and Anwar is a perfect example of those places that were destroyed during the ecological crisis of environmental degradation. The writer shows how Lobonchora village ecology was damaged, people cannot cultivate the lands, and no crops were growing due to drought. On the other hand, during monsoon, the village area gets flooded. And the same picture we can see in the novel of Chittagong city in Bangladesh. As a result of industrialization, the city area is being polluted, seawater and animals are in danger "a place where people tore ships apart and whales died in swimming pools and tides threw up the trash of the entire world" (Anam 273). Because of flood and drought, Anwar, Ali, and Mohammad, migrate from the village to Chittagong in search of work. Before going to Chittagong, Anwar also tries his luck in Dubai because harvesting is difficult in the village for the lack of water. Therefore, this study also attempts to discover how the ecological crisis is becoming a cause of migration and environmental destruction. Through

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the lens of ecocriticism, this paper is trying to show how the characters are forced to leave their homeland due to environmental crises and unplanned industrialization and the impact of these on the life of the characters.

Keywords: *The Bones of Grace*, Migration, Industrialization, Ecological Crisis, Environmental Degradation, Anthropocene, Climate Change.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction, Background and Context, Methodology

1.1) Introduction:

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the impact of environmental degradation on human life. The rapidly deteriorating state of the environment, resulting from pollution, deforestation and other human activities, has brought about irreversible changes to the natural world.

In literature, this concern has been reflected in the emerging field of ecocriticism, which explores the relationship between human beings and the natural world. The relationship between humans and the environment is complex and has been explored in numerous literary works. But Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace* provides a rich terrain for ecocritical analysis; it is a compelling work of fiction that explores themes of identity, family, and love. It is a tale of a young woman's journey of self-discovery, tracing her roots and finding her place in the world. However, the novel also portrays the impact of environmental degradation on human life. Set against the backdrop of the devastating effects of climate change, *The Bones of Grace* examines the consequences of our actions on the natural world and the interconnectedness of all living beings.

This paper aims to explore how *The Bones of Grace* portrays the impact of environmental degradation on human life through an ecocritical lens. This study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the importance of environmental sustainability for human well-being. By analyzing the language and imagery used by Tahmima Anam to evoke an emotional response from readers, this paper hopes to deepen our understanding of the novel and highlight the significance of the relationship between humans and the natural world. In the following

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sections, will discuss the context in detail and its depiction of environmental degradation, and finally, the methodology and research questions for this study.

1.2) Background and Context:

William Rueckert used the term ‘ecocriticism’ for the first time in 1978 in his brilliant essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” He defined it as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology (as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world” (Rueckert 107). Ecocriticism, a branch of literary criticism, is being discussed across the globe as an interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment. It is used to analyze works of fiction and non-fiction from the perspective of environmental issues. I choose the book “*The Bones of Grace*” because it is pointing one of the major issues in Bangladesh, the shipbreaking industry. The people who work in this industry, how they suffer and most importantly how this industry is a root cause of environmental degradation in Chittagong it is clearly mentioned in the novel. I feel this subject needs more attention to save our planet, so I choose this book for my paper.

1.3) Research Questions:

Tahmima Anam’s *The Bones of Grace* highlights the interconnectedness of human beings with nature. The novel shows how the characters’ lives are intertwined with the natural world and how their actions affect the environment. Here the given questions will help this paper find all the answers related to the subject. As environmental degradation is a significant issue in this novel, there are many ways to address it. But I choose these questions to find answers because

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it will highlight the environmental issues and their effect in Bangladesh. The questions are given below:

- 1) How does Tahmima Anam's *The Bones of Grace* reflect the ecological concerns of the contemporary world?
- 2) How does the novel highlight the interconnectedness between human beings and the environment?
- 3) To what extent do the novel's characters reflect the attitudes and responses of people in Bangladesh to environmental degradation and what does it suggest about the broader impact of environmental issues on society?
- 4) How does the use of language and imagery in *The Bones of Grace* contribute to the novel's ecological message?
- 5) What techniques does the author use to evoke a sense of environmental degradation?

1.4) Methodology:

A qualitative analysis of literary texts will initially guide this thesis. It will also investigate books and articles that are related to ecological crisis. The study will also seek information from websites that provide reliable data to move the thesis forward, as there is no use of any quantitative data for this paper. Thus, it will be conducted with a hermeneutic approach, and to do that, I will investigate books and articles related to this. This method is believed to help the study lead in the right direction.

