

ECO-PSYCHOLOGICAL LIBERATION IN YAHYA ASHOUR'S SELECTIVE POETRY

1. Qurrat Ul Ain Najeeb Jamal

Lecturer, Government College Women University Faisalabad

qurratnj@gcwuf.edu.pk

2. Nazneen zahra

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat

nazneen.zahra@uog.edu.pk

3. Dr. Ghulam Asghar

Assistant Professor (Urdu), The Islamia University of Bahawalpur.

asghar.khan@iub.edu.pk

4. Dr. Bushra Siddiqui

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Management and Technology, Lahore

bushra.siddiqui@umt.edu.pk

Abstract

The Palestinian people have a deep affinity for nature, particularly expressed through their affection for olive trees, the sea, and the open sky. To them, these natural elements symbolize a deep connection with the land and their identity. Unfortunately, the ongoing Palestine-Israel conflict has resulted in the destruction of these cherished natural elements; e.g., olive trees are uprooted to clear space for illegal Israeli settlements, the sea is bombed, and the sky is polluted with dust and smoke, making it difficult to breathe both in real and figurative sense. This not only affects the land but also undermines the Palestinians sense of self.

This study examines the eco-psychological components present in the poetry of Yahya Ashour with emphasis on interaction between human psyche and the natural world. The study aims to explore how the poet's engagement with nature acts as a catalyst for psychological liberation, emphasizing the potential for freedom, healing, and catharsis amidst the challenges of living under siege in Gaza. It intends to illustrate the symbolic use of natural elements to form ecological relationships and reveal the psychological depth embedded in Ashour's poems.

Using qualitative methodology, which includes conceptual content analysis of selected poems translated from Arabic to English by Ashour himself, the research aims to examine how Ashour's poetry captures and reflects free-flowing thoughts as a coping mechanism for ongoing trauma. The study will be guided by the theory of Howard Clinebell, proposing that individuals can achieve psychological wholeness by reconnecting with nature, and that individual form ecological identity when they perceive themselves as essential parts of the natural world. Therefore, the study seeks to demonstrate that association with natural elements can enhance self-awareness and form ecological identity, resulting in self-discovery and psychological restoration despite the Palestinian's restricted physical mobility.

Key words: Eco-psychology, psychological liberation, trauma coping, eco-identity, Yahya Ashour, poetry, psychological wholeness, restricted mobility, nature connection.

Yahya Ashour is a twenty-five-year-old touring poet and acclaimed children's author from Gaza. He is committed to demonstrating the core of Palestinian identity through his poetry. His first poetry collection, *You Are a Window, They Are Clouds*, was published in 2018 which offers insight into his personal experience of being a survivor of five wars. In his thought-provoking poetry, Ashour explores the shared consciousness of Palestinians, tackling subjects like yearning, endurance, and the pursuit of freedom. His works also portray a strong bond with nature, frequently providing solace in the face of conflict and hardship. His poems repeatedly mention the Mediterranean Sea and the beaches of Gaza, symbolizing the impact of the natural world in relieving psychological stress and nurturing optimism. For this reason, Yahya Ashour is a compelling voice in Palestinian literature, utilizing his poetic skills to bring attention to the hidden narratives of his homeland. His talent in expressing the human aspects of struggle and the

resolute determination of his people highlights his importance as a poet who advocates for a future characterized by fairness and freedom.

Using ecocriticism, this research paper explores the eco-psychological aspects found in Yahya Ashour's poetry by analyzing how his works address themes of eco-identity, resilience, and the interconnectedness of people with nature in the midst of conflict and injustice in Palestine. Eco-psychology is an emerging field especially in English literature that investigates the interconnectedness of humans with the environment. Though primarily an American field, Glotfelty mentions that there is a possibility for it to become a multi-ethnic movement when linkages are forged between social justice and ecological issues. This is achievable by actively promoting the participation of a wide variety of perspectives (xxv). This study therefore, aims to reveal the deep psychological and ecological meanings present in Ashour's poetry by examining his use of environmental symbols such as the sea, waves, fish, celestial objects, and the beach. Todorov (24) suggests that poetic symbols illuminate poems meaning beyond what is explicitly stated, deriving an additional meaning from the collective understanding of those metaphors from a specific culture. Ashour's use of natural symbols then, not only helps him communicate his intended message clearly and concisely, but also allows for the audience to obtain a better understanding of the atmosphere in his poetry. Hence, this multidisciplinary approach provides an insight into humans' eco-bonding, environmental sustainability, and the therapeutic benefits of interacting with nature. In poetry, especially, eco-psychological topics shed light on how writers portray the link between the human psyche and the natural world, offering a chance to review eco-identity, resilience, trauma, and healing.

