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**Greening in Contemporary Arabic Literature: The Transformation
of Mythic Motifs in Postcolonial Discourse**

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The Future of Postcolonial Studies

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PN
56
P555
F88
2015

First published 2015
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The future of postcolonial studies / edited by Chantal Zabus.
pages cm. — (Routledge research in postcolonial literatures ; 52)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Postcolonialism in literature. 2. Globalization in literature. I. Zabus,
Chantal J., editor.
PN56.P555F88 2015
809°.93358—dc23

2014025951

ISBN: 978-0-415-71426-6 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-88279-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra

Printed and bound in the United States of America by Publishers Graphics,
LLC on sustainably sourced paper.

To Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin
Celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of
The Empire Writes Back (1989)

7 Greening in Contemporary Arabic Literature

The Transformation of Mythic Motifs in Postcolonial Discourse

Ferial J. Ghazoul

With the publication of *The Empire Writes Back*, more than two decades ago, the title itself—borrowed from Salman Rushdie—has become an academic battle cry. It has been used and reused to show cultural resistance to imperial hegemony, and it has become a touchstone of postcolonial criticism. Perhaps it is time to rethink how the empire writes back, not only calling on dialogical studies and contrapuntal readings of Western canonical works or popular media, but also on how the (ex)colonized world has called on its own idioms, myths, and poetics to counter the dominant discourse and voice its worldview. The Orientalist and colonial view of the Other has not only been disseminated in the imperial metropolis but has been transplanted into the different parts of the empire so that the colonized themselves felt their heritage as inferior or nonrelevant to the contemporary world. Rupture with indigenous roots has been a mark of colonialism pointed out by Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Stuart Hall, among others. It is important then to explore how the healing of this rupture takes place in postcolonial literature without a nostalgic yearning for times past and for an imagined or actual golden age. The recasting of local and regional myths as well as the use of key metaphors in a culture have been modes of reconnecting with the cultural past without the illusion that the past can be revived as it was at present.

Literature written after political and often nominal independence has been concerned with issues related to the postcolonial condition. Although the political dimension has been overpowering, more recently gender issues and human rights issues have surfaced in literature, while the ecological concerns seem to be submerged except in rare cases. Recent studies in ecocriticism have excavated environmental issues lurking veiled or hidden in postcolonial literature. Clearly some literary authors express ecological concerns more than others—Ken Saro-Wiwa of Nigeria and Abdelrahman Munif of Saudi Arabia are prime examples. Other works on refugees, the stateless, *les sans-papiers*, and illegal immigrants—such as one comes across in the writing of Ghassan Kanfani and Azzouz Begag—display as well a concern for the physical place and its inhumane degradation. But even in works that normally one would not associate with environmental issues, ecological concerns can be detected (see Sharif; Switzer). What is generally lacking

is not the presence of ecological concerns in postcolonial literature but the absence of highlighting such concerns in the postcolonial discourse. Rob Nixon has amply explained why there is such a distance between ecological studies and postcolonial studies (233–62). He attributes it to the focus on the theme of wilderness and a romanticized version of it, particularly in American Studies on the one hand, and on the other hand, the preoccupation of postcolonial discourse with displacement and diaspora rather than place and its environmental conditions.