1.5) Rationale of the Study:

Ecological crisis is a global concern now as the entire world is facing the threat of climate change. Recently, in the article “How the Climate Crisis is Impacting Bangladesh” published by *The Climate Reality Project*, they state that “It has been estimated that one in every seven people in Bangladesh will be displaced by climate change. Specifically, with a projected 19.6 inch (50 cm) rise in sea level, Bangladesh may lose approximately 11% of its land by then, and up to 18 million people may have to migrate because of sea-level rise alone” (“How the Climate Crisis is Impacting Bangladesh”). So, this victim will lose their land and livelihood due to the climate crisis and move to a new city in search of jobs and food. The World Bank in “Urgent Climate Action Crucial for Bangladesh to Sustain Strong Growth” stated that “Climate change will hit poor and vulnerable people the hardest, 13 million people could become internal climate migrants” (“Urgent Climate Action Crucial for Bangladesh to Sustain Strong Growth”). Moreover, Asian Development Bank shows their concern about this issue. In the article “Climate Change in South Asia” this organization stated, “Cities in South Asia are suffering from the growing problem of solid waste disposal. Total annual GHG emissions from solid waste for Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka were estimated to reach 106 million tons of carbon dioxide by 2005 and 606 million tons by 2030”. Especially cities like Dhaka and Chittagong in Bangladesh, these two cities have fast-growing industrial plants; for example, garments factories and the shipbreaking industry make a lot of solid waste, and most of the waste is dumped unplanned. Thus, this organization also indicates this issue “Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka provide ideal climactic conditions for the organic decomposition of waste matter that generates methane gas, which can be converted to clean energy” (“Climate Change in South Asia”).

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Apart from this, climate change has an impact on our day-to-day life. Recently, the temperature has been rising rapidly in the newspaper and weather news is making headlines “Chuadanga record’s seasons highest temperature 41 degrees Celsius” (“Chuadanga record’s seasons highest temperature 41 degrees Celsius”). Heat waves can be felt physically in most of the major cities in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, the eco-critic Amitav Ghosh noted that “when the subject of climate change appears in these publications, it is almost always to non-fiction; novels and short stories are very rarely to be glimpsed within this horizon (Ghosh 9)”. This author also feels that soon people will realize the need to give more attention to this subject in literature. Hence, in *The Hungry Tide*, he is showing concern towards wildlife preservation and Sundarbans: “Humans do not or should not fit in the Sundarbans” (Ghosh 2).

In *The Guardian*, Amitav Ghosh writes an article that “The climate crisis casts a much smaller shadow on literary fiction than it does on the world. We are living through a crisis of culture – and the imagination” (“Amitav Ghosh: Where Is the Fiction about Climate Change? | Books | The Guardian”).

Consequently, the author feels inspired to write on this topic because it is relevant and essential for the current situation. The subject addresses some challenges and opportunities arising from rapid societal changes.

1.6) Literature Review:

There are many articles and research paper written on *The Bones of Grace* and most of them emphasizes love, cosmopolitanism, transnational belonging, feminism, colonialism, etc.

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a) In a study, Gopinath Khutia writes about the eco-feminist perspective in his paper, “Zubaida as a mestiza in Tahmima Anam’s *The Bones of Grace*.” Through the lens of eco-feminism, he tries to discuss the interconnection of women with nature and the past. It gives us an overview of Zubaida’s life and struggle as a woman but does not cover all the questions I want to research because my paper will try to find out the ecological issues in Bangladesh due to industrialization.

b) In an article named “Postcolonial Texts and the Event of Fiction” from the book *EnvironMentality*, it is stated that “Environmental crisis is a global phenomenon; Since climate change, environmental migration and what McKibben has dubbed the “end of nature” (1989) cannot be restricted by national borders, ecocritical thinking tends to be global in it’s perspective too” (Bartosch 72). The author also points out that “some societies will be more affected by it than others” (Bartosch 72). On the other hand, “Val Palmwood comments on this conflict by comparing the ecological crisis to the sinking of the Titanic. She contrasts the liberal democratic myth of this sinking – men waiting till women and children were in life-boats – with the situation today: he continues “in the real ecological world on which we are passengers, unlike the *Titanic*, the millionaires don’t go down with the ship, it’s certainly not women and children first” (Bartosch 72). This book bring our attention to the fact that during the journey of ecological crisis and “uneven development” all other human beings will suffer.

