

Liquid Lores: Reading Amna Mufti's *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (Water is Dying) as Hydrofiction

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Abstract: *Hydrofictions, as theorized by Hannah Boast, examine the cultural, social, ecological, and political perspectives on water and provide a lens through which the element of water in literature can be studied. This research article aims to analyze Amna Mufti's Paani Mar Raha Hai (Water is Dying) (2018) as a specimen of hydro fiction as it employs a quasi-magical realist narrative to delve into the ramifications of human meddling with the natural course and flows of water. In doing so, mufti's narrative partakes in concerns of the Anthropocene regarding the misuse, scarcity, spoilage, and misappropriation of water and, above all, the political ecology of its unequal distribution. This paper employs the theoretical framework of hydrofictions proposed by Hannah Boast to argue that in the novel, water emerges as a central metaphor, a symbol of nature's resistance in the face of human greed. In the novel, water is not just a marginal ecological concern but an active force shaping the lives of characters and changing the order of reality. In aligning the mufti's novel with Boast's groundbreaking theorization of water in literature of the Anthropocene, this research contributes to a broader discourse on environmental literature in South Asia, paving the way for further studies in hydrofictions and water narratives in Pakistani literary and sociopolitical contexts.*

Key Words: Hydrofictions, Hydronarratives, Water Crises, Political Ecology, Ecological Imbalance, the Anthropocene, Pakistani Literature

Introduction

Water, the essential life force comprising most of our planet, permeates everything, from our body to our literature. It is omnipresent in both literal and metaphorical senses across literatures, cultures, and eras. From affirming its significance as "the new oil" (Asia Society, 2013, para. 1) in political and economic terms to seeing its symbol of purity, transformation, sanctions, and chaos, it is ubiquitous. Therefore, it becomes crucial to acknowledge what it might mean to 'read' it. Hydrofiction is an emerging theoretical framework that specifically examines the representation and significance of water in literary texts. Creating an interdisciplinary framework, hydrofiction bridges literature with hydrology, environmental science, and cultural studies and synthesizes scientific and cultural understandings of water. Hannah Boast (2020), in her groundbreaking work *Hydrofictions: Water, Power, and Politics in Israeli and Palestinian Literature*, foregrounds water as a lens through which literature can be analyzed and, thus, offers a new approach in environmental studies by "focusing on a substance which is crucial to life but which has too often been overlooked" (p. 3). Boast's idea of hydrofictions refers to stories where water is central, not just as the setting but as a symbol and a metaphor. Amna Mufti's Urdu novel *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (*Water is Dying*), published in 2018, narrates a tale that highlights Pakistan's water crises. Her novel can be read as a fine specimen of hydrofiction as it mixes magical realism with myth to underscore the environmental challenges faced by the people in the region and to emphasize the destructive consequences of humans meddling with natural flows and distributions of water.

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Water crises are a shared global reality, going beyond borders and social classes, affecting humans and non-humans alike. Thus, it is naive to see our connection with water as a passive engagement, not an act of controlling nature. Understanding the role of water as more than just a raw material is pivotal in our fight against the ever-increasing shortage of water, as Bullen-Cutting (2021) states in his dissertation *'Dark Mirror of the Water': Spectrality in Climate and Hydro-Fictions & Museum of Water, a Creative Archive*: "Water is not just a resource or number to be quantified; water is culture and nature and nurture. Water is a living liquid history replete with billions of stories, human and otherwise" (p. 141). Boast stresses the multidimensional part that water plays in our lives by putting forward an interdisciplinary approach and analyzing Israeli and Palestinian literature, blending environmental studies with geopolitics, which enables us to see water in a new light, asserting that "Water may appear to be unproblematically 'natural', but it is constituted by a combination of 'natural' and 'cultural' elements" (Boast, 2020, p. 20).

