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## Eco-semiotics: Structural Analysis of Disintegrated Umwelt in Rafat's *Poetry*

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### Abstract

Lust for modern lifestyle and money made man oblivious to nature. Man is depleting the natural resources to accomplish his lust. This lust is creating environmental issues that bring about the exploitation of umwelt and nature. This qualitative research, keeping up with the critical models of eco-semiotics and the text-based analysis, analyzes some of Rafat's poems to represent the crisis of umwelt that arises in reaction to the deterioration of relations between human culture and the nonhuman environment. The primary focus is on the semiotic nature of ecosystems by examining semiotic relations between organisms, frequently concentrating on animals, and the environment, the role of semiosis in ecosystems, and intra- and interspecies communicative relations. The secondary focus is on the space, created by the uncaring nature of man between organism and their umwelt, which results in the waning of species and malfunctioning of the ecosystem. Outcomes of these findings discover how Rafat attempts to turn nonverbal and nonhuman experiences of nature into human language in the form of Eco-poetic that expresses the causes behind the decline of umwelt, distortion in nonhuman semiotics systems, and expanding gap between human and nonhuman semiotic systems. This paper imparts the

understanding of human and nonhuman sign systems through poetry. Moreover, it influences the researchers to explore eco-semiotics regarding success and failure in creating economic and social value.

**KEYWORDS:** Eco-semiotics, Umwelt, Rafat, Nature, Physical environment

## Introduction

Rafat is a Pakistani poet, author, and critic of Pakistani culture, who chooses English for his works. He is known as a Pakistani English poet. Features of his poetry such as imagism, impressionism, romanticism, and classicalism distinguish him from other poets. He introduces Pakistani idioms in English. These idioms bring fame to him as this type of work is admired throughout his poetic career and inspires others. He traces new ways of representing culture and tradition in literary writing. His collection of poetry *Arrival of Monsoon* is a landmark in Pakistani poetry and world poetry. This collection comprises 116 poems that display 31 years of the poetic career of his life.

Besides portraying the cultural erosion, cultural memory, and advancement of society, Rafat tries to explain in his poetry how the relations between living organisms and their physical environment have weakened with the advancement of life. He represents how the interconnectedness between nature and living organisms is essential to living in this world. In the poem, the line after the rain, “Alive, alive everything is alive again” (Rafat, 1975, p. 14) shows that a harsh environment creates problems for humans and nonhumans, and Global warming is damaging the living organism in this world. Rafat attempts to turn nonhuman experiences of nature into human language. His poems decode species’ Umwelt into textual cultural and poetic forms discussing how different species communicate with their environment. He beautifully delineates how technological advancement, overpopulation, and depletion of natural resources are damaging the Umwelt.

Umwelt is the German word meaning environment or surrounding. The survival of nonhumans depends on it and it provides the communication systems for nonhumans. This communication system uses different structures as signs. Semiotics is the systematic study of sign processes and

meaning-making. (Campbell et al., 2019). The study of communication embodies the essence of almost every phenomenon of life (Caesar, 1999). Therefore, semiotics is necessary for ecology. Eco-semiotics, a combination of sign process and ecology, is the “study of sign processes which relate organisms to their natural environment,” (Nöth, 2001, p. 71). It explores the relationship between living organisms and nature through sign processes responsible for ecological phenomena (Maran & Kull, 2014). Environmental semiotic quality provides animal species the grounds to attribute meanings to the environment based on their needs. Every living organism creates its world called *umwelt* according to its needs through the evolution of growth and then lives according to its *umwelt*. *Umwelt* is the self-centered world of an organism (Uexküll, 1920). *Umwelt* world may share different species yet they are different from each other. The main purpose of exploring the disintegrated *Umwelt* is to discover how the factors are damaging the *Umwelt*. Moreover, the destruction of *umwelt* results in the waning species. This research paper utilizes eco-semiotics as a theoretical framework because it investigates transmissions, processes, and problems in and between the different semiotic layers of the *umwelt*. Therefore the primary focus in this section is on the semiotic nature of ecosystems by examining semiotic relations between organisms, frequently concentrating on animals, and the environment, the role of semiosis in ecosystems, and intra- and interspecies communicative relations. The secondary focus is on the space created between organism and their *umwelt* by the uncaring nature of man to species.

