

Storytelling for Climate Action: Fariba Nawa's Opium Nation, Women's Life Writing, and Circular Economy Pathways in the Global South

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ABSTRACT:

The present study examines, *Opium Nation* (2011) authored by Fariba Nawa, as the life-writing narrative that illuminates the environmental and socio-economic challenges of Global South, particularly Afghanistan using a narrative analysis approach, with an eco-critical lens. The memoir provides qualitative testimony that lines up with the numerous Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), of United Nations, like SDG 4 and 5 (Quality Education & Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption & Production). It also argues that Nawa's memoir acts as a qualitative evidence that complements sustainability and CE discourses in the Global South.

Nawa documents how the narcotics economy sustains cycles of poverty and exploitation, exemplified in her account of a twelve year old girl, Darya, sold into marriage to repay opium debt incurred by her father. Such narratives highlight how child marriage and coerced labour emerge directly from unsustainable economic dependence on opium, obstructing educational opportunities and perpetuating gender inequality. Furthermore, Nawa describes how poppy cultivation depletes soil fertility and erodes land security, foregrounding the ecological consequences of monocropping and the urgency of transitioning toward more sustainable agricultural practices. Nawa's account points to the potential of education and vocational training as interventions that may interrupt the destructive cycles of the opium trade by enabling alternative livelihoods such as handicrafts, sustainable agriculture, and community-based entrepreneurship. In this way, *Opium Nation* indirectly participates in conversations about circular economic principles that emphasise regenerating resources, reducing waste, and creating value through local, low-carbon initiatives.

Women's autobiographical writing, therefore, is not only cultural documentation but also a form of qualitative evidence with implications for development policy. By aligning Nawa's narrative with sustainability discourses, the study highlights the role of storytelling in shaping policy agendas around education, gender equality, and sustainable economies in contexts of conflict and poverty. Such accounts remind us that storytelling complements statistical or scientific data by offering insight into lived realities. As ecocritical scholars argue, sustainable transitions require not only technological innovation but also narrative practices that render policy impacts visible and urgent to wider communities.

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Introduction

Afghanistan's fertile landscapes, supported a diverse agricultural economy, with rich soil and irrigated valleys enabling varied crop cultivation once, in the annals of history from long back. But, long years of war and explosion of opium monocultures resulted in severe degradation of the environment, with reduced biodiversity, depleted soil fertility, and stressed water resources [1].

Opium cultivation emerged as the prime economic activity, replacing traditional crops and entrenching cycles of poverty and exploitation [2,3]. Fariba Nawa's *Opium Nation* [4] presents a vivid picture of Afghanistan's transformation from a historically fertile land to a dry, infertile land. The environmental impact of poppy cultivation as well as its social consequences, particularly for women, is documented elaborately in this memoir.

For example, Nawa recounts the story of Darya, a twelve-year-old girl sold into marriage to repay her father's opium debt [4]. Stories like that of the Opium Bride, Darya, exemplify how unsustainable economic dependence on narcotics intersects with gender inequality, child marriage, and lack of education, reinforcing socio-ecological vulnerability in historically fertile regions [5]. This paper situates Nawa's narrative within ICCAS Track 8, emphasising education, policy, circular economy, and public engagement. Storytelling, as demonstrated in *Opium Nation*, serves as a form of humanities-based evidence that complements scientific and statistical data for sustainable development interventions [6,7]. The study is undertaken in six sections. Followed by the introduction, it highlights CE pathways with GS contexts focussing on Afghanistan. Climate Change and CE connections are witnessed through narrative examples from *Opium Nation*. Then it explores Afghanistan's agricultural transformation through history. An analysis of women's life writing as qualitative policy evidence using narrative analysis comes next. Towards the end storytelling as sustainability education, policy-relevant insights,

public engagement and scope for climate action and CE policy in sensitive contexts are discussed.

Circular Economy Pathways In The Global South

Circular economy (CE) pathways in the Global South foreground resource efficiency, informal sector innovation, and socio-economic equity as essential dimensions of sustainable development. Recent reviews show that although CE business models are gaining visibility, their diffusion remains constrained by institutional, financial, and infrastructural barriers [8]. In manufacturing, the Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution Program (SMEP) demonstrates how informality, weak stakeholder coordination, and limited waste infrastructure complicate the shift toward circular production in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa [9]. Similar challenges persist in solid waste management, where CE practices remain underdeveloped due to legal gaps, macroeconomic pressures, and operational inefficiencies [10]. Evidence from informal and home-based enterprises further indicates that circular practices often emerge from necessity rather than policy support, making them resourceful yet difficult to scale [11].