The primary concern of Boast's (2020) theory of hydrofictions is how water, as a symbol, is represented in the literature of Israel and Palestine, examining the imbrication between water politics and literary narratives and surveying how human sociopolitical agendas meddle with the natural course of water. As in the narratives analyzed in Boast's *Hydrofictions* (2020), water in Amna Mufti's *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) symbolizes resistance and control, showing nature's autonomy in the face of human interference. The novel puts forward a non-linear narrative, showing two households affected by the "curse" of water. A patch of water-logged and salinized land by the bed of Beas River is the novel's central focus, which is home to various creatures, human and supernatural. Syed Irfan Ahmad and a few other characters who become permanent residents of this place seem to be given divine knowledge of what will come. Still, as it turns out, they, despite being aware of the ending, are entirely helpless in the face of calamity that falls upon them. Mian Allahyar, a landlord, becomes an incarnation of human greed and unchecked ambition. His ultimate death symbolizes the fate of humanity if it continues to violate the natural order of things. The flood that drowns the village of Mian Allahyar shows water unleashing itself upon human civilization and paying back to human meddling in the same coins. This immense potential of Mufti's ecologically conscious novel which merits attention has been entirely overlooked in the critical appraisals of the novel. Apart from a few marginal mentions in literature reviews and a few recorded talks, there is no full-fledged critical inquiry into the novel's ecological concerns, especially those pertaining to its foregrounding of the water motif in its narrative. This article seeks to align Mufti's novel (2018) with Boast's (2020) idea of hydrofictions and position it within the fiction of the Anthropocene. Thus, this research contributes to a broader discourse on environmental literature in Pakistani and South Asian contexts and initiates further studies in hydrofictions in particular, and climate fiction, by extension, within the exclusive literary and sociopolitical contexts of the regions.

Hydrofiction: A Theoretical Framework for Exploring Water in Literature

Hydrofiction is a category of ecocriticism that tells us "what it might mean to 'read' the resource of water in literature" (Boast, 2020, p. 3). It focuses on how water may function as a narrative device. Water, the essential element of life, permeates everything, including our stories. So, in a way, any piece of literature can be read as hydrofiction. However, Boast (2020) focuses exclusively on works where water is a motif, a symbol present throughout. For instance, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2014) and Mehmood Darwish's *A River Dies of Thirst*, (2009) employ water as a recurring motif. Hannah Boast (2020), in her book *Hydrofictions: Water, Power, and Politics in Israeli and Palestinian Literature*, develops an interdisciplinary theoretical framework for the analysis of what she dubs hydrofiction. Mathew Henry (2020) observes in this regard: "Boast takes inspiration from the energy humanities, particularly Indian writer Amitav Ghosh's notion of perfection, or literature that addresses the entangled cultural, political, and environmental dynamics of oil" (p. 18) to create a lens through which various texts from Israeli and Palestinian literature are analyzed and develops the term hydrofiction. This new literary critical tool investigates "what literary texts might tell us about ... 'hydrological relations'" (Boast, 2020, p. 3), which are described as "a socio-natural process by which water and society make and remake each other over space and time" (Linton & Budds, 2014, p. 175). Boast (2020) explains that hydro fiction is a category for our era of 'hypermodernity' where hydraulic engineering schemes prevail in our world, and water crises are majorly thought to be solved by state-of-the-art technological advancements. "These schemes", she says, "have been used around the world to 'conquer' nonhuman nature and power nations into the modern era" (Boast, 2020, p. 3). The



relevance of water as a significant resource makes it pertinent to analyze it as a driving force that informs our literature on the Anthropocene.

Boast's (2020) focus on Israeli and Palestinian narratives allows us to see the role of water as not just a resource but an active agent shaping relations between people, land, and state. Bakker (2012) states that "water links individual bodies to one another through the cycling of waters and water-borne effluents between water bodies and organisms – both human and non-human" (p. 616). Thus, water cannot be seen merely as H₂O but as a bridge linking various parts of our civilization. By foregrounding water as a shaping agent in the selected narratives, Boast (2020) highlights how literature helps shed light on environmental and political issues that permeate our world and plays an essential part in shaping our understanding of these issues. She anchors her theorization around Israeli and Palestinian literature and, thus, opens up the path for broader application of the theory, as water crises are not unique to Palestine only. Furthermore, her endeavor of situating water at the intersection between environmental studies and geopolitics renders it a valuable prism for analyzing global environmental literature.

