

Semantic Evolution And Functional Reconfiguration Of Natural Imagery In The Literary Works Of Thomas Hardy And Khurshid Dustmuhammad

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Annotation. This article examines the semantic evolution and functional reconfiguration of natural imagery in the prose of Thomas Hardy and Khurshid Dustmuhammad from a comparative-literary perspective. Rather than treating nature as a static background, the study approaches natural images as mobile semantic units whose functions change according to narrative position, character psychology, cultural code, and the ethical structure of the text. The analysis focuses on Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders*, and on Dustmuhammad's *Bozor*, *Jajman*, *Nigoh*, *So'roq* and *Chayongul*. Comparative-typological, semantic-semiotic, hermeneutic, narratological and ecocritical methods are combined to identify recurrent transformations of landscape, season, animal imagery, weather, soil, vegetation and spatial motifs. The novelty of the study lies in tracing not merely the presence or symbolism of nature but the process by which a natural image changes function across the narrative system.

Keywords: natural imagery, semantic evolution, functional reconfiguration, Thomas Hardy, Khurshid Dustmuhammad, comparative literature, semiotics, ecocriticism, narratology, landscape, symbolism.

Introduction

The representation of nature has long occupied a central position in literary studies because landscape, weather, vegetation, animals and material environments often perform functions far beyond description. In realistic prose, a natural image may begin as an element of setting and later acquire psychological, symbolic, narrative or ideological significance. Such mobility is especially visible in writers whose fictional worlds are closely structured around locality and environment. Thomas Hardy and Khurshid Dustmuhammad belong to different literary traditions, historical periods and cultural contexts, yet both repeatedly construct meaning through the transformation of environmental signs. Their texts invite a comparative investigation not only of what nature represents, but also of how its representational function changes during narration.

Hardy's Wessex novels have frequently been described as works in which place is inseparable from character and destiny. Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, the agricultural cycles of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the dairy and field spaces of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and the woodland economy of *The Woodlanders* demonstrate that the environment is not an inert frame. It shapes rhythm, perception, social relations and the horizon of possible action. Critical scholarship has therefore moved from reading Hardy's landscapes as picturesque background toward interpreting them as symbolic, ecological and ontological structures. Barrell's study of the geographies of Wessex, for instance, emphasizes the different ways characters know and inhabit space, while later research has highlighted the interaction between realism, landscape and metaphysical uncertainty [1, pp. 347–361; 12]

Dustmuhammad's prose develops a different but comparably dynamic environmental poetics. In works such as *Bozor*, *Jajman*, *Nigoh*, *So'roq* and *Chayongul*, natural and quasi-natural images are often compressed into signs that expose ethical tensions, social deformation and unstable states of consciousness. The environment may appear less as an expansive landscape than as a dense symbolic field. Zoomorphic motifs, plant imagery, sensory details and spatial contrasts acquire interpretive weight through repetition and displacement. In this respect, Dustmuhammad's poetics often reconfigures the natural image by transferring it from external description into the moral and psychological structure of the narrative.

The relevance of the present study is determined by the need to distinguish between three related but non-identical categories: natural image, semantic function and functional transformation. A natural image is any textual representation derived from landscape, flora, fauna, weather, seasons, physical geography or environmental materiality. Its semantic function is the role it performs in generating meaning within a specific textual context. Functional transformation occurs when that role changes: for example, when a tree first marks location, later mirrors a character's inner state, and eventually becomes a symbol of historical continuity or loss. This process-oriented perspective allows the analysis to move beyond inventories of symbols and toward the dynamics of literary meaning.

The aim of the article is to identify the principal patterns through which natural imagery evolves semantically and is functionally reconfigured in selected works by Hardy and Dustmuhammad. The objectives are: (1) to classify the initial descriptive functions of natural images; (2) to trace their transition into psychological, narrative, symbolic and ethical functions; (3) to compare the cultural logic of these transformations; and (4) to determine the dominant semantic trajectory in each author's prose. The hypothesis is that both writers use repeated natural images as flexible semantic mechanisms, but Hardy usually expands them through spatial and temporal continuity whereas Dustmuhammad frequently intensifies them through symbolic condensation and parabolic reinterpretation.