This paper states that the environmental crisis has become a global concern and elaborates on it, but I want to focus specifically on Bangladesh’s ecological crisis.

c) On the other hand, the introduction of the book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin states that “ecological gap between colonizer and colonized” should

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become narrow (Huggan, Tiffin 9). He says, “the need to bring postcolonial and ecological issues together” (Huggan, Tiffin 9). Because the “environmentalism of the poor” and “the ecological crisis in the Himalayas is not an isolated event,” it is causing “ecological destruction, peasant movement” in India (Huggan, Tiffin). As a result, we see forced migration, and people leave the village searching for jobs.

This research shows how the ecological crisis is making a class difference in India and forcing them to migrate. On the contrary, I want to emphasize this issue according to the inhabitant of Bangladesh.

Ecocriticism is a vast topic and many researchers have explored some areas. But none of them looks at it in the way this paper aims to contribute. This paper will contribute to how ecocriticism can be applied to deal with environmental issues in the light of the novel *The Bones of Grace*, Bangladesh, human nature relationship, challenges, and limitations as a critical approach. Nonetheless, this research is not an end in itself. Instead, this is a doorway to investigate for future research.

1.7) Contribution to the Field:

Ecological crises will be a big challenge for the next generation; they will suffer more. In recent days, all over the world are witnessing the effect of climate change, Turkey is facing frequent earthquakes, and in South Asian countries, “The livelihoods of more than 200 million people in Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are threatened by the rapid loss of snow cover in the Himalayas and rising sea levels” (“Climate Change in South Asia: 12 Things to Know”).

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Amitav Gosh in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* and *The Hungry Tide* highlights the need to focus on climate change in literature. Recently, many critics started to shed light on this subject, but South Asian literature has a long way to go.

This research is important because it will first highlight the significance of environmental sustainability for human well-being, a crucial issue that is increasingly becoming relevant today. The study will focus on how literature can raise awareness and bring attention to the interconnectedness of all living beings and the natural world, contributing to the larger conversation on climate change and environmental sustainability. Secondly, this research will deepen our understanding of how literature can be used to represent the natural world and the consequences of human actions on the environment. By analyzing the language, imagery, and other literary devices used by Tahmima Anam. We can gain insights into how literature can evoke an emotional response from readers, highlighting the importance of environmental sustainability in a powerful and thought-provoking manner. Thirdly, this research will contribute to ecocriticism by examining how *The Bones of Grace* portrays the relationship between humans and the environment. Through this study, we will better understand the importance of ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary field that seeks to bridge the gap between literature, culture, and environmental studies.

CHAPTER TWO

Industrialization and Environmental Degradation in *The Bones of Grace*

Barry Commoner's first law of ecology stated, "Everything is connected to everything else" (Glotfelty, Fromm, xix). He continues, "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. We must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system" and through much work of literature, authors are expressing their concerns about this issue (Glotfelty, Fromm, xix). In *The Bones of Grace*, the writer also shows her concern for ecological destruction and its effect on human life in this book. "For Crutzen, the principal impact is the anthropogenic emission of greenhouse gases, increasing atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide by 30 percent and methane by 100 percent, triggering significant changes in global temperature and climate" (Trexler 1).

The story portrays the destructive impact of human activities on the natural environment, particularly on the endangered species. One of the ways in which language and imagery contribute to the novel's ecological message is through the use of clear descriptions of the natural world. Anam's prose is rich in sensory detail, immersing the reader in the landscapes and ecosystems that her characters inhabit. For example, in the opening pages of the novel, the protagonist, Zubaida describes the coastline of Bangladesh in lush detail, evoking the sights, sounds, and smells of the sea: "The sea was so calm it looked like a silver mirror. The waves leaped gently at the shore, leaving behind a trail of foam that glistened in the sunlight. The air was heavy with the scent of salt and seaweed, and the cries of gulls and sandpipers echoed across the sand" (Anam). By painting such a vivid picture of nature, Anam invites the reader to appreciate its beauty and complexity of it and to preserve it for future generations. At the

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same time, the author also depicts the language and imagery to convey a sense of environmental degradation and loss. For example, fossil hunting is a practice that brings devastating consequences to nature: “They dug and scraped and drilled, curving the earth like a knife through flesh. They hacked down trees, they filled in streams, and they left great gouges in the land. And all the while they shifted through the dirt and rubble, looking for the bones of creatures long dead” (Anam).