In addition, this paper takes a qualitative approach to research, including content analysis of relevant selected poems translated from Arabic to English by Ashour himself. The chosen poems have recurring themes of eco-bonding, rehabilitation, and eco-identity, which can be interpreted in an eco-critical lens. Further, this study is guided by Howard Clinebell's theoretical framework. Clinebell offers the perspective that reconnecting with nature may improve psychological well-being, form ecological identity, and foster a sense of belonging to the natural world, thereby restoring psychological fragmentation and promoting overall mental health. Clinebell emphasizes the therapeutic benefits of engaging in activities in the natural settings which have been linked to reduction of anxiety, depression, and stress, while boosting inner peace. By employing Clinebell's concept, this study aims to explore how Ashour's poetry reflects and reinforces the healing power of nature, particularly in the context of coping with trauma and adversity.

This study will be guided by the following questions:

1. How does Yahya Ashour employ natural elements as symbolic representations of eco-identity and resilience in the midst of conflict and oppression?
2. How does Ashour's poetry rely on eco-psychological themes, such as the interconnectedness between humans and nature, to communicate the idea of liberation and healing?
3. How do memory and nostalgia influence Ashour's portrayal of the Palestinian relationship with nature, and how does this contribute to themes of coping with trauma and psychological restoration?

The field of ecopsychology gained popularity in mid-20th century through the work of Theodore Roszak. Roszak highlighted the inherent connection between the human mind and

nature. In his book, *The Voice of the Earth*, he presents eight eco-psychological principles. Firstly, he argues that the ecological unconscious is the basic tenet of the human mind, serving as a human repository of cosmic evolution in the history of mankind. Furthermore, he stresses the goal of ecopsychology, which is to stimulate an innate sense of environmental connectedness, remedying the detachment between people and the natural world. In addition, he incorporates ideas from ecofeminism to question gender norms and criticize urban-industrial culture. This positions ecopsychology as post-industrial. Ultimately, Roszak also emphasizes the interdependence between global and personal welfare.

Conversely, Scull affirms that ecopsychology investigates the interrelationship between the ecological and psychological crises that arise from our disconnection from the natural world. Ecopsychology seeks to identify the root causes of environmental problems in human psychology and culture. It also explores how our dysfunctional relationship with the natural world contributes to personal and social difficulties. It is moral psychology with the aim of understanding how people can form sustainable and healthy relationships with the natural world (68). Likewise, David Abram points out that in order to form a powerful bond with nature, sensory experiences are important, especially to develop empathy and ecological awareness.

Riggs and Hellyer-Riggs (263-264) further expand the definition by suggesting that ecopsychology is a sustainable approach. They argue that repairing our relationship with the earth will change our needs and developmental desires. They put emphasis on forming a concrete, physical connection with nature in order to galvanize the healing process. They further state that sustainability involves survival for both humans and the planet that meet basic human needs. Biophilia, an intense emotional response to nature and the prospect of losing it, must motivate sustainable practices that can help heal the fracture between humanity and nature, leading to restoration of restful body and peaceful earth.

On the other hand, Metzner asserts that the fundamental ideas of the modern industrialist worldview and the concepts of power that go along with it are challenged by radical ecology, which includes social ecology, ecofeminism, and ecojustice, among other ideas. These ideas form the basis of ecopsychology. He further gives the concept of bioregionalism. Bioregionalism is an eco-psychological practice, which can affect our sense of self and identity. By creating bioregional maps of regions, we can renew our appreciation of the place we inhabit sharing it with natives, immigrants, plants and animals. That is why, places have names and stories, and the name of a place is intertwined to the story of "what took place there." Metzner also delves into green psychology highlighting the nurturing impact of nature in psychological healing and physical wellbeing leading to personal growth and development of ecological identity.