The study of nature in literature has developed through several methodological traditions. Classical approaches to landscape often treated description as a component of setting, atmosphere or authorial style. Structuralist and semiotic approaches later emphasized that images become meaningful through recurrence, opposition and relation to other signs. Lotman's concept of artistic space is particularly useful here because spatial organization in a literary text can encode value distinctions rather than merely imitate geography. A boundary between field and town, heath and house, market and private space, or cultivated and uncultivated land may thus become a semantic opposition that structures character and conflict [9]

Ecocriticism widened this interpretive field by questioning the assumption that non-human environments exist only to reflect human concerns. Buell argues that environmentally oriented texts often present the non-human world as a presence whose significance exceeds metaphorical service to human drama [2]. Garrard similarly stresses the cultural construction of categories such as wilderness, pastoral and dwelling [4]. These perspectives are productive for Hardy because his landscapes repeatedly resist complete subordination to character psychology. Egdon Heath, for example, possesses a duration and materiality that exceed individual plots. Yet a purely ecocritical reading is insufficient for the present comparison, since Dustmuhammad's natural imagery frequently works through symbolic and grotesque compression rather than extensive environmental description.

Narratology provides a second important framework. Description may slow narrative time, create expectation, foreshadow events or reorganize focalization. In Hardy, weather and seasonal change often regulate narrative rhythm: harvest, winter, darkness, rain and storm become temporal operators. Natural images therefore participate in plot architecture. In Dustmuhammad, a concentrated image can interrupt realistic continuity and produce a shift toward parable, psychological estrangement or ethical judgment. The same category of image thus may perform different narratological work depending on whether it expands the fictional world or condenses it into a sign.

The concept of semantic evolution used in this article refers not to historical language change but to intratextual development. It describes the gradual modification of an image's meaning as it recurs under different narrative conditions. Functional reconfiguration refers to a more structural shift: the image is repositioned within the system of the text so that it performs a new task. These processes may occur through repetition, contrast, metaphorization, personification, change of focalization, symbolic accumulation or interaction with plot events. The distinction is analytical: semantic evolution concerns what the image comes to mean, while functional reconfiguration concerns what the image comes to do.

Hardy criticism offers a strong basis for this approach. Studies of his imagery have repeatedly shown that setting and symbol contribute to characterization and philosophical effect. His classification of major novels as works of 'character and environment' has encouraged criticism that treats the environment as structurally active. Research on Wessex geographies demonstrates that landscape is perceived differently by narrators and characters, while work on Hardy's realism has shown how darkness, weather and exposed ground can

destabilize ordinary spatial orientation [1; 12]. Such findings support an interpretation of natural images as changing functional units rather than decorative constants.

Recent comparative scholarship on Hardy and Dustmuhammad has examined nature–society relations, national distinctiveness, landscape symbolism and ecological or ethical dimensions. These studies establish the productivity of the comparison but also reveal a methodological space for a more precise inquiry into transformation. The present article therefore does not ask only whether nature symbolizes fate, society or morality. It asks how an image moves from one semantic function to another, what textual mechanisms enable the movement, and whether the two authors demonstrate different dominant patterns of reconfiguration. [10; 11]

The primary material consists of selected prose works by Thomas Hardy and Khurshid Dustmuhammad. The Hardy corpus includes *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders*. These works were chosen because they present different environmental formations—heath, field, dairy landscape, woodland—and therefore permit observation of how natural imagery functions across distinct narrative systems. The Dustmuhammad corpus includes *Bozor*, *Jajman*, *Nigoh*, *So'roq* and *Chayongul*, works in which environmental, zoomorphic, vegetal and spatial images repeatedly interact with psychological and socio-ethical meanings. [5–8; 13–17]

Five complementary methods are used. First, comparative-typological analysis identifies functional correspondences without assuming direct influence. Second, semantic-semiotic analysis traces how repeated signs acquire additional meanings through opposition and recurrence. Third, close reading examines the local narrative context of image transformation. Fourth, narratological analysis considers focalization, temporal organization, descriptive pause and foreshadowing. Fifth, an ecocritical perspective distinguishes cases in which the environment possesses relative autonomy from those in which it is primarily absorbed into anthropocentric symbolism.

