



## LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT: AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO HAIFAA AL-SANOUSI'S *DEPARTURE OF THE SEA*

Abdulhamid Alansary

(Dept., of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Sohag University, Egypt.)

Email: [abdulhamid4alansary@gmail.com](mailto:abdulhamid4alansary@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT



This research paper tries to explain the desire to return to pure nature through the analysis of a work of art ecocritically, namely Haifaa Al-Sanoussi's *Departure of the Sea*. It also attempts to show how the relationship between man and nature, which had been previously harmonized, has changed and became a heartless and cruel one due to technological and industrial developments and changes. *Departure of the Sea* is a short story in which the relationship between man and nature has manifested itself. The method of analysis followed in this research paper depends largely on the analysis of interactions that take place in the story between man and nature. The analysis of the interactions is naturally followed by an analysis of the results of such interactions.

**Keywords:** *Ecocriticism, Grain Mill, Muddy Houses, Sea, Walls.*

### Citation:

**APA** Alansary, A. (2017) Literature and Environment: An Ecocritical Approach to Haifaa Al-Sanoussi's *Departure of the Sea*. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 4(4), 22-28.

**MLA** Alansary, Abdulhamid. "Literature and Environment: An Ecocritical Approach to Haifaa Al-Sanoussi's *Departure of the Sea*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.4, no.4, 2017, pp.22-28.



## INTRODUCION

*Departure of the Sea* is a short story written by a Kuwaiti professor, Haifaa Al-Sanoussi in 2005. The translation of some parts is the researcher's. There has always been a shared and close relationship between nature and literature. This relationship has manifested itself in the works of different poets and other writers in almost all cultures of the world. In recent years, critics became aware of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. This relationship has been analyzed and emphasized by different writers in their literary productions. Therefore, literary critics try to study how the relationship between nature and literature is textualized. The role of the writer is to make it clear how ecosystems have been badly affected by man. Thus, Ecocriticism not only lays emphasis on the harmony between man and nature, but also on the harms and destruction caused to nature for most of which man is responsible in a direct way.

Ecocriticism, which is a US-based critical approach that appeared in the late 1980s, can simply be defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Thus, it takes an earth-centered approach to works of literature.

Ecocriticism is also concerned with studying the relationship between humans and the non-human world. Literary Ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between humans and nature as manifested in literary works. When it is perceived as a holistic approach, Ecocriticism examines the relationship between man and nature as well as the role that nature and the environment play in the humanities in general.

In his response to readers' nominations of the great classics of British writers, Robert Macfarlane points out in his article "Where the Wild Things Are?" that classic books on Nature writing would "have to evince the belief that the fate of humanity and the fate of nature are inseparable" ([www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)).

Ecocriticism maintains that works of art can be examined in a way that sees man as part of nature; s/he is neither master nor slave, but an integral part of an ecosystem. Therefore, one can

contribute to a society's understanding of nature if one remembers to pay attention to nature itself.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The present study is the first to be achieved on *Departure of the Sea* ecocritically. It is concerned mainly with tracing the Ecocritical elements in Haifaa Al-Sanoussi's *Departure of the Sea*. The Ecocritical principles will be taken from the American version of Ecocriticism whose main figure is Cheryl Glotfelty. The purpose of the study is to make clear the Ecocritical elements in *Departure of the Sea*, which define the relationship between man and nature.

Ecocriticism, as Peter Barry points out, is a concept that "first arose in the late 1970s, at meetings of the WLA (*The Western Literature Association*)" (249). The main interest of the WLA, according to Barry, is the literature of the American West. Therefore, American Ecocriticism became an academic movement by the early 1990s; it has its own journal house known as ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment), which started in 1993.

William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978) marks the early interest in Ecocriticism. This essay offered an outline for the new discipline: "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature." (249). According to Branch, the term was first used in literary criticism by Karl Krober, a US ecocritic, but it was Glotfelty who not only revived the term 'ecocriticism' but urged its adoption to refer to the diffuse critical field that had previously been known as 'the study of nature writing' ([www.asle.org](http://www.asle.org)). Glotfelty is the acknowledged USA founder of Ecocriticism. She is also co-editor with Harold Fromm of a key collection of helpful and definitive essays entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1999). She is also co-founder of the Association for the study of literature and the environment known as ASLE.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Neither Glotfelty nor Krober have dealt with *Departure of the Sea* ecocritically. The present study tries to prove that man cannot live independently of his/her environment. Man and environment are affected in a mutual way. Man is part of nature: s/he is neither master nor slave. To prove this, the



researcher traces the environmental elements in *Departure of the Sea*, trying to point out how the interaction between man and nature affects both, negatively and positively.

