

**Nature—Warfare’s Silent Victim in Feryal Ali Gauhar’s No Space for Further Burials**

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**Abstract**

The research documents an ecocritical study of Feryal Ali Gauhar’s *No Space for Further Burials* (2007) using Lawrence Buell’s ecocritical concept of ‘toxic discourse’ which he discusses in *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001). This research explores the intersection between militarized violence and ecological destruction in the conflicted zones. Set in the war-torn Afghanistan, the narrative exposes the ecological consequences of militarism which lead to deforestation, soil degradation, and toxic contamination. The analysis focuses on militarized ecocide, where environmental degradation becomes a weapon of war, exacerbating human displacement and cultural erasure. The narrator, a nameless captured U.S. medic forced to confront the consequences of militarized violence, becomes a witness to the collapse of ecological and communal systems. The fragmented narrative structure of the novel portrays the fractured relationship between humans and their environment. With the application of ecocriticism, this research highlights Gauhar’s contribution to global environmental literature, urging a reimagining of sustainability through decolonial and anti-militarist lenses. Ultimately, the novel challenges readers to confront the ethical implications of environmental exploitation in conflicted zones, placing itself as a critique of anthropocentric hubris and a calls for ecological accountability.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, ecological justice, eco-trauma, military violence, sustainability development, toxic discourse

**1-Introduction**

The ecological consequences of wars remain critically underexamined for a long time in literary studies, despite their catastrophic impacts. Modern warfare—through deforestation, chemical weapons, and infrastructure bombing—accelerates soil erosion, water pollution, and biodiversity loss (Machlis & Hanson, 2008). In Afghanistan, the U.S. military’s use of depleted uranium munitions and burn pits has left lasting toxic legacies, contaminating farmland and causing spikes in cancer rates (Hedges & Sacco, 2012). These practices exemplify what Rob Nixon terms “slow violence,” where environmental harm unfolds gradually and disproportionately affects the poor (Nixon, 2011). *No Space for Further Burial* shows these realities, depicting villagers who ingest toxins through polluted water and handle corpses riddled with shrapnel. The novel’s refugee camp, a liminal space of abandonment, becomes a repository

for both human and environmental waste, reflecting what Buell describes as the “geography of sacrifice zones” (Buell, 2001, p. 54). The narrative exposes the ‘necropolitical logic’ of war, where certain populations are deemed expendable in the pursuit of geopolitical dominance (Mbembe, 2003). *No Space for Further Burials* explores the human and ecological devastation brought by war, set against the backdrop of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. The novel follows the journey of an unnamed American medic captured by Afghan villagers, who forces him to confront the grotesque consequences of militarized violence. Through fragmented, non-linear storytelling, the novel interrogates the intersections of geopolitical conflict, environmental degradation, and the erasure of marginalized voices. Drawing on her experiences advocating for displaced communities, the writer crafts a narrative that is as much a critique of imperialist interventions as it is an elegy for landscapes and cultures ravaged by war. It shows how war transforms both land and bodies into sites of irreversible toxicity, perpetuating cycles of ecological and social harm. The novel emerges from the post-9/11 geopolitical landscape, where the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (2001–2021) destabilized ecosystems and displaced millions. The novel’s setting is in a desolate Afghan village turned refugee camp which serves as a microcosm of the Global South’s vulnerability to militarized violence and environmental exploitation. The protagonist, a captive medic, navigates a world where rivers run thick with debris, farmlands are littered with unexploded ordnance, and the act of burying the dead becomes impossible due to the saturation of corpses. The title itself reflects the novel’s central motif: a literal and metaphorical “lack of space” for mourning, survival, or ecological renewal. Gauhar, who has worked extensively with the United Nations on gender and displacement, infuses the narrative with visceral accounts of Afghan women and children disproportionately bearing the brunt of war’s toxicity. Her critique extends to global apathy, framing the camp as a marginalized space where human and environmental suffering are rendered invisible.