For analytical purposes, natural images are grouped into six functional categories: descriptive-spatial, psychological-reflective, temporal-rhythmic, narrative-prognostic, symbolic-ethical and ontological-ecological. These categories are not mutually exclusive. The same image may move between them. The key unit of analysis is therefore not the isolated image but the trajectory of its transformation. Three stages are distinguished: initial positioning, semantic accumulation and functional reconfiguration. This three-stage model is applied comparatively to representative examples from both authors.

1. From landscape description to autonomous spatial force in Hardy. In *The Return of the Native*, Egdon Heath represents one of the clearest examples of functional reconfiguration. At the beginning, the heath can be read as a geographical location that situates action. Yet Hardy's sustained attention to its antiquity, darkness, seasonal appearance and resistance to human alteration gradually transforms it into a temporal and ontological structure. The heath does not merely contain the characters; it relativizes them. Human plans appear brief against a landscape associated with deep duration. This is a semantic shift from location to scale: the environment becomes a measure by which the transience of desire is perceived. [6]

The next stage is narratological. Egdon organizes movement, visibility and encounter. Paths, distances, darkness and weather influence who meets whom and under what conditions. Thus, the heath becomes functionally integrated into plot production. It is neither a mystical agent nor a passive setting; rather, its material features create a field of probability. The distinction is important because Hardy's environmental force often emerges from the interaction between physical conditions and human interpretation. Characters project desire onto the heath, but the heath also imposes practical limits upon them.

A similar process is visible in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Agricultural environments initially establish social and economic context, yet they subsequently become instruments of bodily and psychological meaning. Talbothays is associated with fertility, sensory abundance and temporary emotional openness; Flintcomb-Ash is characterized by exposure, mechanical labour and severity. The semantic contrast between these spaces is not reducible to 'good nature' and 'bad nature.' Rather, Hardy reconfigures landscape through labour conditions, climate and social vulnerability. Nature is experienced differently because the body occupies a different economic position. The natural image therefore evolves from pastoral description into a critique of the relation between environment, technology and human precarity. [8]

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, seasonal and meteorological images demonstrate another trajectory. Rural nature is first connected to agricultural routine, but storm, rain, harvest and animal behaviour acquire predictive and structural functions. The storm episode is especially significant because weather becomes a test of knowledge, responsibility and attention. Gabriel Oak's practical reading of environmental signs contrasts with characters who misread or ignore them. Natural imagery thus functions epistemologically: the capacity to interpret nature becomes a marker of practical intelligence and ethical reliability. The image no longer simply creates atmosphere; it differentiates modes of knowledge. [5]

The Woodlanders extends this tendency by making trees and woodland labour central to social identity. Vegetation is economically managed, physically inhabited and symbolically associated with continuity, entanglement and vulnerability. The semantic value of trees evolves through the tension between organic cycles and human social arrangements. Hardy's environmental images repeatedly reveal that what appears stable is subject to cutting, decay, seasonal transition and economic use. In this sense, nature does not symbolize permanence in a simple way; it reveals a different temporality in which continuity includes destruction and renewal. [7]

2. From environmental detail to symbolic condensation in *Dustmuhammad*. *Dustmuhammad*'s prose often begins from a different representational economy. Natural images may be less panoramically extended than Hardy's landscapes, yet their semantic density is high. In *Bozor*, the dominant environment is social and commercial, but organic, bodily and animal associations repeatedly destabilize the supposedly rational order of exchange. The market can be interpreted as an artificial ecosystem governed by appetite, circulation and competition. Natural imagery enters this space not to romanticize an outside world but to expose the instinctual and ethical dimensions of social behaviour. [13]

This transformation is important because the natural sign is displaced from nature itself. Instead of describing a field, forest or heath in extensive realist detail, *Dustmuhammad* often transfers qualities associated with the natural world into human interaction. The result is functional reconfiguration through metaphorization and grotesque analogy. A zoomorphic detail can move from characterization to social diagnosis: what first appears to describe an individual habit or appearance can gradually imply a wider deformation of values. The natural image becomes an ethical semiotic device.