I have focused in this chapter on the motif of greening in contemporary Arabic literature by giving selected examples of how the motif carries with it a regenerative subtext and a critique of the present collapse of environmental health. Green nature is positively overdetermined in contemporary Arabic writing though Arab ecocriticism has barely touched on this promising field. The socioeconomic structure of the Arab World until recently has been based on rural village life and desert oases, with farming as a major source of livelihood, thus making green emblematic of growth and life-giving forces. Adding to this, green is valorized in Islam: paradise is visualized as a lush garden and it is called *al-khudaira*, literally the little green place. The mystic prophet Al-Khidr, The Green One, is popularly associated with immortality. The Arab imaginary, if not collective unconscious, is thus receptive to green; greening has a cultural resonance. In the mid-twentieth century, the influential poetic Tammuzi movement made use of Mesopotamian mythology—and particularly that of the deity Tammuz whose rebirth is associated with spring and the return of vegetation (see Jakobson)—in expressing aesthetically its ideological orientation and call for an Arab rebirth or renaissance (El-Azma). The Arab world is beset by environmental decay and devastation—due to Ottoman and Western colonialisms, and more recently due to national lack of awareness coupled with governmental ill-conceived projects. This unhappy state has impacted contemporary Arabic literature and left its marks on it. Recent works in prose and poetry deploy or invoke mythic motifs of greening, literally and metaphorically, to point to degradation of the environment or/and the hope for a greener future.

A country like Ireland evokes greenness; in fact it is referred to as the Emerald Island. In contrast, the Arab World evokes in the mind of many, correctly or incorrectly, barren deserts and empty quarters—at least it does so in the non-Arab imaginary. But for the Arabs themselves, at least two Arab countries are associated with and have the epithet of “green.” Tunisia is called “The Verdant” and Iraq is called “Ard al-Sawad,” the land of greenness. *Sawad* is one of the many terms for green. It can also mean black but in the sense of dark green—at least that is the sense in which it was used when Iraq came to be known as the Land of Greenness. When the inhabitants of ancient Arabia came from their towns and cities in the peninsula, from their deserts and empty quarters, to southern Iraq covered with orchards of green palm trees, Iraq became synonymous with the greenness for its trees.

There has been no shortage of works on the environment in recent years in Egypt and the Arab world as long as the question is social, political, or anthropological. However, literary green studies are rare. Three issues of *Cairo Papers in Social Science* were dedicated to environmental threats and challenges. The most recent of them stepped into ecocriticism, dealing with the environmental and cultural concerns with a specific issue on “Culture and the Natural Environment: Ancient and Modern Middle Eastern Texts.” Books such as Salwa Gomaa’s *Environmental Policy-Making in Egypt* (1997) and Nicholas Hopkins’s *People and Pollution: Cultural Constructions and Social Action in Egypt* (2001) attest to the importance of the environmental question in the mind of scholars and activists as well as the masses at large in Egypt. On a more popular level, when a journalist like ‘Azza Sulayman writes an op-ed on “The Feast of the Tree and its Egyptian Roots,” attributing the origin of the Christmas tree to an Egyptian ritual associated with Isis and Osiris, she is more than appropriating a tradition. She is exemplifying a preoccupation with the idea of trees and greenness and their relation to the indigenous heritage of resurrection and rebirth.

Perhaps the text that lends itself most clearly to an environmental crisis is the memoir written by Muhammad El Makhzangi, who as a young doctor went to Kiev in the former Soviet Union in the 1980s to specialize in mental health medicine. He wrote in 1997 a book on his experience entitled, *Memories of a Meltdown: An Egyptian between Moscow and Chernobyl* (translated into English by Samah Selim in 2006). The slim book is divided into the four seasons and starts with spring. The vegetation of spring in Kiev offers nature’s gifts to people only to be poisoned by the meltdown of a nuclear site. The contrast between nature’s rhythms and technology’s failure is dramatic and ironic. El Makhzangi opens what he calls his anti-memoir by describing the beauty of nature in Kiev in springtime:

When and how does spring come to Kiev? ... Everyone agrees that it erupts suddenly, miraculously. The trees are bare when we go to sleep, and there are still traces of snow on the ground. Then we wake and the world is pulsing green as though it had all blossomed overnight. ... The gathering warmth melts the snow quickly and the sound of its running waters ... is enough to keep us awake all night, every night, preceding the green explosion. (13)

El Makhzangi uses the term “green explosion” deliberately to follow it by the nuclear explosion. The pastoral framework is marred all the more dramatically when an atomic explosion follows:

In the morning, yet more signs of spring appear. The return of the migrating birds, a splash of green at the tip of tree branches. ... We hear the sudden song of a plover or spot from amongst the myriad species of birds ... a particularly colorful one. (13–14)

Suddenly there is foreshadowing of the disaster amid this idyllic setting and then the disaster in full swing:

There are heralds of spring's eruption, as of this spring's curse. Chernobyl. Molded by the Russian tongue to give shape to a different meaning, thus: *churna*, "black," and *bul*, "pain." The black pain.