In his contribution to the existing literature, Andy Fisher makes the case that ecopsychologists support a change from the human-centric perspective, which sees nature as nothing more than raw material, to one that acknowledges the intrinsic value of nature and its role in forming human psychology. This involves reimagining nature as a spiritual and sacred space filled with other beings in order to understand the human psyche and moving away from capitalist thinking. Fisher also emphasizes the importance of integrating social and cultural critiques from radical standpoint within both ecological and psychological communities. Critics have argued that deep ecology, which sees the ecological crisis as rooted in cultural and

character flaws, focuses too much on psychological and metaphysical aspects, neglecting social analysis. Ecofeminism, for instance, has criticized deep ecology for this reason. To be truly radical, ecopsychology must engage with critical perspectives within psychology as well as ecology, not limiting itself to one discipline.

Nature as a form of therapy in modern poetry is a recent development that is inspired by the works of Theodore Rozak, giving rise to eco-psychological poetry, which emphasizes the healing power of nature on the human mind.

Ashour's poetry exemplifies this approach, viewing nature as a remedy for psychological struggles. He incorporates various eco-psychological themes into his work, including eco-identity, resilience, trauma, and emancipation by utilizing five symbols such as the sea, waves, fish, celestial objects, and the beach. This analysis examines ten poems by Ashour to showcase how he utilizes symbols of nature to communicate eco-psychological concepts. Additionally, the discussion is centered towards the significant influence of nature in developing both individual and collective identities providing insight into the remarkable strength of the human spirit when confronted with challenges.

1. Sea

In his poetry, Yahya Ashour uses the symbol of sea to examine the relationship of human existence with the environment, survey ecological identity, and accentuate perseverance of Palestinian people. The poem, "A Gray Man from A Gray Land" uses the Mediterranean Sea in Gaza as a backdrop to explore the speaker's emotions of loneliness and yearning. The speaker who identifies himself as a "gray man from a gray land," (Ashour, line 2) finds comfort and a sense of belonging in the vast sea, but is reluctant to completely engage with it. The absence of jasmine, a symbol for "gift from god" in the middle east, (Osman) emphasizes the barrenness of Gaza, while the reference to a lost childhood inspires a longing for innocence and possibilities. The poem illustrates the deep disconnect of the speaker from their surroundings due to "twofold alienation from nature" (Clineball, 11) and the loss of inner wildness. This common estrangement in modern society, contributes to violent attitudes not only towards nature, but also towards others and oneself. According to Clineball, addressing this violence requires a renewed connection with nature, allowing individuals to find healing and sustenance in their natural environment. (11) In this context, the sea serves as a location where individuals can find such healing and reconnection through shelter and contemplation, symbolizing the ability of the Palestinians to endure and overcome challenges.

Similarly, in "With Them, The Sea Wakes Up" Ashour uses the sea as a public space, where individuals get together to participate in commercial and recreational activities. Clineball proclaims that the primary source of economic reality, education, governance, technology, healing, and the existence of sacred and moral values is the natural world (13). Hence, the beach is a lively marketplace in Ashour's poetry, fortified by the plethora of activities between sellers and tourists. There also exists an emotional and physical link between the people at the beach and their environment, exemplified by "tears wrestling the waves" (line 15) that echo the sufferings of its inhabitants. The sea serves as a mirror reflecting the collective experiences and emotions of those who inhabit its shores.

Concurrently, the water is represented as a timeless force, indifferent to the sufferings of humans in "The Sun and I Get Tired." Despite the fatigue of the sun and the speaker, the waves persist in their endless movement, serving as proof of the everlasting force of nature. Here, the

sea symbolizes persistence and perseverance in stark contrast to the fleeting nature of human existence.

In literature, the sea has often represented a junction between chaos and order, life and death, time and eternity, danger and intrigue, dullness and beauty (Ferber, 179). In Ashour's poetry too, the sea serves as a bridge evoking both joy and grief. "Suddenly I Remember My Despair" portrays the sea as a quiet observer of the horrors of war, highlighting the contrast between its massive size and the large scale of destruction inflicted upon the land. In "All It Takes Is Few Tears," the sea functions as a setting where the speaker confronts their own distress, with the movement of the waves reflecting the turbulence of their feelings and the "passing of time" (Ferber, 181). The speaker is painfully aware of their chaotic emotional health and detachment in forming human relationships. Emotional need deprivation in intimate relationships can be exacerbated by ecological deprivation and toxicity. Interconnectedness with the natural world can open individuals to deeper emotional, earth and people bonding (Clineball, 13). Thus, Ashour is trying to connect with the sea so that he can become better at managing his emotions, relationships and mental wellbeing.

