



RESEARCH PAPER

Exploring Eco-Criticism in Sweet Tooth: Dark Ecology, Slow Violence, and Human-Nature Interconnectedness

¹Sadaf Ashraf ² Dr. Saira Maqbool* and ³Aamna Farooq

1. M. Phil Scholar, Department of English, Foundation University Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan
3. M. Phil Scholar, Department of English, Foundation University Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author: saira.maqbool@aiou.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this research is to analyze the Netflix (2021) TV series *Sweet Tooth* through the lens of eco-criticism by applying the theory of Morton of dark ecology and Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence. The study is qualitative in nature and utilizes content analysis. The analysis lay stress on the themes of human-nature relationships, environmental degradation, and the role of technology in shaping the environment. The analysis reveals that "Sweet Tooth" effectively illustrates dark ecology by depicting a world where the boundaries between human and non-human are blurred, creating a sense of environmental eeriness. The article contributes to the emerging field of ecocritical studies by contributing a deeper understanding of the ecological themes presented in *Sweet Tooth* and for our understanding of human-nature relationships. Future research should explore the reception of *Sweet Tooth* among diverse audiences to gauge its impact on eco-critical awareness.

KEYWORDS Dark Ecology, Eco-Criticism, Environmental Degradation, Environmentalism, Marginalized Communities, Slow Violence, Sustainable Practices

Introduction

The prominence and focus on environmental problems in modern science fiction and literature can be seen as a reaction to the occurring climatic and environmental catastrophe. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field that acknowledges and values the significance of understanding the association between humans and the natural world in order to address the natural and environmental issues. This has led to a renewed interest in environmental fiction, and literature which reveals the impact of human actions on the environment and offer a vision for a more feasible future.

By merging the concepts of ecology and literature, these fields offer a fresh and distinct viewpoint on the environmental issues that our planet is currently facing. Science fiction, in particular, has been a popular genre for the study of environmental themes and imagining future worlds that have been shattered and destroyed by environmental degradation or climate change. Literary studies have also shed light on environmental issues, connection between literature and the environment. The focus on environmental problems and issues in these fields, call attention to the immediate need for a more imperishable and interconnected future. By mastering the relationship between humans, the natural world and its interconnectedness we can work by addressing and resolving environmental issues for a better future. The ongoing climatic disaster has made it understandable and transparent to us that we need to take action to safeguard our planet, and the fields of environmental fiction, literature, and utopian studies offer a special and unique perspective on how we can attain this.

The themes explored in *Sweet Tooth* are ideal examples of the intersection between environmental issues and popular culture. It is touching story of a half-human, half-deer boy named Gus who is navigating in a post-apocalyptic world where the sick (a virus) has abolished most of humanity, and the remaining survivors are toiling to survive in a world that is rapidly changing. While the series may seem like a simple adventure story but it

presents a unique standpoint on the environment and the impact of human actions on the planet. By using the concepts of dark ecology from Morton (2007) and slow violence from Rob Nixon, we can gain a deeper understanding of the environmental themes present in *Sweet Tooth*.

The series explores the theme of dark ecology through the character of Gus, who is partial- mortal and partial- deer. Gus is the main character in the series who's personification of a new kind of ecological knowledge, one that's grounded on empathy and interconnectedness. He sees, considers and understand nature's power and want others to accept and embrace him and other hybrids as an important part of ecological system that includes non-human entities such as animals, plants, and even inanimate objects. His desire and urge is entirely opposite to the other characters present in the series, who are more focused on just their own survival and often see the environment only as a resource to be used and exploited. Likewise slow violence is portrayed through virus that has wiped out most of humanity. The virus is an outcome of human actions on the environment and can be understood as a representation of the negative consequences of human actions. The sick serves as a metaphor for anthropocentric viewpoint of certain characters in the series. It shows that we decided and acted in ways that are destructive to nature and as such the agency of nature was undermined through acts like ecologism, deforestations, pollutions and exploitation of natural resources harmfully distors the balance of ecosystems. The sick symbolizes the consequences of humanity's negligence for the terrain's and its processes, and functions as a mnemonic of the inevitable cost that our behavior imposes. *Sweet Tooth* provides a different approach to looking at the geography and such effects of mortal behavior on the sphere. The series calls for a recognition of the new subjectivity that begins with a reconsideration of one's relationship with the landscape, and new ecological epistemology that is based on sympoiesis.