### **Research objectives**

- To represent the semiotic nature of ecosystems by examining semiotic relations between organisms, frequently concentrating on animals, and the environment, the role of semiosis in ecosystems, and intra- and interspecies communicative relations in Rafat’s poetry.
- To substantiate that the changing physical structures interrupt the communication, and ultimately disintegrate the *umwelt*.

### **Research questions**

- What is the semiotics nature of the ecosystem concentrating on the communicative environment of animals (*umwelt*) in Rafat’s poetry?

- How do changing physical structures destroy the umwelt?

### **Significance of the study**

Academically, this study puts forward the practical picture of umwelt discussed in biosemiotics. The portrayal of the communication mechanism in the poems imparts the understanding of intentional and unintentional meanings and the process that operates sign systems in nonhumans. Moreover, this study can be relevant literature for future researchers who will contribute to eco-semiotics or analyze literature from this theoretical perspective. Practically, this study describes the realistic picture of human behavior towards nonhumans, which may inculcate the sensitivity that deals with nonhuman survival problems in this world.

### **Literature Review**

This section goes into previous research studies on Rafat's poetry to introduce the relevant literature of this research and the possible research gap in this literature. Rafat's poetry, a landmark in the English language, reflects Pakistani culture, and tradition affected by colonialism and modernism. Keeping up with the different theoretical perspectives and dimensions, critics and researchers have analyzed Rafat's poetry to explore the writer's cultural, national, religious, and traditional points of view. Rafat like Hemingway eschews colonial thought and manifests the reality of their ideals (Din et al., 2021). Moreover, the researchers also enlightened romantic, eco-critical, postcolonial, modern, and post-modern thoughts embedded in his poetry. However, this section includes those research studies having a similar correlation with the topic.

Mohsin, et al. (2015) analyze Rafat's portrayal of the colonial effects, colonial ideology, the concept of hybridity, and the changing values systems of Pakistani culture. Further, their research paper explored the "integral role of poetry to unveil the condition of the Pakistani people after the colonization" (p. 1). They find in the poetry that colonialism is the main factor behind cultural erosion and unusual changes in the behavior and minds of the Pakistani people. Researchers also applied postcolonial theory to expose Rafat's revolts against the prevailing neo-colonialism and multiculturalism in the subcontinent (Nayer, 2008). Emerging new social and

moral values not only destroyed Pakistani culture and tradition but also engulfed happiness among people. Investigating nostalgia is a significant way to represent the values of the past (Szoblik, (2020). Tremendous research has explored the themes of cultural decline and cultural memory in his poems.

Tahira's (2014) work, *Facets of Romanticism in Taufiq Rafat's Poetry Arrival of Monsoon* is a remarkable work to understand the romantic features in Rafat's poetry. She has found all elements of romantic poetry in Rafat's poetry. She claims that Rafat is a South Asian romantic poet. The language of his poetry is also evaluated. He uses concrete images and prosaic language to express landscapes with delicacy and leniency in his diction (Amin, 2018). Rafat's poetry is different from English Romantic poetry because of the employment of imaginative and romantic elements. English romantic poets used objects and images such as rivers, hills, devastated places, trees, meadows, and birds, and treated them in imagination. Romantic literature emphasizes the celebration of imaginative beauty and nature. Contrary to this, Rafat's treatments of imagination are somehow different. Portraying the images of Eastern culture, he does not go into a romantic or fanatic world. Instead, he uses local color, local image, transformation, serenity, and liberty. He uses prosaic diction to portray Pakistani landscapes, culture, and society.