### THEORY AND PRACTICE

There are four principles of Ecocriticism that William Howarth points out in his essay "Some Principles of Ecocriticism". According to Howarth, in reading a nature writer, one can work according to a set of informed, responsible principles, derived from four disciplines: ecology, ethics, language, and criticism.

He states:

Ecology describes the relations between nature and culture...Ethics offers ways to mediate historic social conflicts. Language theory examines how words represent human and nonhuman life. Criticism judges the quality and integrity of words and promotes their dissemination (71).

Howarth explains how the four principles help in reading a work of literature where nature plays an important part. The four principles are of due importance when exploring environmental literature. Each stresses the relations of nature and literature as shifting and moving shapes. Here, the role of an ecocritic is to examine this relationship where human culture is "linked to the physical world and has an effect on the natural world". Therefore, the "ecocritic's job is to negotiate between that which is human and that which is non-human" ([www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com)).

As an ecocritic reads particular texts, s/he thinks about specific issues relating to ecology. S/he is to ask certain questions like: How is nature represented in or expressed in this piece? Do literary metaphors for land have an impact on how we treat the land? Shall place become a critical category like gender, class, and race? Is the crisis with the environment represented in literature, and how has this affected man's relationship to the ecology?

It is Ecocriticism which makes it possible to figure out the relation between nature and literature. According to Howarth, texts reflect how a civilization

regards its natural heritage and we know nature through images and words. Here, effect is mutual: nature has an effect on human culture, which, in turn, has an impact on the physical world. It is ecology which leads us to recognize that life speaks. It communes through encoded streams of information. These encoded streams have in themselves a purpose, which can be decoded by us.

American Ecocriticism is concerned mainly with the works of American writers. The works of these American writers "celebrate nature, life force, and the wilderness as manifested in America" (Barry 249). The American writers that Barry talks about are Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862).

The works of these writers reflect the view that they are influenced by nature in different ways. For example, Emerson's first work *Nature* (1836), Barry points out, is "a reflective essay on the impact upon him of the natural world" (249). Margaret Fuller's first book indicates her encounter with the American landscape: Fuller's first book was "summer on the lakes, during 1843...which is a powerfully written journal of her encounter with the American landscape at large after a period as the first woman student at Harvard" (249). The experience of living in a hut is another thing that Thoreau writes about in his work *Walden*. Barry points out that Thoreau's work *Walden* is "an account of his two-year stay, from 1845, in a hut built on the shore of Walden pond, a couple of miles from his home town of Concord, Massachusetts" (249). Thoreau's work is a kind of seeking refuge in nature from modern life and it is also a return to nature. These works and others can be seen as the founding works of American Ecocriticism.

One major concern of Ecocriticism is that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Glotfelty points out that "[e]cocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature." She goes on and adds that as a critical stance, Ecocriticism "has one foot in literature and the other on land; [and] as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human" (xix).



Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere. Glotfelty points out that since it expands the notion of the world, Ecocriticism is different from other critical approaches, which see "the world" synonymous with society-the social sphere. Accordingly, one must conclude, Glotfelty explains, that "literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic other, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact"(xix).

Most Ecocritical work shares a common motivation. According to Glotfelty, such motivation is the "troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems" (xx). This awareness sparks a sincere desire to contribute to environmental restoration, not just in our spare time, but from within our capacity as professors of literature. Glotfelty highlights the role of literature professors in reducing the damage caused to nature and the world due to bad and harmful human actions. Don Scheese also points out in his essay "Some Principles of Ecocriticism" that the theory and practice of Ecocriticism is "inherently political" (www.Asle.org).

According to Scheese, Ecocriticism, like Feminism, seeks to change the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read. One aim of Ecocritical writings is to make the general public more sensitive towards the places in which they live (www.Asle.org).

In response to Ecocritical principles, Haifaa Al-Sanoussi expresses her dissatisfaction with modern technology that is made apparent in the disgusting smell of modern houses that is brought by dying. She also expresses her desire to go back to virgin nature. This is made clear in Fedha's, the heroine, desires to go back to virgin nature as it is represented in muddy houses, and the sea, as these are opposed to the modern houses with their suffocating paintings. In the opening lines of *Departure of the Sea*, Fedha, the heroine, says:

I am surrounded by walls, which stifle me. And the smell of paintings goes deep into my nose. I hate such

a smell so much. I had been used to the smell of muddy houses and to the smell of the sea. But theses have disappeared. Ahhh...Where are muddy houses? Where is the grain mill? Where is the incense burner? Where is the wood that was used to cover the room? Where...? Where...? Where...? All these things have disappeared and its people also disappeared. (6)

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In the Arabic text, the writer used Kuwaiti terms such as *والجندل* and *الروشنة* which mean in Arabic also *المبخرة* (incense burner) and *الحشب الذي تسقف به الغرفة* (a kind of wood used for covering houses) respectively. (www. Ktuf.org/alaamel/2999/Kuwaiti terms).