Sweet Tooth is definitely rich in fantasy but at the same time it brings vision on what the nature of man and consequent behaviors have on earth. The series makes us question our connection with the nature and encourages viewers to accept a form of life's understanding which is based on recognition of otherness and interconnectivity.

Thus, today the consideration and discussing the popularity of themes connected with the environment in media is widening and more significant as the climate change issue is still active in the world. By wondering and observing that how mass culture display the contact between human and environment, one understands something about its present condition in the light of its future possibilities and should be ready to construct the vital future. The focus of this article is the reflection of human, nature and environmental focus which is depicted in the Netflix (2021) series named *Sweet Tooth* and it assesses how the series interprets and explains the possibility of rebuilding the connection between humans and the nature.

As a result of dissection of the above environmental themes in *Sweet Tooth*, it will be possible to expand the conversation of culture and sustainability, and environment. *Sweet Tooth* was chosen for this research because it provides a singular and proper view on human relations with nature and prompts more consideration and concern toward the global interconnected world.

Literature Review

Anthropocentrism is creating chaos, anarchy, and disorder in the ecosphere and defacing the earth beyond recognition. Our ego-conscious is undermining the eco-consciousness and leading environmental maladies like global warming, greenhouse gas effect, hurricanes, flood, earthquake, land slide, acid rain, water and land toxicity etc. At such a crucial time when the security and integrity of the planet are at stake, literature cannot play the role of a passive observer and remained unaffected by eco calamities.

In this critical time for the planet's security and integrity, literature cannot passively observe but must actively address these ecological challenges. This literature review gives a detailed outline and sketch of existing literature on ecocriticism, an approach that inspects the depiction of nature and the environment in literature and cultural forms. The focal point of this section is grounded on reviewing literature on ecocriticism. It calls for a critical analysis and conflation of published workshop, including books, papers, and other scholarly sources, to fete the crucial themes, debates, and gaps in the literature. The end of this section is to give a thorough overview of the former studies on ecocriticism and to identify the scholars and their immolations to the field.

In the past few decades a new literary approach, ecocriticism regarding environmental writings has come into existence. Coined by Rueckert in 1978, ecocriticism applies ecological concepts to the study of literature, while defines it as exploring how cultural artifacts construct representations of the natural world and the human-nature relationship. Glotfelty & Fromm (1996) emphasizes the interconnections between nature and culture in ecocriticism, specifically within the cultural artifacts of language and literature.

Some of the earlier works touching this theme include the review of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* through Postcolonial eco-criticism where while appreciating western environmentalism and social justice, one overlooks the small representation of climate change or the anthropocene in the novel. Besides, there are certain researches connected to the analysis of films, for example, Romadhon's approach (2018) provides interpretation of James Cameron's *Avatar* where beliefs about nature and environmental matters that are reflected in the picture, were studied. Given the current state of the world and numerous environmental issues, the apparatus of ecocriticism will be helpful to understand how literature configures the specularization of nature and a subject's relationship to it. This review brings into focus climate change the Anthropocene and the environmental themes that are evident in literary texts and stresses the educative, inspiring and transformative purpose of literature that is to make people aware of calamities facing the environment and spur them into action.

Thus, the literature shows a desire to focus on the eco-critical approach in the context of analysing popular media. A study done by Baccolini and Xausa (2012) named "Gender roles, parenthood, and the ethics of care in pandemic media narratives pre-and post-Covid-19" explores how science fiction cinema reacts to crisis and the patriarchal roles in society. The authors analyze three sci-fi productions that feature the climate change theme and the coronavirus pandemic, namely *Bird Box*, *Sweet Tooth*, and *Anna*. They claim that these works introduce innovative modes of the family and parenthood and expand the concept of care to include not only gender roles, but also the relationship between humans, animals, and nature the world.

