

Imbalance and Alienation: An Eco-Critical Interpretation of *Shuggie Bain*

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Abstract

Since its publication in 2020, *Shuggie Bain*, the debut novel by Scottish author Douglas Stuart, has attracted scholarly attention for its unique ecological perspective. Utilizing the theoretical framework of eco-criticism and drawing on the tripartite division of ecology proposed by Chinese scholar Lu Shuyuan, this paper provides an in-depth interpretation of the novel *Shuggie Bain* in three dimensions of natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology, aiming to reveal the ecological imbalance and human alienation in Glasgow, a major industrial city in Scotland during the 1980s. This interpretation will also provide readers with a new research perspective for analyzing *Shuggie Bain*, enhancing their understanding of the rich ecological implications of it.

Keywords: *Shuggie Bain*, Douglas Stuart, natural ecology, social ecology, spiritual ecology.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Douglas Stuart, born in 1976 into a financially strapped working-class family in Glasgow, a renowned industrial city in Scotland, has emerged as a prominent figure in contemporary Scottish literature with his unique literary perspective and keen social insight. His debut novel, *Shuggie Bain*, has won numerous accolades and the hearts of readers since its publication in 2020, particularly for its exceptional artistic expression and profound social themes. The novel's recognition also culminated in its award of the Booker Prize in the same year.

Nowadays, the ecological crisis is still serious, which is manifested in the deteriorating natural environment and frequent social conflicts, and these changes have a profound impact on people's spiritual world. Therefore, it is particularly crucial to interpret literary works from the perspective of eco-criticism. In *Shuggie Bain*, author Stuart sets the backdrop in Glasgow and depicts the severe destruction of the local natural environment caused by industrialization and the subsequent social and spiritual ecological crises triggered by de-industrialization. Through vivid narratives, the novel presents scenes of ecological disorder, sparking profound reflections on natural, social, and spiritual ecological issues. Therefore, interpreting *Shuggie Bain* from an eco-critical perspective not only provides readers with a new

perspective to analyze this work, but also assists them in comprehensively understanding the far-reaching impact of ecological crises on human society and the spiritual world, and exploring strategies in literary works to address the current ecological crisis.

2. Research on *Shuggie Bain*

Published in 2020, *Shuggie Bain* is new but highly valuable for research. Although there is still a lack of studies on it, the research that has been done has revealed rich dimensions.

Foreign scholars have studied in-depth the themes of poverty, love, repression, and trauma in *Shuggie Bain*. Scholar McCartney (2021) has listed and analyzed the specific episodes in this novel, summarizing the themes of poverty and love, and arguing that *Shuggie Bain* is considered to be a novel that fully reflects the real life of a poor family in economically depressed Glasgow in the 1980s and shows the unconditional love of a child for his mother. Moreover, scholar Izzudin (2021) comprehensively analyzed the theme of repression in this novel. He pointed out that the dual oppression from both internal and external sources not only caused the family tragedy of Agnes Bain but also stimulated her death instinct, creating a sad atmosphere for the entire story and further highlighting the immense pressure and helplessness borne by the characters in the novel. In addition, scholars

Indu P., Gopan, and Indu A. S. (2022) used the trauma model proposed by Cathy Caruth and Kai Erikson to interpret the trauma theme in *Shuggie Bain*. They paid special attention to the individual and collective traumas of Glaswegians and, through analyzing the pain experienced by the protagonist Shuggie Bain, demonstrated to readers how the author Stuart shaped Bain into a character who maintains an optimistic attitude throughout.

Compared to foreign research, studies in China on *Shuggie Bain* are relatively scarce. Scholar Li (2022) delved into the translation issues surrounding the Scots dialect in the novel, providing crucial references for readers to understand the linguistic features and cultural backdrop. Meanwhile, from the perspective of de-industrialization and sense of place, scholar Liu (2022) analyzed the situation of human-place relations in the 1980s after the de-industrialization of Glasgow, as well as the possibility of reconstructing the sense of place among the urban underclass in the novel. This research not only demonstrates author Douglas Stuart's profound reflection on Glasgow's history and reality but also provides readers with an important perspective to understand the social backdrop and character relationships in the novel. Additionally, scholar Wan (2023) conducted a detailed analysis of the familial and psychological factors that contribute to the formation of the homosexual psychology of Shuggie Bain and pointed out that under social exclusion and rejection within the homosexual community, Bain's identity recognition becomes even more challenging. She also delved into the construction of Bain's queer identity and the survival dilemma behind it.