Jajman provides a particularly strong example of semantic intensification. The grotesque or zoomorphic image does not remain an external curiosity. Through repetition and narrative emphasis, it becomes a model for uncontrolled appetite and invasive desire. Its semantic trajectory therefore moves from creaturely strangeness to moral allegory. Yet the image is not exhausted by a single equivalence such as 'animal equals greed.' The grotesque power of the image lies in its instability: it crosses boundaries between human and non-human, ordinary and monstrous, realistic and parabolic. Functional reconfiguration occurs precisely because the image disrupts categorical certainty. [14]

In *Nigoh* and *So'roq*, environmental and sensory details frequently participate in focalization. A small natural sign—a shadow, a sound, a bodily reaction, a fragment of surrounding space—may become the trigger for introspection or moral unease. The image evolves through proximity to consciousness. Unlike Hardy's expansive spatial method, in which the environment often outlasts the character, *Dustmuhammad* frequently compresses the environment into a psychologically charged sign. The movement is centrifugal in Hardy, extending the character into a wider spatial system, but often centripetal in *Dustmuhammad*, drawing external signs inward toward ethical and psychological interpretation. [15; 16]

Chayongul illustrates another form of semantic reconfiguration through the tension between beauty and danger encoded in naming and imagery. Floral imagery conventionally invites associations with delicacy, growth or beauty, but the semantic field can be unsettled by conflicting connotations. Such hybridization enables *Dustmuhammad* to question stable value categories. Natural imagery becomes a mechanism for representing ambivalence: attraction and threat, vitality and toxicity, surface and hidden meaning. This differs from straightforward symbolism because the function of the image lies in sustaining contradiction rather than resolving it. [17]

3. Psychological reconfiguration: nature as mirror and counterforce. Both authors use nature in relation to psychology, but their strategies differ. The traditional critical formula of 'nature reflecting mood' is too simple for Hardy. His environments sometimes correspond to emotional states, but they also contradict them. A

beautiful landscape may contain suffering; hostile weather may reveal competence rather than despair. This mismatch prevents the reduction of nature to pathetic fallacy. The environment can function as a counterforce that exposes the limits of subjective perception.

In Dustmuhammad, psychological function often emerges through semiotic concentration. External detail is filtered through heightened perception, suspicion, memory or moral discomfort. The natural image becomes significant because consciousness selects and intensifies it. Functional reconfiguration is therefore closely tied to focalization. A neutral object or sensory impression becomes a sign when the character or narrator interprets it through a disturbed ethical field. This process resembles semantic activation: meaning is not contained in the object alone but produced by its position within a consciousness under pressure.

The comparative distinction can be formulated as follows. Hardy frequently dramatizes the tension between human subjectivity and an environment that exceeds it; Dustmuhammad frequently dramatizes the tension between social reality and a consciousness that decodes it through compressed natural signs. In Hardy, psychological meaning is often corrected or relativized by material environment. In Dustmuhammad, environmental meaning is often intensified by psychological and ethical perception. The direction of semantic movement is therefore different even when the final effect—deepened characterization—is comparable.

4. Temporal-rhythmic transformation. One of the most significant functions of natural imagery is the organization of time. Hardy's rural fiction depends upon seasonal rhythms that structure labour, travel, social gathering and vulnerability. Seasons do not merely indicate chronology. They establish a temporal order against which individual decisions become visible. Harvest must occur at a particular time; weather can close or open possibilities; darkness changes mobility; winter alters bodily endurance. Natural temporality thus becomes narrative temporality.

As these images recur, their semantic function evolves. A season may first provide orientation, later intensify conflict, and finally become a measure of irreversible change. This is especially evident in narratives where characters move between environments. Tess's movement through different rural spaces is also a movement through different regimes of time, labour and social possibility. The environment stores narrative memory: returning to a season or landscape does not restore the earlier state because the image has accumulated prior meanings.