Bulleid's (2022) asserts that the structure of the paper, it will employ the philosophy of Wolfe as the posthuman and animal studies theorist to consider the different series of *Sweet Tooth*. The article is especially devoted to such topics as the series and animal and vegetarian ethics, 'primitivist' motifs in literature, and colonization.

Zantingh's (2019) insists that the comic series *Sweet Tooth*, written by Lemire, transforms the post-apocalyptic genre, but connects it to a true future with the previous colonial past and the suffering of Indigenous peoples. Therefore, the series employs graphic appeal to urge readers to bear this suffering and to envision an otherwise, and it is an excellent process of decolonizing the post-apocalyptic genre.

These articles continue to enrich the debate on the impacts of the popular media in the impartation of knowledge to the general public on topics concerning environmental conservation. Thus, taking into consideration an eco-critical approach to *Sweet Tooth*, they

provide the readers with crucial insights into families, child rearing, guardians, and humans and animals and their shared spaces and environment. These studies illustrate that further research on popular media must include an examination of the results through an eco-critical framework regarding the reconstruction of culture's perception towards nature. The previous studies of ecocriticism have been very helpful in providing new, profound perspectives that assist in explaining the construction of human – nature interaction existence in literature and other forms of culture. Commendably, these studies have prepared the ground for other related research and further exploration. Nevertheless, there remains the lack of further detailed eco-critical interpretation of the series *Sweet Tooth* with the help of the notions of dark ecology and violence. In this way, I believe that the concepts of dark ecology and slow violence altogether with the analysis of the series representation of nature can help people to gain the adequate understanding of how nature affects humans and nonhumans. This gap is crucial because it sows the seeds of the need for a deeper appreciation of the complex interdependency between man, and animals, and the physical world within the consumers' popular culture. This should help to disentangle the nature of environmental messages conveyed in popular media and their potential influence on the viewer's perceptions and responses to environmental problems, as well as assist in the development of strategies for dealing with environmental problems.

Material and Methods

The research method applied in this study is text analysis. Literary analysis entails reading and understanding of the texts with the aim of recognizing certain motifs, themes or any other elements of the given literary piece. Hence, the methodology includes the main elements of the close reading approach in order to analyze the Netflix (2021) series *Sweet Tooth* and include the consideration of how nature and environment are represented. Interpretation is an important procedure where one is able to analyze written or spoken texts in order to unpack hidden information and meaning. Thus, through analysing the language, structure, and the context of the text, it enables readers to comprehend the author's intention, develop the understanding of themes and symbolism, and contemplate the social and cultural aspects, concerning language and rhetoric, and encourages critical thinking. Thus, the textual approach helps the reader to understand the text more comprehensively and make an inference about its content and the author's intent; it helps the reader to notice the workings and the details of the work, as well as its unspoken messages and points of interest.

With regards to the text analysis of this study, the author applied a systematic procedure of analysis with a view to understanding the representation of nature and the environment in *Sweet Tooth*. The analysis entails many watches to ensure that a clear grasp of the widespread themes and messages portrayed in the series is achieved. The analysis of the series will also highlight the notes about nature and environment in the show, its metaphoric images and language. In addition to the textual analysis, the secondary sources of the eco-critical literature and the environmental studies shall be employed in order to bring out context and to hold up the analysis. To this end, the following sources will be employed to alert the interpretation of representation of nature and the environment in *Sweet Tooth* and to position the scanning within the environmental discussion. The textual analysis method used in this study will provide a detailed and systematic approach to analyzing the representation of nature and the environment in *Sweet Tooth*.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is ecocriticism, which is an interdisciplinary field that looks for association between humans, natural world. It is an umbrella term which is used in the study of literature and ecology from an interdisciplinary point of view where literature scholars analyze text that illustrate environmental concerns

and examines various ways literature treats the subject of nature. This study used the idea of dark ecology and slow violence to scan the environmental themes present in *Sweet Tooth*.