Boast's analysis of Israeli and Palestinian literature reveals diverse representations of water, from being a metaphor of loss to a symbol of resistance, allowing us to use this framework to explore the element of water in global fiction. Boast (2020) refuses to reduce water to a mere resource by asserting that it is our materialistic perspective on water that has made it an easy substance for us to exploit it as she claims "the making of water legible as a fact of 'Nature' is what allows us to conceive of it as a resource existing in quantities independent of human intervention which we might discover, access, exploit or improve" (Boast, 2020, p. 20). She articulates the main argument by exploring the multifaceted role of water in these narratives and how it is a reflection of the reality of water. Hydrofictions, she highlights, strives to draw attention to the fact that though water is present in our narratives, it is often ignored and overlooked. Boast (2020) reinforces the notion that water flows through our lives and stories and how, in return, our narratives float and immerse in the same water. The focus on Israeli and Palestinian literature is a deliberate choice, as Boast explains that one of the primary goals of her work was to bring these texts to the audiences of the Anglophone world by "foregrounding Israeli and Palestinian literature as environmental literature" (Boast, 2020, p. 5), something she notes, has been rarely done. As stated earlier, water, which has remained invisible in critical inquiries, needs to be brought into sharp focus and accorded the treatment it merits.

Boast's (2020) theory of hydro fiction also aligns itself with the broader critiques of the Anthropocene, which is the time in which "the collective activities of human beings (Homo sapiens) began to substantially alter Earth's surface, atmosphere, oceans, and systems of nutrient cycling" (Rafferty, 2024, para. 1). Boast (2020) situates hydro fiction in post-colonial studies and post-colonial ecocriticism by analyzing Israeli and Palestinian texts. She argues that "the idea of 'humanity' as responsible for ecological devastation elides unequal account ability, unequally borne consequences, and the origins and persistence of these effects in colonial histories" (Boast, 2020, p. 8). It suggests that the colonized are the first to suffer the consequences of this mistreatment of nature, and the colonizers who are majorly responsible for this abuse remain unharmed. This is further explained as Boast uses the lens of water to bring to light the voices that have not reached the mainstream discourse regarding the Israel/Palestine conflict and to remind us that "the extent to which 'natural' hydrological realities are socially and politically produced" (Boast, 2020, p. 4). Hydrofictions emphasize that literature helps us understand the intricacies of environmental problems by focusing on the different perspectives and often times reveal that the prevailing beliefs about these ecological concerns are wrong as Boast provides evidence by putting forward a compact examination of the hydrological realities of Israel and Palestine and the differences in the ways water is represented in literature in the respective communities. This framework explores the intricate connection between water and narratives, emphasizing the act of reading the resource of water and thus enables a nuanced examination of how Mufti's *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) engages with the contemporary challenges of climate and environment by using water as a potent and determining force which positions itself to avenge the atrocities it endures.

Textual Analysis: Reading *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) as Hydrofiction

Mufti's *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (*Water is Dying*) (2018) is one of the few Pakistani Urdu novels narrating a tale of the environmental crisis of water wrapped in a curious blend of magical realism and myth. The story

involves various characters that are eventually swept in a deluge, which the story suggests is nature's revenge upon humans. The whole saga reflects the author's deep environmental consciousness steeped in her minute awareness of the landscape and climate of Punjab, where the story is set. The novel follows the narratives of Syed Irfan Ahmad and Israr as their parallel narratives merge in the middle of the story. The story incorporates the stream-of-consciousness technique as it moves in a non-linear manner, showing urban and rural life and highlighting the interference of humans with nature at a larger national scale and smaller personal scale. Furthermore, it alludes to the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent and the 1960 Indus water treaty, which allocates the use of the Indus River and its tributaries (The World Bank, 1960) to lament the displacement of non-human life as a consequence of unchecked human intervention and sociopolitical agenda.