The writer calls for a return to virgin nature, a nature that is not spoiled by the bad and the harmful actions of human beings. Since the relationship between man and nature is mutual, man should not do any harm to nature as it did not cause him any sufferings.

Ecocriticism, Don Scheese points out, is "inherently interdisciplinary"(www.Asle.org). That is, Ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work of art in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, or, as Scheese explains, "when a significant interaction occurs, between author and place, character(s) and place" (www.Asle.org).

In this case, the interaction takes place between human, as represented by the author, and elements of nature, as represented by rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air-all are non-human elements of place. When an author sees and describes these elements he incorporates geological, botanical, zoological, ecological, as well as social, aesthetic, and psychological considerations. When we talk about history we call it natural history if we mean by nature the human as well as the non-human world.

In *Departure of the Sea*, the heroine, Fedha, recounts her experiences with the sea when she is on death bed. At the same time, her experience with the sea makes her sad because when she remembers it, though she never forgets it, this experience makes her remember her family and the early years of her



childhood. She regrets her past years as she is now suffering from an illness and regrets the experiences with the sea:

I became a feeble body that drags with it the features and the experiences of something called the sea. But is the sea that I saw a few years ago the same sea that my mother and father knew? No, No, I don't think so. (7)

Here, the interaction takes place in the mind of the heroine. It is an interaction between human and non-human. As the interaction takes place, Fedha incorporates social aesthetic and psychological considerations. This incorporation emphasizes the Ecocritical fact that Nature circles both the human and the non-human. Any attempt to separate them is a great failure, since one affects, and is affected by, the other. It is Ecocriticism that fills the gap between texts and facts. As Lawrence Buell has argued: "Ecocriticism assumes that there is an extra-textual reality that impacts human beings and their artefacts – and vice versa" (qtd in Carter 138).

Ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work "in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, character(s) and place" (Howarth 22). According to Howarth, landscape by definition includes the non-human elements of place--the rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air--as well as human perceptions and modifications. An author uses these to describe an interaction between nature (referred to as non-human) and the author himself/herself (referred to as human). The interaction takes place, then, between human, represented in the author, and non-human, represented in rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, seas, animals, air- all are non-human elements of place. When an author sees and describes these elements, s/he incorporates geological, botanical, zoological, aesthetic, and psychological considerations. Accordingly, when we talk about history we call it natural history if we mean by nature the human as well as the non-human world.

The story in *Departure of the Sea* begins with Haifa's narration that an aged Kuwaiti woman

on death-bed remembers her early life with father, mother and sisters. She not only remembers her family but also remembers the sea-an important part of nature- as the cornerstone in her life in particular and in the life of Kuwaiti and Arab people in general. While on death-bed, Fedha (فضة) holds a horrifying comparison between the glorious past, as represented in her family and the beautiful sea and muddy houses on one hand, and the present with its modern houses and the suffocating (stifling) paintings, which hasten her death, on the other. The sea is the dominant character here and the interaction takes place between the heroine (who, in most cases, represents the author) and place as is seen in walls, paintings, muddy houses, and, most importantly, the sea. When interaction takes place, Fedha incorporates aesthetic and psychological considerations. The psychological ones can be seen in her longing for past days when she lived with mother, father, sisters, brother. The aesthetic considerations can be seen in the soothing smell of the sea.

An important question that Ecocritics ask when analyzing a literary production is: What role does the material place play in the plot of the short story, the play, or the novel? Peter Barry points out what Ecocritics do when they analyze a literary text. According to Barry, Ecocritics "re-read literary works, paying particular attention to the representation of nature in the work" (254).

The sea is the material place in Al-Sanoussi's *Departure of the Sea*. The sea has been engraved in the mind and heart of the heroine of the short story as well as in the mind and heart of the writer herself. The word "sea" itself has been mentioned a great number of times in the story. At the very beginning of the story, Fedha expresses her hatred of modern houses, with their abhorrent paintings and longs for muddy houses and the smell of the sea. In the end, she also remembers the sea while recounting her experiences with it when she was young. She says: "I am used to live my new life...though the sea never leaves my mind... It was with me... It was deeply rooted inside me ... And it remained there..." (35).