After reading and studying the existing research, it can be found that few researchers have noticed the ecological consciousness conveyed by Douglas Stuart in his novel *Shuggie Bain*. Therefore, to fill this research gap, this paper will conduct a systematic and detailed analysis of the ecological consciousness conveyed in this novel from three dimensions: natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology.

3. Theoretical Foundation

Since the introduction of Western eco-critical theory into China, its popularity in the academic circle has continued to rise, becoming an emerging force in the field of literary criticism. Chinese scholars have not only dedicated themselves to studying eco-criticism but also combined traditions of Chinese culture to construct an eco-critical discourse system with distinct Chinese characteristics. This system has not only had a far-reaching impact on literary research in China but also provided new methods and ideas for the study of literary works from an international perspective.

Scholar Lu Shuyuan's tripartite division of ecology has provided a solid theoretical framework for the establishment of China's eco-critical discourse

system and its dialogue with international eco-criticism. He innovatively divides eco-criticism into three dimensions, i.e., natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology (Lu, 2000). Natural ecology focuses on the independent natural world, exploring the interactions and influences between organisms and their environments; social ecology turns its gaze to human society, taking politics, economy, and culture as research objects; while spiritual ecology centers on the inner soul and emotional values of human beings. Therefore, ecological criticism theory offers more possibilities for interpreting *Shuggie Bain*, guiding readers to delve into the relationships between man and nature, society, and the self, thereby enhancing their understanding of the novel's themes and underlying meanings.

4. Imbalanced Natural Ecology

According to scholar Lu (2002), the crisis of natural ecology refers to "people's external participation in the ecology of nature through production, leading to overall or near-overall destruction, which in turn threatens human existence." In *Shuggie Bain*, Douglas Stuart depicts two representative geographical spaces in Glasgow: Sighthill and Pithead. Through detailed descriptions of their environments, he reveals the severe damage caused by industrialization to the natural ecological balance in Glasgow, which is not only in the excessive consumption of natural resources and the rapid decline in environmental quality but also in the fundamental transformation of human existence and the subsequent lack of ecological ethics and responsibility. Through this profound portrayal, Stuart warns readers to reexamine their relationship with nature and actively explore sustainable development paths to address the increasingly severe crisis of natural ecology.

4.1 The Deteriorated Sighthill

Built in the 1960s, Sighthill carries a complex historical backdrop. It is not only Glasgow's most representative slum but also a microcosm of the destruction of natural ecology during industrialization. Originally intended to improve the living conditions of the poor, Sighthill gradually evolved into an area that failed to provide a suitable and harmonious living environment for the underclass as initially envisioned. Within this crowded land, ten 20-story towers accommodate over 7,000 people living at the bottom of society. Confined in cramped and disordered spaces, these residents face a harsh natural environment and low quality of life.

The Shuggie family, a newly blended family, initially resided with Shuggie's grandparents in Sighthill. Stuart's depiction of this geographical space directly demonstrates the destruction of Glasgow's nature and the environmental pollution caused by industrialization. Ideally, nature should be a sanctuary for humans to purify their souls and find inner peace. However, Glasgow's industrialization did not transform it into the Eden envisioned by people but instead severely

affected the beauty of man and nature. The over-industrialized Sighthill, with its deteriorating environment, towering blocks, and cramped spaces, lacks the beauty and vitality of nature. Living in a crowded and low-ceilinged apartment, Shuggie's mother, Agnes, always feels oppressed and empty. When she approached the window, she even had an illusion, as if "for a brief moment she was flying" (Stuart, 2020, p. 22), which fully demonstrates her strong desire to escape this oppressive and harsh environment. Additionally, the industrial pollution caused by excessive industrial development is particularly prominent in Sighthill. The air quality was severely compromised, with dust filling the arid streets and gray-brown landscapes everywhere. Noise and pungent odors permeated the community, making it difficult for residents to enjoy the comfort of fresh air.