Lawrence Buell’s *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) introduces “toxic discourse” as a framework to analyze literary and cultural narratives that expose the material and symbolic violence of environmental contamination. Toxic discourse is characterized by its focus on “slow violence” (Nixon, 2011)—gradual ecological degradation—and its linkage to social inequity, where marginalized communities face disproportionate exposure to hazardous environments. This discourse destabilizes anthropocentric narratives by foregrounding the interconnectedness of human and non-human suffering. Buell argues that toxicity is not merely a physical condition but a “cultural symptom” of modernity’s exploitative practices (Buell, 2001, p. 36). His theory aligns with postcolonial ecocriticism, which critiques how colonial and neocolonial powers extract resources and pollute lands occupied by Indigenous and subaltern populations (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2014). By applying Buell’s framework to Gauhar’s novel, this study highlights how war perpetuates toxic environments, rendering ecosystems and communities uninhabitable. A pivotal scene in *No Space for Further Burials* encapsulates the novel’s engagement with toxic discourse. The medic, ordered to bury corpses in a makeshift graveyard, discovers that the soil is so saturated with blood and debris that it rejects further burials. This image—of land “choking” on human remains—mirrors Buell’s assertion that toxicity disrupts the boundary between body and environment (Buell, 2001, p. 58). The villagers’ reliance on a contaminated river for drinking water, meanwhile, illustrates how war’s ecological violence becomes a form of biopolitical control, poisoning both bodies and ecosystems. The fragmented narrative structure of the novel, shifting between the medic’s guilt-ridden memories and the villagers’ testimonies, reflects the disintegration of ecological and social coherence under war. As Buell notes, toxic discourse often employs non-linear storytelling to mimic the pervasive, insidious nature of contamination. Through this lens, the novel becomes a testament to the interconnectedness of human and environmental survival, urging readers to confront the ethical implications of militarized toxicity.

### **1.1. Research Question**

- i. How does the novel, *No Space for Further Burials*, explore the post-war ecological concerns?

### **1.2. Research Objectives**

- i. The objective of this research is to examine the post-war effects on the land, people, and environment as well as to demand for environmental justice.

## **2-Literature Review**

Gauhar's *No Space for Further Burials* (2007) is a critique of the social, political, and environmental crises. It is approached from multiple perspectives like politics, religion, and feminine perspective is also explored. Previous research on *No Space for Further Burials* has focused primarily on its exploration of trauma, violence, and the consequences of the War on Terror. Shoaib & Dr. Sobia's *Representation of 'War on Terror', Trauma and Violence in Feryal Ali Gauhar's No Space for Further Burials* (2020), examines the psychological and emotional consequences of war and displacement within the novel. The analysis emphasizes how the trauma of war and political instability affects both the characters and the environment, but the ecological implications of this trauma are only briefly acknowledged. The concept of toxic discourse, as proposed by Buell, would allow for a more in-depth understanding of how the novel critiques the cultural and political narratives that enable the ecological devastation depicted in the story. The discourse surrounding the War on Terror in *No Space for Further Burials* normalizes violence and displacement, but the environmental toll of these processes is not fully addressed in this work. By incorporating Buell's ideas, one can explore how the novel critiques not only the human toll of war but also the ecological consequences of such toxic narratives. Another relevant study is Nawaz, Cheema, & Aziz's jointly written *Contextualizing Islamic Ecology: Representation of Environmental Crisis in Post-9/11 Pakistani Fiction* (2025), which examines the environmental concerns in post-9/11 Pakistani literature, including Gauhar's novel. It highlights the way ecological themes are explored in relation to the geopolitical and socio-cultural crises of the region. However, it does not engage with the novel through Buell's concept of toxic discourse, missing an opportunity to explore how the linguistic and cultural constructions of the postcolonial world contribute to the normalization of environmental destruction. Toxic discourse is a crucial lens for understanding how the novel critiques the political and cultural forces that exacerbate environmental crises. By applying this framework, researchers can analyze how the novel challenges the political language that dismisses environmental concerns in favor of short-term gain, whether through military action or political corruption. This work lays the groundwork for examining environmental issues in Pakistani fiction but overlooks the specific ways in which toxic discourse is central to understanding the narrative of environmental destruction in *No Space for Further Burials*.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework is originated from Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) which is applied for the analysis in order to better understand the ecological dimension of the novel. The term 'toxic discourse' is adopted for the textual analysis. In the chapter titled 'Toxic Discourse in Writing for an Endangered World', Buell explores how environmental narratives—whether in literature, media, politics, or everyday discourse—can perpetuate environmental harm. He introduces