The fire ... burnt directly on top of Chernobyl's nuclear reactor number four. It erupted at exactly 1: 23: 48 a.m. on April 26, 1986, when the fourth reactor of the nuclear plant exploded. (14)

The stylistic irony underlies the use of similar words to describe spring in nature, such as "erupts," "explosion," and the like, and the failure of technology: "fire erupted," "plant exploded," and so on. There is almost a dream, nay a nightmarish, quality to this prose. It is this parallelism and inversion, paradise that turned into hell or rather paradise that was the façade of an inferno:

Kiev is a city drowning in gardens—one of the greenest in the world. But in this post-Chernobyl paradise, people quit their old summer habits. The holiday crowds abandoned all the lake shores, the woods and parks. (46)

The precolonial mythic motifs are submerged in postcolonial discourse. Muhammad El Makhzangi compares the explosion using a motif from the *Arabian Nights* and Arabic folktales when he compares the explosion to that of an emerging genie from a bottle: "The atomic genie had escaped his bottle, unsealed by human carelessness in the face of advanced technology" (15).

Earlier in the Preface of the book by the author entitled "The Descent of the Whale," the author alludes to Sindbad's first voyage as an allegorical tale that corresponds to the Soviet Union where he chose to go for post-graduate medical studies, attracted by leftist discourse, but ending up disappointed upon discovering the deception on which it is based:

Once upon a time, Sindbad the Sailor was shipwrecked at sea. He glimpsed a beautiful island on the horizon and eagerly swam to its shores. One day, after he had lived there happily for a time, the island began to shift and shudder and slowly sank into the ocean. He suddenly realized that this island was no island at all, but rather a mere patch of earth sticking out of the water, stuck on the back of a sleeping whale.

The Soviet Union was just this: the fertile possibility of a fabulous island for humanity, but contingent, tenuously rooted on the back of a huge whale of lies, propaganda, flawed ideology masquerading as truth. (9)

What was the reaction of our author as "the drama of Chernobyl ... unfold[ed] in Kiev"?

I was unafraid, perhaps because of the radiation's intangibility, perhaps because I am profoundly aware of my own inevitable mortality—just one amongst a short-lived human multitude who inhabit the oppressed Third World, the exhausted South, where suffering and early death is the rule, and to live and prosper, the exception. (21)

In another collection of short stories, El Makhzangi presents magic thinking based on the power of contiguity in the hallucination of a disturbed mind that is itself contagious. The very short story "A Few Flowers" in the bilingual collection, *In the Sold Night*, translated by Eva Elias and Nur Elmessiri, El Makhzangi situates the incident in a hospital. An agitated patient in the last stage of tuberculosis is seen by his doctor "grasping a few green thin stems crowned by a few red begonias. He held them close to his chest, trembling. ... [H]is skin was covered with a dusty yellow hue and his features had taken on the rigidity of the faces of the dead" (57). He had cut the flowers from the garden and when the doctor-narrator asked him why he did it, he answered that he was told that if he brought the red begonias next to his face, his pale yellow cheeks will become rosy. When sick Sulayman was questioned as to who had advised him to do so he pointed to himself making the doctor laugh and telling him not to do such a silly thing again. But no sooner did the doctor go back to his room than he held the red begonias close to his cheeks and looked at the mirror. Indeed his face became rosy, reflecting the color of the flowers, and he kept at it for hours until the nurse called him and asked to examine Sulayman. The doctor took red begonias to his patient this time to make him happy but it was too late. He found him motionless.