Moreover, Tahir (2000) remarks on his poetry in the introduction of the book, *A Certain Season: A Selection of Poems*, according to which Rafat introduces Pakistani idioms in his poetry such as *baithak, lichee, veranda sheesham, Gulmohar, bulbul, brilliantly white courtyard, last night curry, and brown water*. These words do not occur in English writings before his writing (Athar, 2000). He introduces a new style in Pakistani English poetry. He treats natural objects with a unique style. One of the most distinguishing excellence of Rafat among all poets is his usage of his native idiom, expressions, and terms through which he describes his region. He uses ordinary language providing a picture of upgrading and hopefulness. The distinguished quality of his poetic style is the implication of diverse images and objects in such a way that constructs a real picture before readers' eyes to understand his ideas and concepts. For instance, in the poem, *Karachi 1955* he describes the fanciful image of the city. His style is characterized by simplicity, terseness, usage of local images, convincing way of writing ideas, and coherence in the text. The

most extraordinary quality in Rafat's poetry is his astonishing ability to maintain a specific, simple, and diction to represent the local coloring.

Imagination is another dominant feature of Rafat's poetry. His poems very simply encompass modern as well as pastoral life. We find in his poetry disintegration, pessimism, images, subjectivity, symbolism, realism, and urbanization, which are the recurring themes of modern and postmodern poetry (Amin, 2018).

Apropos, critics have examined it critically and theoretically from the perspective of cultural, anthropological, postcolonial, romantic, imagist, and modern points of view to reveal the picture of cultural memory, cultural erosion, and colonial effects on Pakistani culture, and society, no doubt, many researchers remained successful. However, the poetry's meanings go beyond this because Rafat's poetry has diverse areas of study, which can be explored further. Nobody has interpreted Rafat's poetry in the light of eco-semiotics theory. This research attempts to expose the unfamiliar meanings of Rafat's poetry to researchers. With the portrayal of culture and romanticism in his poetry, Rafat depicts ecological crises and the collapse of umwelt arising in reaction to the depletion of natural resources, advancement of technology, and pollution. This research does not simply discuss the ecological crises of umwelt in the poetry and does not make descriptive findings about whether Rafat's poetry contains the elements of disintegrated umwelt. Instead, this research intends to examine Rafat's poetry from scientific approaches of eco-semiotics exploring how ecological space determined by this type of poetry disintegrates Umwelt, what ideas about Umwelt can be figured out by this type of research, and how some of these poems reflect relationships between environmental and cultural semiotic.

Keeping some ecocritical approaches in view, this research intends to explore the application of these approaches in selected poetry in detail and examine how these can be practically applicable to the analysis of poems, as well as what kind of interpretation they brought forward for the relationship between culture and nature in a wider sense.

## **Theatrical Background**

Grabe (2009) suggested many tricks of reading from theory to practice as in this process many factors influence the reading. Keeping up with the contextual factors influencing readings (Grabe, 2009) together with the applied method, (Hedrick et al., 1993; Bryman & Bell, 2011), the theatrical framework has been developed because the theatrical framework of this study borrows the knowledge from eco-semiotics research theory to contribute to understanding an issue or phenomenon (Umwelt). It takes models from eco-semiotics explored resources and applies them to Rafat's poetry to understand the problems of Umwelt.

The model of Nöth (1998) *Eco-semiotics: Sign System Studies* seems insufficient to fulfill the target results of the present research because this study requires a model that simultaneously can fulfill eco-semiotic methodological implications to poetry. Therefore, keeping in mind the suggestion by Griffin (2013), the model of Peirce (1974) has been combined with the ideas of Uexküll (1964) and Kull (1998). However, only Peirce's model has been taken completely and other models are supplementary.

Ecosemiotics, a branch of semiotics originated in the mid-1990s to study sign-mediated aspects of ecology, and ecological anthropology deals with the relationship between human culture and ecosystems. It is "the study of sign processes which relate organisms to their natural environment," (Nöth, 2001, p. 71) or the semiotic study explores "human relationships to nature which have a semiotic (sign mediated) basis" (Kull, 1998, p. 351). Moreover, it examines the sign processes of a culture or environment that provide a communication system between living and nonliving things. Maran and Kull (2014) argue that eco-semiotics was introduced as "a branch of semiotics that studies sign processes as responsible for ecological phenomena" (p. 41). The physical surroundings have the semiotic capability on different levels which provides animal species the grounds to assign different signs and meanings to the environment according to their requirement in creating umwelts. The environment also becomes expressive in human culture through artistic writings or the symbols of animals or landscapes. Through human action, cultural depictions of the environment successively affect the physical environment. Eco-semiotics investigate transmissions, processes, and problems that occur in and between the different semiotic layers of the environment.