Through the specific portrayal of the natural environment in Sighthill, Stuart visually shows the severe natural ecological crisis that Glasgow faced during its industrialization process, resulting in an imbalance in the human-nature relationship. This is not only a profound reflection on the urban development of Glasgow but also a reminder for readers to reexamine the impact of industrialization on the natural environment and actively seek sustainable development paths.

4.2 The Abandoned Pithead

Driven by the urgent need to escape the decaying Sighthill, Agnes and her three children were easily deceived by the lies spun by Shug Bain, the father of Shuggie. Shug promised them an improved living condition in their new home, yet it was merely a guise to abandon his family. They had envisioned a small yet cozy abode with its garden and porch, but reality went against their wishes. Upon arrival, they were shocked to discover that the so-called new home was located in the abandoned lower residential area of Glasgow's post-industrial mining district (Pithead).

During the industrialization period, the relentless extraction of minerals devastated the natural environment of Pithead. Therefore, Pithead was littered with relics of the industrial era, such as mine shafts, slag heaps, and marshlands, where the natural ecological balance has long been lost. The roads in Pithead were narrow, and the mining pits at the end of the street were like huge wounds, devouring the horizon. As described by Stuart in *Shuggie Bain*, "the taxi pulled lines through it as though it were the photo negative of fresh snow" (Stuart, 2020, p. 100), with dust flying and a thick layer of charcoal dust covering the road surface, casting a gray pallor over the entire area. In Pithead, a carefully crafted garden has become an unattainable luxury. Instead, there were only a few dead yew trees and the occasional weed or patch of goldfinch, but swamps of peat ash were almost everywhere. Moreover, low, cramped houses were lined up, each of them had "exactly the same amount of patchy garden, and each garden was dissected

by the identical criss-crossing of white washing lines and grey washing poles" (Stuart, 2020, p. 100-101), so the idea of an independent porch or a spacious yard for drying clothes is a distant dream. In addition, the poor air quality of these mining districts is another stark reality. Even on sunny days, the air was filled with a strong, pungent smell of black metal, which was intolerable and hazardous to health and the environment.

Through his vivid portrayal of the deplorable conditions of Pithead, Stuart not only exposes the severe ecological crisis that Glasgow faced with industrial development but also voices his dissatisfaction and concern over human-caused environmental degradation. Furthermore, he delves into the underlying social and spiritual ecological crises implied in this phenomenon, reflecting his profound anxiety for the future development of human society.

5. Distorted Social Ecology

Scholar Lu (2002) believes that it is too superficial for people to solely attribute the destruction of the ecological environment to industrial development because they overlook the intricate and vast social ecosystem that intervenes between humans and nature. In *Shuggie Bain*, Douglas Stuart depicts the conflicts among various social strata and the inequalities in gender relations in Glasgow. His nuanced portrayal reveals the complexity and multifaceted nature of these social phenomena, allowing readers to realize the distorted social ecology and alienated interpersonal relationships in Glasgow.

5.1 Opposition Among Social Classes

Although Glasgow was undergoing a transition phase of de-industrialization in the 1980s, the prosperous development of industrialization inevitably gave rise to a series of social problems. Among them, the deep-rooted class concept has become a particularly prominent contradiction. Stuart keenly found this problem and delved into how the increasingly sharp class opposition became a microcosm of interpersonal imbalance in *Shuggie Bain*.

Shug Bain serves as a representative of class antagonism in the novel. Deeply constrained by social hierarchy, Shug harbors extreme dissatisfaction with his impoverished life as a taxi driver, yearning to escape poverty and ascend to the upper class. Therefore, after being tricked into moving with his family to Pithead, he discarded his family without hesitation and used his exceptional eloquence to charm Joanie, a member of the bourgeoisie, and embarked on the wealthy life that he had longed for. Moreover, after living a life of prosperity, Shug did not feel any guilt towards his family or any desire to address the sharp realities of class opposition. Instead, he indulged in the privileges that stem from class antagonism and reveled in the thrill it brings.