the concept of “toxic discourse,” which refers to the ways in which language, rhetoric, and narratives are employed to obscure, justify, or trivialize environmental destruction. Through this framework, Buell critiques the dominant discourses that not only deny or deflect responsibility for ecological damage but also normalize it within societal structures. Buell defines toxic discourse as a kind of language or narrative that masks the truth about environmental degradation, thus serving to sustain the systems that cause it. These toxic discourses can be found in the rhetoric of governments, corporations, and even individuals, shaping public opinion and influencing the ways in which environmental issues are discussed and understood. The discourse, in this sense, becomes a tool for maintaining the status quo and justifying actions that harm the environment. Buell begins by establishing the significant role that toxic discourse plays in the continuation of environmental destruction. He argues that such discourse works at multiple levels to suppress awareness and action on ecological issues. According to Buell, toxic discourse performs several functions: it minimizes or trivializes the severity of ecological crises, distracts from the sources of environmental harm, and perpetuates ideologies of progress, growth, and development that are incompatible with sustainability. Buell defines toxic discourse as “the rhetoric and ideologies that are complicit in environmental damage, often without direct acknowledgment of their role in the harm” (Buell, 2001, p. 7). This kind of discourse can be subtle and pervasive, operating through official policies, scientific reports, or cultural narratives that downplay the urgency of ecological issues. Buell emphasizes that toxic discourse does not simply misrepresent facts but shapes the very way people understand and engage with the environment. For example, in environmental discussions, terms like “sustainable development” may be used without addressing the fundamental contradictions inherent in growth-based economic models. Similarly, the rhetoric around “clean coal” or “greenwashing” in corporate advertising presents environmentally harmful activities as beneficial, making the public less likely to push for change or hold polluters accountable. Buell identifies several forms of toxic discourse that contribute to the widespread acceptance of environmental destruction. These types of discourse often serve to obscure or divert attention from the real causes and consequences of ecological damage. While Buell does not provide an exhaustive list, he discusses several prominent forms of toxic discourse that are particularly prevalent in Western capitalist societies. Few of the prominent forms are worth mentioning because these terms are relevant to the analysis. Rhetoric of progress and development is one of the prominent forms of toxic discourse which involves the language of progress and development, which frames ecological destruction as a necessary byproduct of human advancement. This type of discourse is particularly evident in industrial and economic policies that prioritize growth over sustainability. It frames environmental degradation as an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of modernization, technological innovation, and economic growth. In this discourse, environmental harm is often portrayed as a “cost of doing business,” an unavoidable side effect of development that should not be questioned. Buell writes that “the discourse of progress tends to frame environmental damage as an acceptable trade-off for greater economic output or technological advancement” (Buell, 2001, p. 13). This framing can be seen in the promotion of large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the construction of dams, highways, and factories, which often disregard environmental consequences in favor of short-term economic gains. Buell also addresses the discourse around technological solutions to environmental problems, often referred to as “technological fixes.” This form of toxic discourse positions technological innovation as the primary means to solve environmental crises, without addressing the systemic causes of ecological harm. While technology may provide some solutions, Buell

warns that an overreliance on it can mask the deeper structural changes needed in society to address environmental issues effectively. Buell critiques the reliance on “green technologies” or “eco-friendly” products that claim to mitigate environmental impact without challenging the underlying patterns of consumption and production. He notes that “such discourse often presents technological solutions as easy answers, without considering the broader cultural and social changes that are necessary to achieve true sustainability” (Buell, 2001, p. 16). Deflection of Responsibility is another form of toxic discourse involves deflecting responsibility for environmental harm. This includes the portrayal of ecological issues as being too complex or too global for any one nation or individual to solve. The deflection of responsibility is often used by governments, corporations, and other powerful entities to avoid taking meaningful action on environmental issues. Buell explains that “the discourse of globalism often downplays the responsibility of wealthy nations for environmental destruction, focusing instead on the actions of developing countries” (Buell, 2001, p. 23). This discourse ignores the historical and ongoing role that industrialized nations play in contributing to global environmental problems, such as climate change, and places undue blame on poorer nations while they are directly involved in the process of destroying the ecological system of these countries. Buell, finally, identifies the normalization of ecological harm as a key component of toxic discourse. In this type of discourse, environmental destruction is presented as a routine, unavoidable part of life. It becomes so ingrained in everyday narratives that it is no longer seen as something that can or should be challenged. Buell argues that “the normalization of ecological harm occurs when environmental destruction is accepted as part of the status quo, and when attempts to change this narrative are met with resistance or indifference” (Buell, 2001, p. 27). This is evident in the everyday practices of consumption, where the environmental costs of products are often ignored in favor of convenience or economic gain.

In short, Buell’s concept of toxic discourse offers a powerful critique of the ways in which environmental issues are framed and discussed. By identifying various forms of toxic discourse—denial, progress rhetoric, technological fixes, market-based solutions, deflection of responsibility, and normalization—Buell provides a lens through which we can critically examine the narratives that sustain environmental harm. His analysis challenges us to recognize how language and rhetoric shape our understanding of ecological crises and to confront the ideologies that perpetuate them. By doing so, Buell calls for a shift in both discourse and action to address the urgent environmental challenges of our time and these concepts are perfectly applied for the analysis as the mentioned practices are evident in the novel at many places. Framing those events into theoretical dimensions provide the better understanding of ecological perspective of the novel.