The protagonist, Zubaida Haque, is a paleontologist working on excavating a whale fossil in Pakistan. Throughout the novel, she expresses her concerns about the rapid extinction of marine life due to overfishing, pollution, and climate change. “The wholesale emission of fossil fuels that began in the Victorian period and has intensified through the present day” (Trexler 4). Since “earth’s biological and geophysical systems have much less potential for adaptation. So, there will be significant losses of biodiversity, perhaps even the world’s sixth extinction event” (Trexler 2).

The novel’s chapter, “The Dig and Prosperity Shipbreaking” highlights the impact of globalization and modernization on the environment. The novel’s characters frequently travel between different countries and continents, leading to the spread of invasive species, deforestation, and the destruction of natural habitats. In this context, Roman Bartosch said in his book, “We can speak of the need for a ‘sense of planet’ in the environmental thought” (Bartosch 72). In the novel, we can see that the characters Anwar and Pahari go to Dubai for luck and money. They try to cope with the environment in another country but they do not feel that it costs their struggle to survive in a world where resources are scarce and livelihoods are threatened, “you look down, you die...And that will be the end of your life” (Anam 177). The novel also highlights that corporate greed and industrialization have led to environmental degradation, particularly in developing countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan, “you know countries like this” (Anam 59). “Val Palmwood comments on this conflict by comparing the

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ecological crisis to the sinking of the Titanic. She contrasts the liberal democratic myth of this sinking – men waiting till women and children were in life-boats – with the situation today; He continues “in the real ecological world on which we are passengers, unlike the *Titanic*, the millionaires don’t go down with the ship, it’s certainly not women and children first” (Bartosch 72).

Because in the chapter “The Dig”, the writer mentions how the people of a village come to the city to earn money. But they are enslaved, the shipbreaking process is extremely dangerous as children are given labor without any safety tools. And in the story, we also see how cruel was the death of Mohammed “Mo’s legs were bandaged all the way up to his thighs” (Anam 391). Moreover, the waste of the ship is being dumped into the seawater “broken refrigerators, oxygen tanks, rows and rows of lifebuoys, toilet bowls, washing machines, metal cages” and thus, the sea creatures are dying (Anam 136). Sometimes the local people of Chittagong witness the dead body of a whale on the shore. Thus, “Palmwood critically evokes, an awareness of the uniqueness of specific environments and the mechanism of ‘uneven development’ (Bartosch 72)”.

Zubaida went to the remote Balochistan region of Pakistan, Dera Bugti in search of the bones or fossils of “*Ambulocetus*”, there she witnessed the devastating effects of mining on the landscape and the cruel picture of excavation. Anam vividly depicts the destruction wrought by the mining industry, showing how it has transformed the once-beautiful landscape into a barren wasteland. The area becomes bare and feels “desert’ll suck you dry” (Anam 55). Life is tough there, with minimal living essentials like water, food, etc. People in that area have to face daily hardship and challenges to cope with the lack of infrastructure and harsh weather, poor health, violence, insecurity, etc. they are “living in the darkness of ecology” (Hossain 1).

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At the same time, during her search to the coastal area of Bangladesh, Chittagong, where she witnesses the devastating effects of shipbreaking on the environment, including pollution of water bodies, she saw there, “Oil refineries lined the road on one side, and high walls separated the road from the coast on the other, and, out in the water, giant oil tankers and container ships waited to load or dump their cargo” (Anam 135). In this subject Asian Development Bank stated “Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka provide ideal climactic conditions for the organic decomposition of waste matter that generates methane gas, which can be converted to clean energy” (“Climate Change in South Asia”). Seeing this Zubaida “was unable to hold back from cursing out loud” (Anam 136). Soon after a while, she realizes that “It’s a cruel industry. A film (Rainbow Warrior) isn’t going to change anything” (Anam 137). The workers are working with taking life in hand there: “a man in the distance, suspended from the deck of a skyscraper-high ship with only a rope around his waist ... My first look at this scene made me profoundly sad” (Anam 141).