Dustmuhammad's prose often produces temporal effect through repetition rather than seasonal expansion. A recurring animal, plant or spatial motif accumulates associations each time it appears. This gives the image a mnemonic function. Repetition creates semantic layering, and later occurrences reactivate earlier contexts. The resulting temporality is recursive: the present moment is interpreted through previous appearances of the sign. Such a mechanism is especially effective in psychologically and symbolically organized prose because it allows a small image to carry a disproportionate amount of narrative memory.

5. Narrative-prognostic function and foreshadowing. Natural images frequently become anticipatory signs. In Hardy, weather, animal behaviour, darkness and changes in landscape may prepare the reader for crisis. However, these signs should not be interpreted as supernatural prophecy. Their prognostic force often arises from practical causality or from the reader's recognition of patterned imagery. A storm threatens a harvest because of material conditions; darkness increases uncertainty because it limits vision. The symbolic effect is grounded in realism.

Dustmuhammad's anticipatory signs are often more semiotically charged. Grotesque or disturbing natural motifs may appear before their full ethical significance becomes clear. The reader first registers strangeness and only later understands its relation to social or psychological conflict. Here semantic evolution depends upon delayed interpretation. The image is planted as an unresolved sign and retrospectively reconfigured after later narrative information. This technique gives natural imagery a hermeneutic function: it organizes the reader's process of interpretation.

6. Ethical and axiological transformation. Although the present study deliberately distinguishes itself from a purely axiological analysis, value formation remains one stage of semantic evolution. In Hardy, natural environments do not consistently endorse a simple moral code. They can expose hypocrisy, reveal vulnerability, reward knowledge in practical terms, or remain indifferent to human suffering. The ethical force often emerges from the contrast between natural processes and rigid social judgment. Tess, for example, may be represented as closely connected with natural vitality while society imposes moral categories that generate

exclusion. The natural image therefore acquires ethical force by destabilizing institutional judgment rather than by providing a fixed alternative morality. [8]

Dustmuhammad more frequently turns natural and grotesque images into direct instruments of ethical diagnosis. Appetite, predation, growth, decay and bodily instinct become semiotic resources for representing social behaviour. Yet his strongest images avoid didactic simplicity because they preserve ambivalence. The symbolic transformation is effective when a sign remains aesthetically open while still directing attention toward moral imbalance. Functional reconfiguration thus converts a sensory image into an ethical question rather than merely an ethical answer.

7. Ontological and ecological dimensions. Hardy's natural world often carries an ontological weight because it suggests forms of duration and existence that do not depend on human centrality. Egdon Heath is the most obvious case, but similar effects occur in recurrent attention to earth, weather, animals and seasonal cycles. Ecocritical interpretation becomes possible when the environment is recognized as more than a mirror for human meaning. The semantic evolution of an image may therefore culminate in partial autonomy: it remains relevant to human narrative while also resisting complete anthropocentric absorption. [6]

Dustmuhammad's natural imagery is generally more deeply embedded in human ethical and social interpretation, yet this does not eliminate ecological significance. The transformation of human behaviour into animalistic or organic imagery can reveal the instability of the human/non-human boundary. It may also question the idea of civilized rationality by showing the persistence of appetite, instinct and material dependence. His ecological dimension is therefore often indirect and philosophical: it emerges from the critique of human self-exception rather than from sustained representation of non-human environments.

8. Comparative model of semantic trajectories. The analysis permits the identification of two dominant trajectories. Hardy's typical trajectory may be represented as: descriptive environment → temporal/spatial structuring → psychological or epistemological testing → narrative causality → ontological or ethical enlargement. Dustmuhammad's typical trajectory may be represented as: concrete sensory or natural sign → metaphorical displacement → psychological concentration → grotesque or symbolic intensification → ethical/social diagnosis. These are not rigid formulas, but they clarify different tendencies in the organization of imagery.

The difference also concerns scale. Hardy often works through environmental extension. Meaning grows because an image is embedded in a broad spatial and temporal system. Dustmuhammad often works through semiotic compression. Meaning grows because a small image is repeated, displaced or made ambiguous. In Hardy, the reader is frequently asked to inhabit an environment; in Dustmuhammad, the reader is frequently asked to decode a sign. Both strategies demonstrate semantic evolution, but they produce different reading experiences.