Dark ecology, as defined by Morton (2012), is a procedure of understanding and examining the relationship between all living things and the impact of human actions on the environment. It asserts that humans are not separate from the natural world neither they are of higher priority than those of non-humans rather they are deeply interconnected with it by being a part of a larger biotic web, network or community whose interests must constrain or govern the human interests. This concept is particularly relevant to *Sweet Tooth*, as the series explores the impacts of human actions on the environment and the urgent need unceasing and interconnected future. This concept has several different aspects, including: Non-anthropocentrism, Entanglement and Uncertainty.

Slow violence, as defined by Rob Nixon, is a way of understanding the violence that is often gradual, slow and often invisible and is not considered as violence at all like the impact of environmental degradation on marginalized communities. Slow violence lay stress on the slow and gradual aftermath of environmental collapse which can take years or even decades to become apparent and visible.

The impact of environmental declination is frequently concealed, unnoticeable or delicate to perceive, particularly for those who aren't directly affected by it and it highlights the disproportionate impact of environmental disaster on marginalized communities, similar as low- income communities and communities of color. It recognizes that environmental issues aren't just about the physical terrain, but also about social justice and inequality, a conception which is portrayed elegantly and directly in the series to make observers realize and understand the critical need and way to be followed for a more just and indifferent future. These generalities offer a unique perspective on the relationship between humans and the natural world, and punctuate the significance of addressing environmental issues in a way that's both environmentally and socially just.

Results and Discussion

Lemire's comic series *Sweet Tooth* (2009–13) and its 2021 television adaptation blend these two pertinent categories, presenting a postcatastrophic future wherein humanity has been wiped out by a global pandemic which causes all newborn human children to become human-nonhuman animal "hybrids". The story revolves around the journey of Gus, a nine-year-old hybrid of human and deer, as he ventures out of a Nebraskan nature reserve following the death of his adoptive human father. As Huggan and Tiffan note in their book "Nature has agency, and it is not simply a passive backdrop to human events" (Huggan and Tiffan, 26). This is exemplified through the character of Gus, who despite being a hybrid, demonstrates his agency by actively seeking to make a difference and change his circumstances. Accompanied by Jepperd, an ex-hockey player, Gus gathers a diverse group of human and hybrid companions as they travel to Alaska in search of Gus's origin and the origins of other hybrids. Using eco-criticism as a lens, the survey's focal points are the themes of human-nature connections, environmental degradation, and the role of technology in shaping the environment, as observed through the lens of Nixon's theory of slow violence and Morton's (2012) concept of dark ecology. Thus, analyzing ecocriticism and applying it to environmental fiction allows exploring the interactions between cultures as well as literature as reflection of these interactions and their influence on society and citizens' attitudes toward environment. It also contributes to us realizing the value and significance of this nature and environment in sustenance of life.

When analyzing *Sweet Tooth*, ideas of ecocriticism, dark ecology, and slow violence would help to expand the discussion about the show's attempt to depict human/nature relations and further consequences of the oppression of power. For those who are interested in the concepts which describe the effects of human mean activities on