The story starts with Syed Irfan Ahmad migrating to Pakistan after 1947, getting a job as an engineer in the government sector, and marrying Shahida. Things went smoothly for him until he started working on constructing the Mangla Dam, which is part of the Indus Water Treaty agreement. A Jogi from the temple of Mangla Devi comes to his place and gives him a snake, which he says is a souvenir from the valley, and with this, a series of supernatural events start, which continues till the novel's end. Shahida is the first to perceive atypical behaviours as she observes Irfan being paranoid and dissociated from reality. Upon asking, he replies with this foreboding prophecy: "Now Beas will dry out, it will end" (Mufti, 2018, p. 62). He is overwhelmed with ominous dread about the fate of the Punjab rivers as the construction of new mega-dams gathers pace. This moment marks a significant conclusion of the novel, which is the psychological repercussions of humans trespassing in the ways of nature. It shows how *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) posits nature, specifically water, not as a passive victim of human ambitions and greed but as an active force that retaliates once pushed to its limits. The use of magical realism enhances this critique, as after Irfan accepts the snake, an unnamed curse falls upon him and extends to several other characters. The snake also symbolizes a dark portent of the escalating impacts of meddling with water.

On the other side, in the rural heartland of Punjab, Mian Allahyar and his household is engulfed by a severe storm as he tries to cultivate a water-logged and salinized piece of land by the bed of the river Beas. His anthropocentric greed blinds him to apparent signs of dire consequences of water-related ecological disruption. The death of various people around him and many unnatural developments in animals fail to forewarn him until he meets his doom at the hands of the very nature he wants to control. This anthropocentric insistence on dominating and exploiting nature without a care for the ecological imbalance about water becomes the leitmotif of this novel as it repeatedly alludes to the Indus Water Treaty as a tool for environmental disruption. Be it Mian Allahyar or the politicians who signed the treaty, it is the voracity that is ever present in human nature that results in the literal death of water. Mufti (2018) decries the human thinking that water is unlimited, free to use, divide, and kill. Deckard (2019) emphasizes the fact that "Water is 'renewable' only when the closed circles of hydrological cycles remain complete" (p. 108). In doing so, the novel reflects on the eco-anxiety about chronic fears of environmental doom and the planet's future. It weaves quasi-magic realist and folkloric narratives to mirror a broader scientific view of the eco-anxieties expressed by critics like Deckard (2019).

Paani Mar Raha Hai (2018) critiques water misappropriation as a cause of suffering for all non-human life. Humans in the novel, much like humans in real life have forgotten the consequences of their involvement with nature and only realize their follies when it's too late. In the novel, nature takes its revenge by drowning the village where Allahyar lived. This is parallel to what happened to the valley where Mangla dam is constructed as stated in the novel: "This village was now going to become a river. Man, like Vishwamitra, drunk in his power, was thinking he could write the fate of civilizations" (Mufti, 2018, p. 171). In this way, water makes its presence known by avenging the exploitation of water. Boast (2020) denounces the notion of seeing water as a mere utility that is free to use and divided on political grounds. The representation of water in *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) mirrors this sentiment as the characters are killed in the same way they killed water.

The hydrofictions, at its core, explore how literary texts illustrate the complex two-way relationship between humans and water, focusing on the political ways water is divided, politicized, and weaponized against enemies. Mufti includes and condemns the Indus water treaty in *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018), laying out how water is transformed into the arena of conflict, introducing hydro warfare as a new dimension



into the global geopolitical and strategic hostilities. She points out the flaws of the treaty, which fails to account for the interconnectedness of water systems, which are not bound by artificial political lines. By creating arbitrary boundaries, it disrupts the delicate ecological balance but also exacerbates the oppression of marginalized communities. A report by the United States Institute of Peace, highlighting the political landscape of the Indus Basin in Pakistan, notes: “The treaty mirrored the political landscape of the time by simply dividing the basin between the two countries instead of providing for meaningful cooperative management or sharing” (Mustafa, 2010, p. 5). These apprehensions validate Mufti’s concerns that while the treaty survived wars and conflicts, its resilience does not justify the compromises it imposed. *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) highlights the tangible and far-reaching consequences of the Indus Water Treaty, showing the human and non-human price of the political division of water, which aligns with Boast’s idea that blaming all “‘humanity’ as responsible for ecological devastation elides unequal account ability, [and] unequally borne consequences” (Boast, 2020, p. 8) as those suffering the aftermath of this division are rarely those in the positions of power who carve up these resources. The division of rivers in the treaty fails to account for the interdependence of nature and humanity, resulting in detrimental effects on both the environment and the people who inhabit the region.