Afghanistan illustrates the complexity of embedding CE pathways in fragile contexts. As documented by Nawa [4], many households like that of Parween and Darya, rely heavily on poppy cultivation and related activities to survive amid conflict, weak governance, and limited market access. While opium provides short-term income, it entrenches communities in high-risk, low-diversification economies shaped by coercive actors. Recent bans on cultivation underscore the limits of transition strategies: although alternatives such as saffron, almonds, and pomegranates have been promoted, they require infrastructure, markets, and institutional support that remain underdeveloped. The Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023 [12] confirms that cereals and other crops have replaced many opium fields, yet the income losses for farmers are severe, as no substitute matches the profitability of poppy.

At the community level, Nawa's work highlights localised, CE-aligned practices that embody both environmental and economic sustainability including, saffron cultivation which is a low-carbon, high-value crop that restores soil fertility and offers an alternative to chemical-intensive farming, followed by wheat cultivation and handicrafts, that are livelihood strategies preserving cultural traditions, enhancing food security, and generating sustainable income.

These examples show how environmentally restorative and economically viable interventions can be implemented in low-resource contexts [8,9], like war-ravaged Afghanistan. Such practices also align with global sustainability frameworks, contributing to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Climate Change And Circular Economy

The circular economy (CE) has gained prominence as a strategy to mitigate climate change by promoting resource regeneration, low-waste production, and the retention of material and economic value throughout supply chains [13]. By shifting away from the linear "take–make–dispose" model, CE aligns with global sustainability targets, particularly those related to climate action, responsible consumption, and inclusive economic growth. CE not only reduces greenhouse gas emissions but also builds socio-ecological resilience, becoming a critical beacon of light for climate adaptation and mitigation in vulnerable regions [14].

In Afghanistan, CE principles are seen in community-driven initiatives that tries to break cycles of resource dependency and environmental degradation. Women-led cooperatives, according to Nawa, like Parween, who also does carpet weaving, have been central to this shift, creating livelihood alternatives to opium monoculture through the cultivation of saffron, wheat, and other low-impact crops.

As Nawa [4] documents, these practices not only provide significant increase in income but also help to restore soil fertility and reduce reliance on

chemicals like fertilisers. Similarly, community-based handicraft and cottage industries (Parween weaves carpets, Nawa [4]) contribute to sustainable economies by channelising local resources, reducing waste, and embedding economic activity within cultural traditions. Such initiatives demonstrate how circular practices, contribute to both climate resilience and social stability in post-conflict scenerios. Afghan examples from *Opium Nation* stresses their indirect connection with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), like SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Local livelihood strategies of the Afghans with sustainability frameworks globally, highlight the potential of circular economies to close the gap between climate action and development. In reality transforming such initiatives into actionable policies, requires governmental support, including access to finance, infrastructure, and secure market linkages, which is almost non existent in underdeveloped insensitive states. Without getting promising support from the State, circular practices risk themselves to external shocks. Afghanistan is an in-between evidence between the promise and limitations of applying such circular strategies to climate adaptation in less resource fed, conflict-affected settings. The challenge is in integrating these breakthrough initiatives into broader policy frameworks and ensuring that women, who often drive innovation at the community level, receive institutional recognition and support like NGOs.

Afghanistan's Historical Agricultural Transformation

Before the onset of prolonged conflict, Afghanistan's fertile valleys sustained a diverse agricultural base of orchards, vineyards, wheat, barley, and horticultural products that provided food security, local trade, and ecological resilience [16].

Traditional farming systems were characterised by crop rotation, mixed cultivation, and community-managed irrigation networks that

maintained soil fertility and supported rural livelihoods for centuries [16]. However, decades of political instability, economic collapse, and weak governance progressively eroded these systems, paving the way for a dramatic agricultural shift.

The widespread introduction and expansion of opium poppy cultivation disrupted ecological balance, degraded soils, and displaced traditional crops, leading to biodiversity loss and declining resilience in rural ecosystems [2]. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), poppy emerged not only as a high-yield cash crop but also as a survival strategy under conditions of insecurity and market collapse, embedding households in fragile, high-risk economies [2].

Nawa [4] documents how even historically productive agricultural regions once known for wheat, fruit, and nut cultivation became dominated by opium production, forcing communities into environmentally unsustainable practices and exposing them to coercive networks of traffickers and warlords. This transformation reconfigured Afghanistan's agrarian landscape, replacing centuries-old systems of ecological balance and cultural continuity with monocultures tied to global illicit markets that funded the long lasting tug of war for power.

Women's Life Writing As Qualitative Policy Evidence

Women's autobiographical narratives offer a powerful form of qualitative policy evidence by capturing lived experiences that illuminate socio-economic and ecological dynamics often absent from conventional datasets.

As Mohanty [5] argues, such narratives contest homogenising representations of women in the Global South, instead foregrounding their agency, situated knowledge, and resilience. Fariba Nawa's memoir *Opium Nation* exemplifies this mode of testimony, linking the environmental degradation caused by poppy cultivation to the everyday struggles and adaptive strategies of Afghan women [4].