It is also worth noting that the female character Agnes in *Shuggie Bain* also embodies the severity of social class opposition at that time. Despite being abandoned by Shug and struggling to survive with her children in the desolate and impoverished Pithead of Glasgow, relying on the dole, she still dressed up in glamorous clothes when she was outside, with “the strappy heels, the hard-set hair, the beautiful fur coat” (Stuart, 2020, p. 116). This is Agnes’s way of showing that she is different from the surrounding women, highlighting her nobility and high status. However, this deliberate outward adornment is a direct manifestation of the inferiority complex she harbors due to the influence of class mentality.

Through the portrayals of Shug and Agnes, readers can see the message that Stuart wants to convey through this novel, that in the context of class opposition, people’s values and moral standards are gradually twisting. This novel is not only a profound reflection of the true conditions of Glasgow society at that time but also a warning about how class mentality can lead to interpersonal imbalance and even distort the entire social ecology. Through this novel, Stuart aims to remind readers of the need to address the negative impacts of class concepts to maintain social harmony and stability.

5.2 Inequality in Gender Relations

In *Shuggie Bain*, Douglas Stuart reveals men’s attitude of disdain towards women and how this attitude gradually marginalizes women, trapping them in a state of domination under the oppression of their partners or authority. The oppression of women by men not only impacts their tragic fates but also shows a distorted social ecology on the macro level.

In this novel, female characters are often portrayed as mere appendages to men, their existence seemingly confined to satisfying male physical desires and vanity. This unequal relationship is particularly evident between Shug and Agnes. Shug failed to treat Agnes with respect due to a partner, instead displaying impatience and disregard towards her. When Agnes called him for comfort due to a lack of security, Shug often chose to hang up the phone or ignored her altogether. In Shug’s eyes, Agnes’s role was limited to fulfilling his sexual needs and serving as an outlet for his emotional venting. He wielded absolute control over her without bearing any moral or emotional responsibility.

Meanwhile, influenced by the patriarchal system, women often lack awareness of resistance to their marginalized status. Agnes, deeply influenced by patriarchy, blindly admired her lazy and lustful husband Shug, obeying his every word. Even when subjected to Shug’s unwarranted violence and abuse, she only blamed herself and begged for his forgiveness. This acquiescent attitude undoubtedly exposed her powerlessness and subjugated status within the patriarchal system. Another female character in the novel, Bridie Donnelly, similarly

illustrates the plight of women under patriarchy. In the face of her husband’s repeated infidelities, Bridie habitually reflected on herself or blamed other women for tempting him. When her husband expressed dissatisfaction and anger towards her, she dared not confront him directly but silently endured it all. This passive response reflects her domination by male values, lack of self-awareness and rebellious spirit, and inability to effectively safeguard her rights and dignity.

Stuart attempts to urge readers to pay attention to the negative impact of patriarchy on gender relations and how it undermines social harmony and stability and reminds them to start looking for solutions to these problems, gradually building a more equal and harmonious society.

6. Alienated Spiritual Ecology

At the heart of scholar Lu’s ecological thinking lies the spiritual ecology, which is the bridge between natural ecology and social ecology. He goes deep into the spiritual dimension to analyze the causes of the ecological crisis and argues that to lift the ecological crisis people must return to the spiritual roots for interpretation and research (Lu, 2020). In *Shuggie Bain*, the heroine Agnes gradually loses herself under the oppression of a patriarchal society, her mental world becoming fragile. By portraying Agnes’s lack of self-awareness and twisted mental state, Douglas Stuart aims to draw attention to the crisis of mental ecology.

6.1 Loss of Self-Awareness

The rapid development of industrialization has brought profound changes to social structures and economic forms. In this transformation, men often have easier access to job opportunities and career development, while women are more often confined to the framework of traditional gender roles. This trend not only reinforces patriarchy but also further marginalizes women’s social status. Against such a backdrop, women not only face restrictions in their professions and economy but also suffer immense emotional and mental distress. The oppression of patriarchy leaves them feeling lost and unsettled, unable to find true self-identity. Although Glasgow began its de-industrialization process in the 1980s, the deep impact of the industrial boom on women’s spiritual ecology remains ingrained and difficult to change fundamentally in a short time. This impact is vividly demonstrated in the character of Agnes in *Shuggie Bain*.