Peirce's *CP 1931–1956* modeling theory keeps a prescriptive potential as it incites us to create new bases of comparison used to build new models to understand the clear nature of the ecosystem. Modeling theory, as an approach uses artistic resources for reconnecting culture with ecologies. One, who is an expert in using artistic and creative modes of modeling, can shift focus, contribute to, and be a mechanism of meaning for the rest of the ecosystem. The sign concept which itself is a landmark in a semiotic interpretation of ecological issues originated in the semiotics of Peirce's *CP 1931–1956*. The Peircean sign is tripartite, which connects the sign in a narrow sense (representamen), the object of the sign, and its interpretation (interpretant), but these three components belong to different mental, textual, and physical dominions. In this semiosis, the sign's processual manifestation grants some sort of connection to emerge non-existing. As the sign can turn the world into meaningful relations and connect tremendous entities, it embodies a huge ecological potential to reconnect and heal.

## **Material and Methods**

As Creswell (2016) and Mayring (2000) suggested, qualitative research methodology has been adopted to analyze the data. The data of this research is not numerical rather it is observable, natural, documentary, and describable in the form of poetry. The nature of this research study is empirical. It does a procedural controlled analysis of text in a particular context of communication, following the rules and steps of the eco-semiotics model ruling out any quantification. This research follows contextual and explanatory research design as suggested by Strauss (1987) and Brannen, (1992) because this research is about how the phenomena of nonhumans Umwelt existed in the ecological world and about the investigation of the reason behind disintegrated Umwelt. Moreover, this aims at discussing the relationship and the reason for what exists. The applied method is adopted while analyzing the data.

## **Analysis, discussion, and findings**

Ecosemiotics tries to “bring biosemiotics and cultural semiotics into contact by studying communication between humans and their non-human environment” (Lidström, 2013, p.154). Ecosemiotics works on human and nonhuman communication analyzing the different signs to



understand the *umwelt* and ecosystem. It studies biosemiotics, the study of nonhuman sign systems, and the field of traditional or cultural semiotics, the study of communication between humans. Though ecosemiotics facilitates communication between human and non-human agents, it also concentrates on zoosemiotics - a subcategory of biosemiotics and phytosemiotics - the study of communication among plants. Semiosis is the fundamental element in creating strong *umwelt*, especially in the case of nonhumans because their *umwelt* is based on sign systems. Ecosemiotics works according to Peircean semiotics (1974), which is based on three main components: sign, object, and interpretant. The interpretant perceives the object through signs. These signs may be entities, things, stimuli, movements, etc. The sign creates a relation between objects and the interpretant and brings messages to the interpretant. For instance, flowers, nectar, and bees are signs, objects, and interpretants. Bee sees flowers and instantly perceives the nectar. This process makes *umwelt* in a broader sense. This triadic semiotic process is different from the semiotics process of Saussure because it includes signifiers and signified. Saussure's semiotics process focuses on the role of signifier and signified, while Peircean's semiotics (1974) focuses on the role of the interpretant. In Peircean Semiotics (1974), the process of semiotics is based on three different types of signs: iconic, indexical, and symbolical, and these signs are related to their objects in different ways; by similarity, physicality, or habit, respectively. In this semiotics process, the main role is assigned to different types of signs and most signs are concrete natural objects, which create the *umwelt* for nonhumans. When these natural objects are disturbed by external forces the *umwelt* is perverted (Kull, 1996).

Rafat speaks for the rights of the oppressed— including humans, nonhumans, living things, and the environment. He has at the same time the agenda of defending the rights of the oppressed local peoples and in the same way, for the 'rights' of nature. Rafat's poetry exposes this issue and depicts how the *umwelt* of birds and plants is being disturbed by external forces. His poems are observations of nature and can be interpreted from an ecosemiotic perspective.