Paani Mar Raha Hai (2018) brings to the fore the post-partition mishandling of the Indus Basin system and the agony of nature perishing in the hands of the political ambitions of those in power. According to a report from the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, one of the fundamental drivers of the expanding water shortage in Pakistan is poor management, declaring that “the country’s irrigation is one of the most inefficient in the world with an overall efficiency of 39 percent, reflecting aging and poor maintenance of the irrigation system” (Maqbool, 2022, p. 5). The novel reveals the alarming lack of reluctance with which nature, specifically water, is sacrificed at the altar of politics, with dams and diversions, rather than being tools for equitable development, becoming instruments to exert control, overlooking the consequences of these actions. Mufti (2018) admonishes the hegemonizing of water, reminding us that “the ones constructing the dykes ... forgot that great civilizations drowned in the water of the dykes of their own making” (p. 144). This critique is particularly relevant in the context of Pakistan’s ongoing water crisis, with mismanagement and political manipulation posing a significant threat to the country’s ecological future. Through its hauntingly vivid portrayal of the Indus Basin water system’s decline, *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) unveils the interplay between environmental degradation and political corruption, urging the reevaluation of the policies that prioritize control over sustainability.

The novel weaves myths drawn from different sources into its narrative frameworks to warn about impending hydrological crises resulting from recent political conflicts. It illustrates the delicate balance between humanity and the environment and highlights the dire consequences of disrupting this equilibrium. It incorporates and mingles Hindu mythology and Islamic theology, the central religions of the Indian subcontinent, to create an eco-mythology to reprehend human behaviour towards the water. On the one hand, it mentions Vishwamitra, who, according to the Hindu scriptures, was “a king who became a Brahman, created a new universe with its own galaxies to spite the gods” (Basham et al., 2024). On the other hand, she refers to the Quran to hint at the human hubris in the novel’s characters. In both Islam and Hinduism, violating nature is a sin. In Hinduism, all things in the universe are believed to have a part of Brahman in them, and thus, it is mandatory to honour everything human and non-human. As Gairola (2020) states: “Human being is considered to be made up of five natural essential elements ... Therefore, cutting of trees, polluting air, water, land was regarded as sin as these elements of nature were to be respected as gods and Goddess” (p. 21). In Islam, though human beings are considered to be superior, they are not free to exploit God’s world as they have “obligations toward God, fellow human beings, and other creatures” (Rizvi, 2010, p. 66). Therefore, the characters in *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) defy their moral and spiritual duties and are made to pay the price of their sin by violating water’s course of action.

The supernatural incidents in the novel are emblematic of the strength that water and nature possess. The fish and turtles eating human flesh, the man-eating goats, and several other occurrences occurring before Irfan even starts working on the project of Mangla Dam reveal the growing rage of water, which reaches its final form when a deluge strikes Irfan’s house, and fishes rain from the sky. A driver who works there takes one of these fish and feeds it to his pregnant wife, who then gives birth to a mermaid. It is not the first half-human, half-fish child who is born in the novel. This anomaly curses anyone who comes in

contact with Irfan or his house. Nazneen, who lives across the street, visits the place once and produces a mermaid child herself. Allahyar also ends up having a merman child, which he asks his servant to kill. Towards the end, several children like these are born in a single hospital. *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) establishes that the disturbance in the natural order of things is not the end of times but the start of a rightful retaliation as a petrified and alarmed Israr states: "I do not know anything except that the destruction that will come is not the end of the world. It is just water asking for its path back" (Mufti, 2018, p. 178).