environment, dark ecology explains the ecological points of view which state the degradation of the ecosystems and the loss of the biological diversity. Thus, in *Sweet Tooth*, the plot is set in post-apocalyptic tone with emphasis made on the fact that ecological imbalance always has repercussions. Most of the land has reverted to the natural front, defining the strength and authority of nature. The hybrids, the sons and daughters who partook of the animals' features, suggest the integration of human and non-human, so the distinctions made between culture and nature prove flexible. This challenges the anthropocentric or human centred view and focuses on the relationships that exist between humanity and the environment. Moreover, it is also possible to use the notion of slow violence in relation to the topics such as power dynamics and consequences that the show sheds light upon in frequently oppressed communities. Slow violence is the constant and generally unnoticeable types of violence carried out on the affected people and the environment. All the children of human-animal mutants in *Sweet Tooth* experience prejudice and suffering, even becoming prisoners of General Abbot and the Last Men who plan to interrogate, and probably eliminate them. This slow violence is observed as a result of a distorted ideology and serves to illustrate the effects of oppressive power. The crisis is presented through the exposure of the show that depicts the dissimilarities in their reaction. General Abbot is an embodiment of the evil side of man's nature and continues to executions and vandalism to maintain his manufactured view of humanity. On the other hand, characters like Aimee Eden and Bear are those portrayals of dark ecology and slow violence, which shows that all live beings are related to each other and deserve love, tolerance, and understanding. Through *Sweet Tooth*, viewers are encouraged to ponder on ecological and social repercussions of the actions of people, effects of power relations, as well as the possibilities of esoteric change. It reminds us of the need to solve ecological issues and troubled social contexts by reorienting our view on the exploitation of nature and the values of society. In this case, Nixon's slow violence theory is most relevant to elucidate the series since it captures the unnoticeable and progressive process of environmental degradation and depletion especially on vulnerable communities. This aspect paints the picture that *Sweet Tooth*'s elites have an access to resources and technologies that enable them to perpetuate and survive while the poor and vulnerable are on their own.

Sweet Tooth central three main themes are human-nature relationships, environmental degradation, and the role of technology are prevalent throughout the series. Through a close examination and interpretation of the series, this study has identified several key messages related to human's attitude with nature. The series exhibits a multiplex association between humans and nature, where humans are both dependent on and destructive towards nature. In *Sweet Tooth*, the hybrid children are a symbol of the interconnectedness of humans and nature and highlight the importance of biological diversity. Indeed, one of the characters in the series explained, "The hybrids are the future; they're the link to the world outside, to nature" (*Sweet Tooth*, episode 1). Germination seems to indicate that those characters who are half-human and half-animal have a task of bridging and preserving nature. The hybrids is the combination of human and animal qualities, which reflects the unity in people with other living species and the surroundings. They have characteristics and skills learned from animals and this demonstrates the necessity for the natural world. By viewing the hybrids as the future, the statement suggests that they hold the potential to stimulate humans to restore and reconnect with nature and change their relation with the environment. The hybrids give out a reminder to the value of biodiversity that all living organisms are a part of a larger biotic web where all have their own importance. Furthermore, the idea of hybrids being a bridge suggests that they can help human bridge the gap that has emerged between them and the natural world due to modernization and technological advancements. They serve as a catalyst for humans to reestablish a closer relationship with nature, promoting a more sustainable and balanced coexistence

The series portrays the consequences of disrupting the natural world, such as the emergence and then spread of the virus. For example, when Gus and Tommy enter the abandoned zoo, Tommy remarks, "This is what happens when humans mess with nature. The animals are gone, and the virus is spreading" (Sweet Tooth, episode 2). The series depicts the impacts of human activities on the environment, such as toil to tame nature, using it solely for mean purposes without regarding nature for its processes, deforestation and pollution. In *Sweet Tooth*, the post-apocalyptic world is a result of human's egocentric activities that have led to environmental degradation and the collapse of society. The series depicts exquisitely the consequences of environmental degradation, such as the loss of biodiversity and the emergence of new diseases. For example, when Gus and Jepperd are traveling through the abandoned city and Jepperd blame humans, counting himself too, of being consumed by greed and selfishness towards nature, which has eventually resulted in its destruction. Jepperd accepts the consequences of human actions and highlights the terrible condition of the environment as a result. The character Jepperd confesses that the ruinous impact on nature is originally caused by humanity's unsatisfiable greed and ignorance for the welfare of the natural world. This allegation implicates humans as the main culprits and offenders who are responsible for the devastation that has unfolded. By pointing out humanity's role in the destruction of nature, Jepperd urges self-analysis and encourages viewers to tackle the consequences of our actions. This serves as a call for individuals and society as a whole to reassess our values, prioritize viable practices, and embrace a more responsible and respectful approach to our relationship with the natural world.