9. Cultural specificity and comparative significance. The contrast between the two authors should not be reduced to a binary opposition between English realism and Uzbek symbolism. Hardy is highly symbolic, and Dustmuhammad is capable of concrete social realism. The more productive distinction concerns the dominant route by which environmental meaning is organized. Hardy's rural Wessex is tied to late nineteenth-century transformations in agriculture, mobility, technology, class and gender. Dustmuhammad writes within a modern Uzbek context marked by rapid social change, moral uncertainty, urbanization and the tension between inherited values and new forms of social behaviour. Natural imagery responds to these different historical pressures.

This cultural specificity explains why formally similar images can perform different functions. An animal image in Hardy may participate in agricultural realism, practical knowledge or vulnerability; in Dustmuhammad it may become a grotesque social sign. A plant image in Hardy may belong to seasonal ecology and labour; in Dustmuhammad it may be condensed into a paradoxical symbolic name. Comparative analysis is therefore most effective when it identifies functional equivalence without erasing contextual difference.

10. Scientific novelty of the functional approach. Previous discussions of these writers have productively emphasized landscape, nature–society relations, symbolism and national distinctiveness. The contribution of the present study is to shift the unit of comparison from theme to transformation. Nature is not treated as a stable theme that both writers 'use'; instead, each natural image is examined as a dynamic element capable of

changing semantic status. This allows the analysis to explain why the same image can be descriptive in one passage, psychological in another and narratively decisive later. It also clarifies how repetition creates semantic memory within a text.

The functional perspective has broader methodological value. It can be applied to comparative studies of writers from different traditions because it does not require identical symbols or direct influence. What is compared is the process of meaning formation. Such a model is especially useful for literary linguistics, stylistics and comparative poetics, where the interaction between lexical image, narrative structure and cultural interpretation is central.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that natural imagery in the works of Thomas Hardy and Khurshid Dustmuhammad is characterized by semantic mobility and functional multiplicity. In both authors, nature cannot be adequately described as background, decoration or a fixed symbolic code. Natural images evolve as the narrative progresses, accumulate associations and move between descriptive, psychological, temporal, prognostic, ethical and ontological functions.

Hardy's dominant pattern is environmental expansion. Landscapes such as Egdon Heath, agricultural fields and woodlands begin as spatial environments but gradually become systems that organize time, perception, labour, causality and ethical judgment. His natural imagery often preserves a degree of autonomy from human consciousness, thereby relativizing individual desire and exposing the limits of anthropocentric interpretation. Weather, season and landscape can test knowledge, structure action and establish forms of duration that exceed the human plot.

Dustmuhammad's dominant pattern is semiotic intensification. Natural, zoomorphic and vegetal images are frequently condensed, displaced and repeated until they become psychological, grotesque or ethical signs. Rather than expanding into an autonomous environment, they often move inward toward consciousness or outward toward social diagnosis. Their power lies in ambiguity and transformation: a sensory image may become a moral question, a creaturely sign may become a model of social appetite, and a floral or bodily association may expose contradictions between appearance and value.

The principal comparative finding is therefore not that one writer uses nature realistically and the other symbolically, but that their texts tend to organize semantic evolution through different mechanisms. Hardy predominantly develops meaning through spatial-temporal continuity and environmental causality; Dustmuhammad predominantly develops meaning through metaphorical displacement, symbolic compression and ethical focalization. These mechanisms reflect different literary traditions and historical contexts while revealing a shared understanding of imagery as an active generator of narrative meaning.

The three-stage model proposed in this article—initial positioning, semantic accumulation and functional reconfiguration—offers a productive framework for further research. Future studies may apply it to a larger corpus, examine specific image groups such as animals, plants or weather, or integrate corpus-stylistic methods to measure lexical recurrence and collocational change. Such work would deepen the linguistic dimension of comparative literary analysis and provide a more precise account of how images acquire, transform and redistribute meaning within narrative structures.

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