“Wendy Woodward demonstrates how ecocritical reading of texts that reveal varying degrees of human attunement to other species—particularly birds in the examples she offers here—alters our sense of vulnerability to extinction, to loss. This study exemplifies the communication of human attentiveness to other species, which is such a vital form of environmental communication” (Slovic, Rangarajan, Sarveswaran 7). It is a regret that human beings can not maintain this communication with nature. Thus, Anam also paints a picture in the novel where we humans have exploited and destroyed nature to the point of no return. For instance, Zubaida hears the heartbreaking sight of whales washing up on the shore, their bodies ravaged by pollution: “Strange things washed up on shore. It was thrashing around, skin all dried up. Making horrible noises. A whale?” (Anam 273).

The image of the whale and the ship is crucial in this novel. Sometimes the author presents the word ship as a symbol of Zubaida’s good days and sometimes it is used as a metaphor for her

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floating existence and identity crisis. She feels that her life is also related to nature and the sea. She realizes that “Diana is incomplete” (Anam 403); Grace is not complete, and like Diana, she is “incomplete yet magnificent” (Anam 405).

Furthermore, the author uses the character Shona to clear out the mystery of Zubaida’s birth and root. In this story, Shona is like an antidote to Zubaida’s crisis and metaphorically a fossil of *Ambulocetus* because when we study a fossil, we know about its past and habitat, just like the protagonist Zubaida. Shona portrays the devastating effect of flood on the life of Bangladeshi people, where Zubaida’s family is from: “village, where the water is full of arsenic” (Anam 169). She shows a flood can displace communities, destroy homes and livelihoods, and even lead to loss of life. The World Bank in “Urgent Climate Action Crucial for Bangladesh to Sustain Strong Growth” stated that “Climate change will hit poor and vulnerable people the hardest, 13 million people could become internal climate migrants” (“Urgent Climate Action Crucial for Bangladesh to Sustain Strong Growth”).

Though the novel’s characters do not migrate to another country, they are forced to migrate to another city; for example, Shona and her mother are forced to leave their village when her father goes to Dubai for work. Her mother dies at birth and she works in Prosperity Shipbreaking. And we see that Shona’s father Anwar had no option of earning in the village as their land was barren, not only this flood and draught were also a part of their life: “Dubai, Dubai, son, it’s like paradise, shopping malls and television and air con” (Anam, 179).

Overall, *The Bones of Grace* offers a compelling exploration of the interconnectedness between human beings and the environment. By highlighting the impact of human activity on the natural world and the profound effect of environmental degradation on human beings, the story is asking for awareness of this issue.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, people from all over the world are facing issues regarding the ecological crisis, especially those who live in developing countries like India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In this twenty-first century, industrialization is one of the main reasons for environmental destruction. “If you were to scan the newspaper headlines of the same period, you would learn of oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate, battles over public land use, Protests over nuclear waste dumps, a growing hole in the ozone layer, predictions of global warming, acid rain, irons of topsoil, destruction of the tropical rain forest” (Glotfelty, Fromm xvi). It is affecting our social, economic, and political lives. The novel, *The Bones of Grace* is an excellent example of the devastating effects of the ecological crisis in Bangladesh. The author tries to draw our attention to this vital topic in a tricky way. She connects this crisis with the characters of the novel. Because “If we’re not part of the solution, we’re part of the problem” (Glotfelty, Fromm xxi). The workers in the shipbreaking industry in Chittagong are forced to come here for city life because of unemployment in the village, food shortage, health issues, etc. There is flood and drought, life is cruel in the village; during flood time, “the water is full of arsenic,” and during drought, the land remains barren (Anam 169). So, in search of livelihood village people had to leave their families and go to the city. But there, they had to work taking their life risk; there is no safety precaution in shipbreaking work, and even children like Mohammad are working there. Not only this, but Anam also shows that people migrate to developed countries like Dubai in search of luck but there they lose life as Pahari did. The author also points out the effects of mining in Pakistan and the impacts of shipbreaking in water bodies, the sea creatures are also suffering

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with us. And we have to find an answer to this problem. “The answer lies in recognizing that current, environmental problems are largely of our own making, are, in other words, a by-product of culture” (Glotfelty, Fromm xxi).

In a nutshell, *The Bones of Grace* gives us a vivid picture of how humans and nature suffer due to the ecological crisis. However, the main focus of the author is to make the reader aware of the ecological crisis and preserve it for the future.

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