### **3. Analysis**

No Space for Further Burials presents a upsetting portrayal of war-torn Afghanistan through the eyes of a captured U.S. Army doctor confined to an asylum. It exposes the interconnectedness of ecological, bodily, and sociopolitical toxicity in conflict zones. By framing the asylum as a microcosm of a risk society, the narrative illustrates how war devastates both land and human psyches, perpetuating cycles of endangerment that align with Buell’s ecocritical framework. Buell defines toxic discourse as “a discourse of allegation; one that may be literal, figurative, or both, but which in any case is spurred by apprehension of perils to the body’s health by hostile elements in the environment” (Buell, 2001, p. 30). The narrator observed that “the hills, once lush with almond trees, now lay barren, scarred by craters and the skeletons of burnt-out vehicles” (Gauhar, 2007, p. 45). It is clearly showing the devastating consequences of the war and use of chemicals which result in ecological destruction. Further, the the

concept of toxic discourse underscores how environmental contamination is not merely physical but also psychological and sociopolitical. Toxic discourse often reveals the “materiality of place,” where environments saturated with pollutants become sites of collective trauma (Buell, 2001, p. 55). Additionally, Buell’s notion of the “risk society” highlights modernity’s tendency to produce systemic hazards, such as industrial or militarized pollution, which disproportionately affect marginalized communities (Buell, 2001, p. 45). The novel meticulously documents the physical decay of Afghanistan’s landscape under war. The asylum, surrounded by “rubble-strewn plains” and “air thick with the acrid smoke of detonated shells” (Gauhar, 2007, p. 32), embodies Buell’s “hostile elements” (Buell, 2001, p. 30). The doctor observes that “the earth itself seems poisoned, its rivers choked with debris and its soil rejecting even the hardiest weeds” (Gauhar, 2007, p. 89). This imagery aligns with theoretical assertion that toxic discourse often manifests as “allegations of a violated environment” (Buell, 2001, p. 35), where ecological ruin symbolizes broader societal collapse. The title *No Space for Further Burials* metaphorically reflects the saturation of the environment with death, rendering it incapable of absorbing more waste—a literal and figurative toxic overload. The asylum’s inmates, traumatized by war, exemplify Buell’s argument that toxicity permeates both body and mind. One inmate, a former farmer, mutters incessantly about “chemical rains that burned his crops and children” (Gauhar, 2007, p. 67), illustrating how environmental contamination disrupts livelihoods and mental health. Toxic discourse often involves “narratives of somatic and psychic vulnerability” (Buell, 2001, p. 48), evident in the inmates’ fractured psyches. The doctor, initially an outsider, gradually internalizes their trauma, dreaming of “rivers of blood merging with oil spills” (Gauhar, 2007, p. 122). This hallucinatory imagery underscores Buell’s claim that toxic environments distort perception, blurring boundaries between reality and nightmare (Buell, 2001, p. 62). Buell’s environmental justice framework emphasizes how marginalized groups bear the brunt of ecological harm. In the novel, Afghan civilians, particularly women and children, are depicted as collateral damage in a war orchestrated by foreign powers. A teenage inmate recounts how her village’s water source was contaminated by military waste, leading to “bloated bellies and cracked lips” (Gauhar, 2007, p. 104). This aligns with the idea that “toxicity is often a class-specific experience” (Buell, 2001, p. 73), as impoverished communities lack resources to mitigate pollution. The U.S. doctor’s guilt—stemming from his complicity in the war machine—mirrors Buell’s critique of industrialized nations exporting risk to vulnerable regions. The asylum, a microcosm of the war’s fallout, is described as reeking of “the stench of unwashed bodies and excrement mingled with the acrid smell of disinfectant” (Gauhar, 2007, p. 23). Here, Buell’s concept of “environmental unconscious” emerges—the idea that spaces shape human experiences silently but profoundly. The asylum’s squalor exacerbates the inmates’ suffering, reflecting how toxicity permeates both place and psyche. Cultural and social toxicity is also evident in the novel which is linked to Buell’s concepts as he expands toxic discourse beyond physical harm to include “cultural contamination,” where environments are stripped of their socio-cultural meaning (Buell, 2001, p. 49). In the novel, the erosion of Afghan traditions is depicted through displaced characters like an elderly woman who laments, “Our songs are forgotten, our stories buried under the rubble of foreign bombs” (Gauhar, 2007, p. 112). The destruction of cultural landmarks—mosques, homes, and ancestral graves—symbolizes the disintegration of communal identity. The American doctor’s presence exemplifies Buell’s notion of external agents introducing toxicity. Though intending to heal, the doctor’s cultural ignorance exacerbates tensions. His inability to comprehend local customs, such as burial rituals disrupted by