Conclusion

The series presents a critique of technology and its role in shaping perceptions about environment. In *Sweet Tooth*, technology is portrayed as a two-sided sword that can both harm and help the environment. The series highlights the need for viable and eco-friendly technologies that can help address the ecological crisis. As one character in the series states, we need to find a way out to live in harmony with nature, not against it similarly when Gus and Jepperd are traveling through the abandoned city, Jepperd remarks about technology that we thought we could fix everything with technology but we were wrong lay emphasis that destruction caused by humans even cannot be undone by technology. The close examination of the series lay stress on the importance of examining and understanding the representation of nature and the environment in popular media. This study recognizes many key messages related to human-nature relationships, environmental degradation, and the role of technology in shaping the environment. These themes offer awareness into the ways in which popular media can shape knowledge and public viewpoint about environmental issues and the human-nature relationship and seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the role of popular media in shaping public perceptions of environmental issues.

Sweet Tooth also stresses the need to pay attention to eco-criticism as the theoretical model for the analysis of popular media. According to the present research, the application of eco-criticism to Sweet Tooth allowed for detecting the following themes pertaining to humans' interaction with the environment and the matter of the ecological apocalypse. In addition, the critical evaluation of Sweet Tooth helps in making conclusion on how popular media can influence the awareness of people on aspects of the environment. Thus, this study investigates the representation of nature and the environment in Sweet Tooth as part of the corpus. The popular series on Netflix (2021) titled Sweet Tooth can be regarded as a representation of the discussed topic and stresses the necessity of preserving the environment and learning from nature. The series also shows a complex connection of humans with nature as both subscribers and culprits to the environment's misdeeds. The cross-bred children in the series are the allegory for the relation between people and ecology and provide the Angle to examine the importance of the variety of species. The series also provides a reviewing of technology, and its implication in the constructing of

environment, need for environmental and green technology. In general, all the series provide retrospective critiques on the ecological problem and environmental preservation and management solutions. Thus, Sweet Tooth is a notable example of a piece of pop culture that continues to address humans' relations to the environment. Indeed, through presenting such problems in a more developed way, the series promotes environmental preservation and utilization of sustainable resources; thus, adding valuable input to the discussion of these significant problems.

References

- Baccolini, R., & Xausa, C. (2021). Gender roles, parenthood, and the ethics of care in pandemic media narratives pre- and post-Covid-19. *Artforum International*, 54(3), 89-90.
- Bulleid, A. (2022). Returning to human nature: Posthumanist animal, environmental and postcolonial ethics in *Sweet Tooth*. *Journal of Ecocriticism*, 4(1), 57-61.
- Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. University of Georgia Press.
- Huggan, G., & Tiffin, H. (2010). *Postcolonial ecocriticism: Literature, animals, environment*. Routledge.
- Lemire, J. (2009–2013). *Sweet Tooth* [Comic series]. Vertigo.
- Morton, T. (2012). *The ecological thought*. Harvard University Press.
- Morton, T. (2007). *Ecology without nature: Rethinking environmental aesthetics*. Harvard University Press.
- Netflix. (2021). *Sweet Tooth* (J. Mickle, Creator). Netflix.
- Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press.
- Romadhon, A. (2018). An eco-critical interpretation of James Cameron's *Avatar*. *Journal of Ecocriticism*, 8(2), 50-61.
- Rueckert, W. (1978). Literature and ecology: An experiment in ecocriticism. *Iowa Review*, 9(1), 71-86.
- Stranger-legger, Z. (2020). Colonial violence, post-apocalypse, and the Inuit in Lemire's *Sweet Tooth* series. *Zygon*, 58, (2), 315-339
- Zantingh, P. (2019). Tekkietkertok's anger: Colonial violence, post-apocalypse, and the Inuit in Lemire's *Sweet Tooth* series. *Orbis Litterarum*, 78, 286–303