Mufti (2018) foregrounds water as a symbol of power and resistance as it refuses to be reduced to a mere utility and asserts its dominance by taking back what was snatched from it. At the novel's start, Shahida notes that everyone around her is talking about the river, and she finds it unpleasant as it spoils her conversations. She worries herself, "Why has the river left its path and entered their conversation?" (Mufti, 2018, p. 57). But this is only the start of water settling in their lives and demanding that they pay attention to it. The flooding of Allahyar's village represents human powerlessness in the face of nature's authority. Throughout the novel, several characters try to manipulate water to make it dance to their tune, but their attempts prove futile when death takes them all. At the birth of her half-human, half-fish daughter, Nazneen is unsurprised as she realizes that this is merely a consequence of humans being unsatiable in their conquest of nature as she thinks that "if it were in the hands of humans, they would dry up oceans. But that is the problem; it is not in their hands" (Mufti, 2018, p. 126). Thus, her thoughts solidify the insignificance of mortal humanity while coming face to face with a force that is beyond human limits.

The destruction of aquatic ecosystems, specifically the drying up of rivers discussed in *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018), an echo of the problems faced by the natural landscape of Pakistan, as Mufti exclaimed in an interview while talking about her inspiration for the novel "My whole life was the inspiration. ... I used to live near Sutlej, and I saw it shrinking" (Ali, 2020). As mentioned earlier, the novel is a testament to the author's acute understanding of the Anthropocene around her, and she has done an excellent job conveying the impending danger. The Indus Basin is one of Pakistan's significant water resources, but its hydrological and prosocial balance has been impacted by politics-driven partition. Watto et al., (2021) in their book *Water Resources of Pakistan: Issues and Impacts*, claim that "Pakistan's ultimate water challenge is the unsustainable way in which its water is used and managed, especially in the Indus Basin" (p. 6). In light of these, *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) serves in so many ways as a cautionary tale about the dangers of environmental exploitation driven by international disputes and political tensions.

Boast (2020) makes the case that environmental hazards are not just the domain of activists and scientists, affirming that literary assessments of these catastrophic prospects "allow[s] us to see the present situation as contingent, and encouraging us to imagine, and work for, an alternative" (Boast, 2020, p. 4). *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) reflects on this notion by delineating the consequences of human interference and enslavement of nature, apathy towards the devastation of non-human life, and taking water for granted under the illusion that everything will automatically fix itself. The last lines of the novel mix sadness and apprehension about the impending hydrological apocalypse: "Israr and Nazneen sealed their lips and did not tell anyone that water is dying. And centuries passed. Today, water is still dying" (Mufti, 2018, p. 188). Thus, these lines metaphorically depict the perpetual and cyclical destruction of water sources through human greed and inaction over centuries. They confront the audience with the spectre of the relentless decline of vital hydro resources, emphasizing how ignored warnings and lack of intervention perpetuate environmental degradation and aggravating water crises.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Paani Mar Raha Hai* (2018) is a hydro narrative with a difference. It replaces a bland realist narrative with a quasi-magical realist and folkloric narrative to criticize treating water merely as a commodity. It portrays water as an active, almost sentient force that resists commodification and reasserts its control over humanity. In doing so, it engages with the themes of environmental justice, the limits of anthropocentric logic, and the rejection of human exceptionalism that human needs should take precedence over ecological concerns. The novel examines water as an almost supernatural force that is not pliable to human will and can suddenly defy and fight back to make us see the role of water as not just H₂O



or a commodity that can be made to bend to human will. Thus, it echoes Hannah Boast's (2020) assertion that “water is a substance and medium through which social, cultural, geopolitical and economic relations flow, which is as ‘cultural’ as it is ‘natural’ and which must be recognized in this complexity in calls for water justice” (p. 196). Mufti’s narrative carves an image of resistance in the face of unchecked human interventions with nature in the form of water’s fury and revenge, urging us to inspect our role in the ever-increasing destruction of our hydrological landscape.

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