The sea, in *Departure of the Sea*, plays an important part in the structure and the understanding of the events. The sea is the place of rest of mind and soul. Page 14, in which the word sea



has been mentioned seven times, can be seen as the development of the story. The heroine, Fedha, goes back now and then to her early childhood where the sea was present in all aspects of life. Here, remembrance of the sea stands for an idea from the remote personal past. The sea is the seed of an idea that was planted in the mind of the author-and her heroine as well- grew and matured over time to meet a need which arose many years later. The smell of the sea and that of the muddy houses are constant important factors that Fedha never forgets while on death-bed. It is nostalgia to the past, the virgin nature, the sea, the desert, the muddy houses, etc. In a brief dialogue between Fedha and her son Saleh, Al-Sanoussi writes:

I will take you to the sea. You will insert your feet in the sea which you love....you will become as beautiful as you were in the past. The sea...a beautiful word, which takes me to the past, a past that Saleh does not feel. It is a past that I loved just as my younger daughter, Haya, loved. (14)

The sea, an important part of nature, can mean at least two things to the heroine of the story as well as to the author of *Departure of the Sea*. The first is that the sea can refer to an actual situation, which is marked by modern changes in environment. The other thing is that the sea can be used as a symbolic imaginary dimension, in which we find the glorious past.

Current transformations that are brought to the world, due to modern technology, are an important concern for Ecocriticism. Peter Barry refers to a poem written in 1915 by Thomas Hardy to explain this point. Barry points out: "overwhelmed by a sense of the collapse of civilized values as the Great War dragged on [Thomas Hardy] wrote a brief poem called In Time of the Breaking of Nations' " (256). Similarly, in *Departure of the Sea*, the author regrets the departure of the sea with its beauty, purity and calmness due to sweeping modern technologies. In the meantime, the writer expresses her dismay at the advent of modern technology, which is represented in the furious warships and vessels, which are used to destroy everything beautiful. Here, there is an

indirect reference to the Gulf Wars, first and second. The reference marks a transformation in Kuwaiti environment, which was a desert environment with little farming. Due to such transformations, nature itself changed: a few people are now working on land; there is a huge number of factories built; and, most importantly, the sea is no longer used for peace of mind. Al-Sanoussi writes: "the sea...a beautiful word that takes me back to a past that Saleh [the heroine's son] never knew it," because Saleh belongs to a new generation that did not experience the calmness and beauty of the sea (*Departure* 33).

In this brief phrase there is a contrast between two images of the sea. The first is the one that Fedha, father and mother represent; the second image is that image, which the new generation, represented by Saleh, experiences. Both images show how humans interact differently with nature; how nature affects them and how they are influenced by it. The past image is not polluted by oil and its derivatives. Although the image of the sea can be seen differently by two different generations, it seems to be one image that both generations like to return to. It is a return to nature itself. Haya, Fedha's daughter, stands for the second generation. Nevertheless, she hopes she can go back to the sea and live in its time. Although she uses modern apparatuses in her daily life, Haya wishes to "wash her clothes in the sea" (*Departure* 14). The sea, an important factor in the lives of the characters in *Departure of the Sea*, plays an important role in their daily lives: it has a great impact on them and they never stop thinking of going back to it.

## CONCLUSION

To live contentedly and to be complete, man cannot live independently of the natural world. Man must see himself/herself as being part and parcel of the whole ecological system. To live apart from the natural world, man loses identity. In *Departure of the Sea*, the heroine cannot live a second without thinking of the sea, which played a significant role in her life and the life of her children, though they represent a different generation. What is even more important is that the relationship between man and nature does not consist in man having control over nature or vice versa. Rather, the relationship must be represented in mutual effect: one is affected by and



has an impact on the other. There must be no tension between the two poles, man and his/her natural world. When tension arises, it can be resolved when man incorporates himself/herself into nature. To solve the global crisis the world is facing today, this requires us to understand our impact on nature and to understand the ethical systems that help in reforming such a crisis. Thus, man must live in harmony with his/her surroundings.

#### Ecological table

Term	Significance
Sea	Recalls good past memories
Walls (of old, muddy houses)	Desire to go back to simplicity in life
Muddy houses	Desire to live healthy life
Grain mill, Incense burner, Wood	Strong bond between nature and man since all these tools are taken directly from nature and are, thus, used for the benefit of human beings

In ecological terms, when an interaction takes place between human and elements of nature, the author incorporates geological, botanical, zoological, as well as social, aesthetic, and psychological considerations. Sea, muddy houses, grain mill, incense burner, wood, and other elements are considered the source of relief for the author of *Departure of the Sea*, and of course, for human beings in general.

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