Agnes placed her sense of belonging and security solely on her male partner, mistakenly seeing love as the sole focus of life. Her existence revolved entirely around her partner, lacking independent space and freedom. When her husband Shug went out to work, Agnes constantly called to track his whereabouts, trying to alleviate her inner anxiety. When Shug became violent or decided to leave her due to the unbearable home environment, she meekly begged him to stay. Later in the

novel, Agnes spends a warm and happy period with her new partner Eugene. For him, she even resolved to quit drinking, a habit she had indulged in for years, demonstrating her sincerity and commitment to the relationship. However, when she started drinking again and was abandoned by Eugene, Agnes's psychological defenses completely collapsed, plunging her into despair. This experience dealt a crushing blow to Agnes, leaving her once again feeling abandoned and helpless. Poor Agnes has never been able to find her true self. She has always been in a state of passive acceptance, unable to change her passivity and obedience to love.

Through depicting Agnes's lack of self-awareness, Stuart profoundly reflects on the mental predicaments of modern humanity. He attempts to reveal through this character how women gradually lose themselves and fall into mental difficulties under the dual oppression of industrialization and patriarchy. By portraying Agnes's experience, Stuart not only provides readers with a unique perspective to understand the mental ecological issues of modern society but also offers valuable insights for the further development of spiritual ecology.

6.2 Twisted Mental Landscapes

Amidst the rapid development of industrial civilization, a profound spiritual crisis has emerged. With his keen insight and delicate brushstrokes, Douglas Stuart reveals the distorted mental landscape of Agnes, specifically manifesting in her misconceptions about sexual relationships and suicidal tendencies.

Agnes's understanding of sexual relationships was deeply flawed. She mistakenly viewed sex as the sole bond maintaining love, believing that only through sexual acts can she retain her lover. Whenever Shug became angry or distant, she resorted to sexual behavior to please him and seek his reconciliation. This excessive reliance on and misinterpretation of sex not only exposed the superficial nature of Agnes's understanding of love but also highlighted the deep-seated insecurity and emptiness within her. Worse still, Agnes repeatedly exhibited suicidal tendencies in the face of life's hardships and mental oppression. She attempted to escape the agony of her inner world through extreme acts. Whether it was jumping from a building due to a hostile living environment, igniting curtains after excessive drinking to destroy everything, or choosing to end her life after being abandoned by Shug and Eugene, these suicidal episodes profoundly demonstrated the distortion and despair of Agnes's mental world. Her absurd behavior is not just an individual tragedy but a microcosm of the spiritual plight of humanity under industrial civilization. Against a backdrop of imbalance between humans and nature and the preponderance of material pursuits over spiritual ones, people's inner worlds gradually distort, often choosing loneliness and despair in the face of spiritual difficulties.

Through portraying Agnes's mental landscape, Stuart conveys a profound message, that humans must not only focus on protecting nature but also maintaining and nurturing the balance and development of their mental worlds. Only then can humans find their true selves in the dual pursuit of material and spiritual fulfillment, avoiding the crisis of spiritual ecology.

7. CONCLUSION

Shuggie Bain is a masterpiece profoundly reflecting the social reality of Glasgow in the 1980s. In this work, Stuart, with his keen insight, accurately captures the imbalance of natural ecology, the distortion of social ecology, and the alienation of spiritual ecology in Glasgow. Through vivid ecological writing, he showcases the tension between man and nature, man and society, and man and himself. Moreover, he calls for people to return to nature and pursue harmonious unity with nature, society, and the heart.

In summary, interpreting *Shuggie Bain* through the theory of ecological criticism not only enables readers to deeply understand the essence of the novel, but also helps them further explore Stuart's ecological ideas, and fills the current research gap in this work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest exists in the submission of this manuscript. I confirm that the manuscript is original and has not been published before nor submitted to another journal for the consideration of publication.

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