landmines, underscores Buell's argument that toxic discourse often involves "the disruption of place-based knowledge" (Buell, 2001, p. 62). The novel critiques imperialism's role in severing communities from their ecological and cultural roots. Toxic environments manifest in "the body as a site of interaction with the poisoned world" (Buell, 2001, p. 78). The asylum's inmates embody this interplay: a child born with deformities, a woman driven to insanity by her family's deaths, and a man coughing blood from chemical exposure. These characters literalize Buell's claim that toxicity "insinuates itself into the flesh" (p. 81). The protagonist's guilt-ridden narration—"I suture their wounds, but I cannot mend their souls" (Gauhar, 2007, p. 89)—highlights the psychological toll of inhabiting a toxic world. Buell's "slow violence," a term he borrows from Rob Nixon, is evident in the lingering trauma of war, where environmental harm outlasts immediate conflict. The doctor's nightmares of "rivers flowing with blood instead of water" (p. 134) metaphorize the pervasive, insidious nature of ecological and psychological toxicity. Buell emphasizes that narrative structure shapes environmental awareness. The novel's fragmented, first-person perspective mirrors the disjointed reality of a war zone. Flashbacks to the doctor's past and the inmates' fragmented stories reflect the assertion that toxic discourse often requires "narrative forms that accommodate dislocation" (Buell, 2001, p. 102). By situating the story in an asylum—a space of confinement and madness—Gauhar critiques the cyclical nature of violence and environmental degradation. The title of the novel, itself, encapsulates the argument about "the foreclosure of future possibilities" in toxic environments (Buell, 2001, p. 115). When a character states, "Even the earth rejects us now" (Gauhar, 2007, p. 167), it underscores the irreversible damage to land and community, rendering traditional burial rites impossible. Buell's concept of toxic discourse can be found in the novel through the ways in which political leaders, corporations, and specifically, military entities manipulate language to obscure the realities of environmental destruction. In *No Space for Further Burials*, the repeated theme of burial sites and the management of human remains reflects an overt metaphor for the disposability of both human and ecological life. The notion of "no space" for further burials echoes not only the overcrowding of graveyards but also the moral and physical depletion of the earth's resources. This shows Buell's assertion that toxic discourses deny the existence of limits, where the earth is viewed as an inexhaustible resource to be consumed without consequence. The characters in the novel frequently encounter stories or justifications that downplay the ecological crisis they face. Political leaders dismiss environmental destruction as either a necessary by-product of industrial progress or an inevitable side-effect of warfare. This denial echoes Buell's observations about the ways that political rhetoric and corporate messaging serve to deflect responsibility, framing ecological collapse as something abstract and distant, rather than a pressing, lived reality. An example from the novel can be seen in how government officials and business tycoons minimize the threat of environmental damage in order to preserve their economic interests, creating a toxic discourse that undermines urgent calls for action. The contrast between this rhetoric and the lived experience of the characters—who suffer from pollution, scarcity, and displacement—exposes the chasm between elite narratives and the realities faced by vulnerable populations. Buell emphasizes the importance of memory in ecological literature, suggesting that narratives that forget or erase the past contribute to the perpetuation of environmental harm. In *No Space for Further Burials*, memory plays a crucial role in shaping the characters' perceptions of their environment and the consequences of past actions. The novel's exploration of buried bodies serves as a metaphor for the silencing of ecological memory—what has been buried is not just human remains but the memory of a time before environmental devastation.

In keeping with Buell's ideas, the characters in the novel seek to uncover these memories, to retrieve them from the "buried" past, as a means of resisting the toxic discourse that seeks to forget and move forward without acknowledging the harm done. This recovery of ecological memory challenges the toxic discourse of progress and technological domination, and instead calls for a reckoning with the past in order to prevent further destruction.

## 5. Conclusion

The novel functions as a powerful critique of toxic discourses and the ways in which societal narratives perpetuate environmental harm. This analysis has illuminated how the novel portrays the manipulation of language to obscure the reality of ecological collapse and the silencing of those who resist this narrative. Through the novel's focus on memory, ecological devastation, and the marginalization of resistance, it offers an evoking critique of the cultural and political structures that contribute to the destruction of the earth. By applying Buell's ideas, we can see how the novel not only engages with the environmental issues of its setting but also critiques the larger toxic discourses that shape and perpetuate global ecological injustice. The analysis calls for a new, more responsible approach to the relationship between humans and the environment—one that acknowledges the past, confronts the present, and seeks to mitigate future harm.

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