Likewise, in "We'll Leave the Sea Alone," Ashour portrays the sea as an eternal observer of the passage of time preserving memories and history. The sea also serves as a reservoir of shared knowledge symbolizing Palestinian's interdependence with it and the environment.

2. Waves

Yahya Ashour uses the symbol of waves in "To Eat Watermelon" to form an eco-identity. Ecotherapy suggests that our self-identity is not only shaped by our early interactions with nature but also by cultural understandings of nature guided by our parents' and society's perceptions (Clineball, 27). When Israel banned public displays of the Palestinian flag in Gaza and the West Bank in 1967, the watermelon, which shares its colors with the Palestinian flag, came to symbolize the Palestinian identity (Syed). Therefore, the title of the poem immediately establishes a link between the speaker and the watermelon which stands for Palestinian people's home and culture. By declining to partake in the consumption of the watermelon, the speaker separates themselves from their Palestinian identity, dissociating from the socio-political circumstances in which they are situated. Interestingly, symbol of olive tree that has become synonymous with Palestinian identity is absent in Ashour's poetry. This is indicative of the speakers desire to transcend cultural boundaries and embrace a more fluid sense of self. Subsequently, the speaker proclaims, "I am a wave/ at the beach/I am no longer what I am" (lines 3-5), adopting an ecological sense of self and mirroring the Palestinian's determination of surviving turbulent waters and adapting to changing circumstances.

Additionally, the imagery of other natural elements in the poem, such as the sun, sky and sea, becomes foundational, influencing the overall wellness and wholeness of identity (Clineball, 27) for the speaker by grounding him in nature. The imagery reinforces spiritual and existential connection between the speaker and the natural world, allowing for the speaker to transcend their cultural identity and merges with nature harmoniously.

3. Fish

The symbol of the fish is employed by Yahya Ashour in many of his poems to illustrate influence of nature in formation of identity, freedom, agency, healing and his personal interdependence with the natural elements present in the environment. In his poem, "Uncovered Boats," he compares himself to a "dead fish," (line 8) emphasizing feelings of stagnation and despair. In literature, fish has symbolized various things, including good luck charm in the middle east, eternal life in Islam and as a reminder of overcoming life's tough currents (Bareket).

In this case however, the fish symbolizes the speaker's detention and absence of agency. Ashour's imagery of the sea highlights its dual nature as a space that can either liberate or restrict individuals, depending on perspective. Correspondingly, in "Gaza Under Siege," the juxtaposition of the world depicted as "fish" and the speaker portrayed as a "jungle" implies a reversal of roles, where the natural world becomes a dangerous place rather than a safe harbour effectively reflecting the harsh realities of living in the "world's largest open-air prison" (Ufheil-Somers). Hence, the fish comes to symbolize vulnerability and danger in this poem.

Furthermore, the speaker expresses a desire for the transformative qualities of the fish such as breathing underwater and moving freely without borders or visas hindering his mobility in "I Wish You Were a Fish." In this poem, the fish symbolizes freedom from man-made restrictions, offering a metaphorical escape from oppression, displacement and conflict. This theme of liberation through nature aligns with eco-psychological principles, which emphasize the healing power of reconnecting with the natural world and finding solace in its patterns and sequences. Moreover, the need for liberation and security is also expressed in "A Universe of Being," where the speaker longs to become a fish, against the expectations of their parents. In this context, the fish signifies a return to a simpler existence, free from societal pressures. This nostalgia for a carefree existence contributes to themes of coping with trauma and seeking psychological restoration.

Clineball also uses the fish metaphor to demonstrate the tendency of humans to disregard their deep-rooted connection to the earth, neglecting a vital aspect of their lives. (27) Ashour's use of the fish as a symbol in his poems, therefore, aligns with Howard Clineball's claim. Ashour deliberately employs the fish symbol to enhance his understanding of this intrinsic bond with nature and to grapple with issues of identity, agency, and emotional well-being within the broader context of ecological interconnectedness.

4. Celestial objects

In light of the ecological and psychological challenges faced by Palestinians amidst the ongoing conflict with Israel, Yahya Ashour's poetry serves as a moving reflection of the complex interplay between the human psyche and the natural world. The poet employs celestial symbols such as the sun, moon and the star within his verses to elucidate how Palestinian's cope with trauma, oppression, and injustice to form sense of self.