Through storytelling, Nawa reveals how households negotiate between subsistence imperatives and ecological harm, while also documenting emerging resilience practices. Notably, women-led saffron cooperatives illustrate how localised, circular-economy practices can restore soil fertility, diversify livelihoods, and reduce dependence on illicit economies [4,8].

These life-writing accounts are not merely personal reflections but can inform context-sensitive policy frameworks. By situating women's narratives within global development agendas, they contribute directly to Sustainable Development Goals, particularly education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and sustainable economic growth (SDG 8) [4].

Furthermore, when triangulated with external sources such as UNODC Afghan Opium Surveys [2,3,12], UNDP Human Development Reports [19], UNICEF assessments of gendered vulnerabilities (2019), and World Bank environmental data [1], such testimonies acquire empirical robustness. This triangulation ensures that narrative-based evidence not only complements but also enhances quantitative analyses, bridging the gap between local experience and global policy discourse.

Storytelling As Climate And Sustainability Education

Storytelling is a powerful tool in sustainability education, translating complex climate and policy issues into human-centered experiences. Nawa's *Opium Nation* illustrates this by linking opium-based livelihoods to environmental degradation and social vulnerability.

Darya's story, for example, shows how child marriage and coerced labour emerge from unsustainable economic dependence on poppy cultivation [4]. Such narratives enhance climate literacy and empathy by embedding socio-ecological realities into education and policy frameworks [6,7].

When combined with Circular Economy (CE) principles, storytelling offers a holistic framework for climate action in the Global South. Women-

led saffron cooperatives documented by Nawa exemplify CE practices that regenerate soil, diversify livelihoods, and reduce reliance on illicit economies [4,8].

Narratives like these serve three policy functions: (1) they reveal links between ecological degradation and economic systems, (2) provide qualitative guidance for SDG-aligned interventions, and (3) highlight gender-inclusive sustainability strategies. Integrating narrative evidence with quantitative data ensures that sustainability policies are context-sensitive, socially legitimate, and ecologically informed [6,7].

Policy-Relevant Insights

Life-writing provides actionable knowledge for governance by grounding policy design in lived realities. In *Opium Nation*, Nawa [4] documents how communities experimented with livelihood strategies beyond opium, ranging from saffron and grain farming to artisanal crafts and small-scale trade.

These alternatives, though fragile, reveal pathways toward ecological regeneration and income diversification. Policy frameworks can build on such practices by (1) expanding vocational training that integrates sustainable agriculture, craft production, and entrepreneurship, (2) investing in local circular economy projects, including soil restoration, renewable energy, and waste-to-resource initiatives (3) embedding gender-inclusive economic policies that align with SDGs 4 (Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work), and 12 (Responsible Consumption) [4,8].

Scaling these models requires institutional support, infrastructure development, and market linkages, ensuring that localised innovations can move beyond survival strategies toward systemic resilience.

Public Awareness And Behavioural Change

Narratives also mobilise public engagement by linking ecological outcomes to human experiences. Nawa [4] illustrates how opium became deeply embedded in Afghan daily life,

restructuring household economies, social norms, and community resilience. These accounts expose systemic risks of soil depletion, livelihood precarity, and dependency on illicit markets while highlighting how ordinary families envision alternative futures.

Storytelling complements scientific data by humanising environmental challenges, fostering empathy, and making policy discourse more culturally resonant [6,7]. In contexts of weak state legitimacy, such as Afghanistan, narrative-driven engagement is indispensable for shaping sustainable behaviour and generating grassroots legitimacy for policy interventions.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's agricultural transformation and dependence on opium monocultures illustrate the complex intersections of conflict, livelihood insecurity, and environmental degradation. Fariba Nawa's *Opium Nation* provides a powerful narrative lens to understand these dynamics, showing how ecological fragility, gender inequality, and illicit economies reinforce each other in ways that conventional data alone cannot fully capture [4].

By integrating women's life-writing into sustainability scholarship, this study highlights the value of narrative evidence as both a diagnostic tool and a catalyst for context-sensitive interventions. Circular economy pathways offer an alternative to destructive cycles of dependency by promoting resource regeneration, livelihood diversification, and gender-inclusive participation. Yet, as demonstrated in Afghanistan and across the Global South, scaling such practices requires systemic support with good governance, infrastructure, market access, and financial mechanisms [8,9].

Without these enabling conditions, community-led innovations, though resourceful, remain fragile and localised. Ultimately, combining storytelling with circular economy principles provides a framework for sustainable development that is both human-centered and ecologically informed. Narratives such as Nawa's

not only humanise abstract sustainability goals but also translate them into actionable, culturally resonant strategies that align with the SDGs. Embedding such evidence into education, policy, and public engagement strengthens the legitimacy of interventions while ensuring they

address the lived realities of vulnerable communities. Afghanistan thus serves as a critical case for rethinking how narrative and circularity together can inform climate resilience and sustainable futures in fragile contexts [4,8,12].

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