In this section, the methodology of Peirce with the ideas of Uexküll, Kull, and Maran has been adopted to interpret three dimensions of Taufiq Rafat's poems. The first dimension analysis seeks to manifest nature from a nonhuman perspective, tries to investigate species' *Umwelten*, and portrays non-human nature in semiotic terms. The second focuses on interpreting semiotic

nature instead of the semiotic view of nature concerned with observation. The third refers to umwelten space that is created by external forces. These three ecosemiotics scholars emphasize the language of living things, especially nature and nonhumans in text and the role of language in umwelt.

The poem, *The Partridge Calling*, explores nature from the nonhumans' point of view. The environment or nature acts like the culture in nonhuman worlds. Like the cultural codes, the environment also shares codes with its inhabitants for survival. In this poem, different structures of physical surroundings such as mounds swamps, elephant grass, and greenery work like cultural codes to constitute the birds' environment. This poem reflects the signs, i.e. cotton patch, midstride, and lilt, that contribute to the meaning-making process of the Umwelt. These semiotic codes turn Partridge's understanding and calling to each other into nonverbal and nonhuman experiences of nature that express semiotic systems. Rafat attempts to turn nonverbal and nonhuman experiences of nature into human language in poetry that expresses the causes behind the decline of umwelt, distortion in nonhuman semiotic systems, and expanding the gap between human and nonhuman semiotic. The poet makes the partridges narrator. They talk like human beings but the poet intends to describe the sign system that not only provides a way to communicate but also creates the umwelt that enables them to survive. Two partridges communicate with each other. They recognize the way, the lilt, and the elephant grass by the sign system based on their understanding of objects. These objects are the signs that carry the meaning of birds. In addition, December, chilled steel, and guns are metaphors for us but they provide signs to birds. This process makes umwelt of the birds survive.

Out of the next cotton patch  
a partridge calls in reply  
to another. We halt  
in midstride, and greedily  
turn to listen to that rich,  
wild, triumphant lilt.  
The December countryside  
flaunts this one warm note. Even  
the elephant grass he adores  
is not the anonymous heaven  
it seems; chilled steel each blade

like the guns on our shoulders. ” (Rafat, 1985, p. 13)

In the case of *Stonechat*, the observations of the bird and his behavior presumably came before the poem belong to Peircean semiotics, while the representation of the poet’s observations in the form of the poem belongs to cultural semiotics. Analyzing the poem from the eco-semiotic perspective highlights how the *umwelt* has deteriorated and mediated between human and non-human nature.

In this poem, the poet describes the *umwelt* of stonechat comprised of surrounding: hills, surroundings, and greenery. The poet describes the physical environment that has deteriorated through the ages. The poet discusses the desert and eroded hills of Jhelum. He contrasts between green fruitful surroundings and barren desert. He discusses his life experience enjoying the beauty of greenery and a healthy environment. He used to see and enjoy nature and pastoral. Now all these places have been converted into eroded and barren places. However, he portrays how habitation is affected by the changing surroundings. The places like Jhelum’s eroded hills have become bleak and dreary due to the environmental perversion in society. These places symbolize ecological deterioration and environmental crisis. This research intends to evaluate how the changing objects - signs disturbed by environmental problems result in the decline of nonhuman habitats. Rafat says that his eyes used to see fruitful and greenery scenery but he feels disturbance and agony to see eroded places. In cultural Peircean semiotics, the physical objects are the signs, and when these objects change they reconstruct the *umwelt* accustomed to living things. The fruitful, greenery, eroded hills are structural signs that take part in human life and signs that convey the dreary meaning to the poet. That is why the poet says “To understand this waste desert, I must try and know myself as I must have been and become and become” Likewise, the stonechat also feels the distortion in the communication with habitant, caused by the devastation of the physical environment. The *umwelt* of stonechat was eroded hills that were green and peaceful once. When the place turned into a desert, unfruitful and arid the *umwelt* of the Stonechat was destroyed because according to Peircean semiotics, the triad, the object, sign, and the interpretant do not work properly as the signs that convey the meaning of Stonechat are changed. And the poet says that “stone chat there almost lost against no color background”. This

indicates the reason why the birds are waning. In the following lines, the poet describes the problems of birds surviving in the declining umwelt.