"The Sun and I Get Tired", portrays the sun as a paternal figure embodying reality or truth. The poem compares the weariness of both the sun and the speaker. The exhaustion experienced by the speaker is due to his disillusionment from confronting his harsh reality of living in a grim state of imprisonment by his circumstance of being born in Gaza. His plight is similar to the predicament of the prisoners in Plato's allegorical cave from *Republic* (Ferrari, 220) who are trapped and bound inside the cave, facing away from the entrance and oblivious to the true light of the sun. Schmidt and Wheelwright state that nature possesses the power to stimulate not only the creative process but also inspire individuals to seek meaning (202). Howard Clineball adds to this argument by asserting that intentional interaction with the beauty of nature leads to spontaneous creative flow in the right hemisphere of the brain (46). For Ashour, writing poems serves as a coping mechanism and creative therapy to temporarily escape the bleakness of his reality and seek solace in the symbolic representation of the sun's enduring strength.

Likewise, the moon and star serve as symbols for parental, cultural, and the world's expectations in "A Universe of Being." In contrast to "The Sun and I Get Tired," the speaker wishes to escape the external expectations of society by becoming either a sparrow or a fish. His

desire is to be free like a bird and fish, in union with the natural environment, underscores the significance of natural celestial objects capacity to facilitate personal growth through eco-therapy. By establishing a connection with the natural elements, the poet is effectively able to handle traumatic experiences through gaining a broader outlook.

5. Beach

Yahya Ashour uses the symbol of the beach as a powerful tool to shed light on Palestinians' affinity with nature, their self-identity, their psychological emancipation, and also to reveal the psychological depth hidden in his poetry.

In "A Gray Man from A Gray Land," Ashour's concept of the land is reminiscent of Siegfried Sassoon's poem "Dreamers," where Sassoon metaphorically compares the battlefield to "death's grey land," (line 1) symbolizing the draining effect of war on one's sense of home and identity. Just as Sassoon's imagery conveys the bleakness of conflict-ridden places, in a similar vein, Ashour portrays the speaker as a "gray man from a gray land" (line 2), suggesting a feeling of being partially alive due to the impact of war. The colour gray demonstrates the toll of surviving multiple wars on the speaker's psyche, draining life force from the speaker's existence, and leading to his depression, desolation, and half death. Clineball posits that there needs to be a shift in the behavior of individuals from Eco destructive tendencies to conscious, eco-friendly attitudes. This will result in decreased alienation from nature and enhance general well-being (92). Hence, the beach emerges as a liminal space in many of Ashour's poems as a recurring symbol, which the speaker goes back to again and again for introspection in order to grapple with their feelings of loss and possibly attain renewal of self.

Memory and nostalgia play a central role in Ashour's portrayal of the Palestinian relationship with the beach as well. "Realize the Scale of the Catastrophe" portrays the beach as a place where collective memory of trauma and loss experienced by the Palestinians is stored. In stark contrast to "With Them, The Sea Wakes Up," this poem emphasizes the absence of children playing on the beach serving as a heartbreaking reminder of the impact of violence on Palestinian communities.

In "We'll Leave the Sea Alone," the beach is once again transformed into a place of recollection and contemplation, where the clouds in the sky silently observe the passing of time and the tenacity of the land. In this way, Ashour powerfully compels the readers to ponder the role of nature, especially the symbol of beach in Palestinian identity and experience of loss, yearning, suffering and recovery.

In conclusion, Yahya Ashour's poetry serves as a powerful exploration of the relationship between human existence and the natural world amidst the backdrop of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Through the lens of ecopsychology, Ashour uses natural symbols in his poetry to tackle themes like eco-identity, resilience, trauma, and liberation. Throughout his poetry, Ashour demonstrates how nature, particularly the sea, serves as both a sanctuary and a mirror to the collective consciousness of Palestinians. The sea symbolizes many things, including the steadfastness of Palestinians and the enduring spirit of a people faced with unending political conflict. Moreover, Ashour's use of other symbols like waves and fish further emphasizes the interconnectedness between humans and nature, illustrating the longing of the poet for freedom, agency, and a return to a simpler existence. These symbols not only serve as metaphors for the

Palestinian struggle but also evoke a sense of nostalgia and yearning for a lost connection with the natural world. The celestial objects and the imagery of the beach in Ashour's poetry add another layer of depth to his exploration of human emotions and experiences. Through these symbols, Ashour highlights the transformative power of nature in facilitating personal growth, healing, and psychological restoration. Yahya Ashour's poetry transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, offering readers insight into the human condition and the enduring bond between humanity and the natural world.

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