Once there he burst into songs. Never  
was anything so eager to survive  
intolerance of excuse, he calls  
this place home has learned to distinguish  
between the various shades of grey  
till the neighborhood is a riot of color,  
and a ragged patch of wheat sufficient  
cause to be mellifluous about. (Rafat, 1985, p. 39)

The bird perceives this place as home even though this place is not worth living. Its environment does not permit the living organism to live there. The poet says that the living organisms are not ready to live there because of aridity. Though the birds migrate due to the unavailability of food, the poet conveys the idea that instability and decline of physical surroundings and environment affect the communication of birds. This distortion in communication affects the umwelt of birds. In addition, the assimilation of stonechat to the new environment supports the Peircean semiotics. The poet says that “a ragged patch of wheat sufficient cause to be mellifluous about” (Rafat, 1985, p. 39). A ragged patch of wheat symbolizes that a little amount of feed is sufficient to live there but the physical environment in the shape of signs is more important than that of feed.

This kind of poem interprets non-human nature and contextualizes it so that it acquires meaning and significance in a human Umwelt. In this way, awareness should be conveyed to human Umwelt. For these poems, an ecosemiotic perspective may aid the analysis of different aspects of the process of interpretation and contextualization. This attempts to point to some specific ways in which this poem and the collection as a whole translate non-human nature into meaningful signs in a human Umwelt.

## CONCLUSION

*Stonechat* and *The Partridge Calling* expose how the relations between living organisms and their physical environment have weakened with the advancement of human life and how the

interconnectedness between nature and living organisms is essential to living in this world. These poems describe nature from the nonhuman perspective and portray non-human nature in a semiotic process. Through these poems, Rafat exposes that colonialism, technological advancement, globalization, and the advancement of human life have destroyed the environment of nonhumans. Consequently, it results in the waning of unique species of birds, animals, and plants from this world. In the poems, environmental conditions, semiotic procedures, and the multiplicity of life stories use meaning-making approaches to display and disturb Umwelt by external forces. Rafat does focus on the interpretation of semiotic nature instead of the semiotic view of nature. In this way, he tries to depict the disintegration of umwelt and space created between umwelt and their inhabitant, especially in nonhuman cases created by external forces.

*The Partridge Calling* explores nature from the nonhumans' point of view. This poem describes how umwelt is created. In this umwelt, the meaning-making process depends on physical objects and the structure of the environment, which is essential for their survival. In this poem, structural changes disturb the communication. Consequently, this distortion in communication causes the disintegration of Umwelt. Likewise, the stonechat umwelt depends on the physical surroundings of Jhelum city. This poem describes the eroded hills and barren soil. But the descriptions of stonechat with the background of destruction and ruin place signify the relationship between the bird and the surroundings. The behavior and observation of Stonechat belong to Peircean semiotics, while the depiction of the poet's observations belongs to cultural semiotics. This poem describes how the advancement of culture changed physical surroundings. The umwelt of stonechat is comprised of hills, surroundings, and greenery. The destructed physical environment such as the bleak and dreary, eroded hills of Jhelum creates misrepresentation in the communication systems of Stonechat. When the place turns into a desert, unfruitful and arid the umwelt of the stonechat destroys. The poet says that "stone chat there almost lost against no color background" (Rafat, 1985, p. 39). This indicates the reason for birds waning. The poet describes the bird's perception of this place as home.

The environment of this place does not allow living organisms to live there. The aridity of this place does not permit living organisms to live there. The changing objects destroy the assimilation of stonechat into the surroundings. Likewise, the plant creates an environment and

provides necessary facilities for species of birds animals herbs, and plants. Eco-semiotics launches its justification on the reciprocation among humans, animals, objects, matter, culture, and the contributing elements of the ecosystem. In this way, it seeks freedom and causality.

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