This story wavers between the rational and the magical. What is most fantastic about it is the doctor himself imitating the patient. It is not only the contiguity of the rose to the cheek but also the act itself proved to be contagious. From the point of greening, the flower is a cure and a joy though short-lived. Just as our urban environment has distanced us from flowers and nature so has our "scientific" thinking distanced us from the healing power of flowers and nature.

The *Nakba* (Catastrophe) of 1948 was as shocking for the Palestinians as the nuclear explosion was for Ukrainians. Suddenly the Palestinians found themselves strangers in their own land, pushed out of their homes and groves (see Sa'idi and Abu-Lughod). The majority of the Palestinians in the 1940s were peasants or farmers (Sayigh 10–63). When displaced they had to leave their own orange groves and olive orchards. Their loss was not simply of land but of livelihood. Fertile Palestine, though not exactly a paradise of milk and honey as George Sandys presented it in the seventeenth century (Said 11), was nevertheless a rich agricultural country. Planting and harvesting were more than a way of life; they presented a worldview where life is akin to green vistas and death to arid landscapes. It is not surprising that citrus fruits and olive products became metonyms of Palestine.

In a short story by Ghassan Kanafani, “The Land of Sad Oranges” (57–62), the reader can read in the title alone a reference to Palestine. The story is narrated by a child and thus it shows events from his limited and innocent point of view. It is the *Nakba* seen through the eyes of a displaced child on the eve of the defeat of the Palestinians, and the Arab Salvation Army that was sent by Arab countries to defend the Palestinians. For the child-narrator leaving Jaffa for Acre and beyond into Lebanon is a chance to miss school, not realizing he is being condemned to the life of a refugee. As far as he is concerned it seems like a picnic and a journey to another town as one would do when attending a festival. As the story unfolds the child-narrator begins to grasp little by little the horrors of the catastrophe. In the story, the narrator recounts the attitudes of parents and the disillusionment of the men. Structural irony is Kanafani’s strategy in showing the unsuspecting mindset of the child and the recognitions of tragedy by the reader. What is also striking is how the code of oranges unifies the different episodes:

I sat silently, with my chin between my knees and my arms wrapped around them. The groves of orange trees followed each other in succession along the side of the road. We were all eaten up with fear. The lorry panted over the damp earth, and the sounds of distant shots rang out like a farewell.

(Kanafani 57–58)

Fun turns into fear and the shots usher not a celebration but a farewell. The orange groves are metonyms of Palestine from which the family is departing—an exodus from the land of vegetation and fruit. Oranges function as a leitmotif in the story. Soon enough the women climb down when the lorry stops and go towards a peasant selling oranges. They buy them as they cry. One of the grown-ups is observed by the child: he is not so much eating or smelling the orange but gazing at it with tearful eyes. The orange then is not simply a fruit but a symbol or an index of Palestine; it stands for something else—the homeland in this case. As the lorry moves further towards Lebanon it puts “more distance between themselves and the land of oranges” (Kanafani 58). The grownups continue to gaze wordlessly at the orange fruit; and “all the orange trees which your father had abandoned ... shone in his eyes, all the well-tended orange trees which he had bought one by one were printed on his face and reflected in the tears” (58). The homeland is thus condensed in a fruit. After reaching Sidon in Lebanon the mother wants to go back not so much to Jaffa but “to return to the orange trees” (59). The oranges too come to have a human character. The oranges “shriveled up if a change occurred and they were watered by a strange hand” (62). Thus, they are not dumb objects but sensitive beings that know intimacy. The story ends up with the shriveled orange on the table—a dried-up homeland.

The identification of Palestinians with the land to the point of personifying it as the beloved is depicted in Kanafani’s novella, *Men in the Sun*. This is particularly true with one of the older protagonists Abu Qais in his journey

to Kuwait seeking a job. The novella opens with Abu Qais in Basra waiting to make the clandestine crossing from Iraq to Kuwait. But he remains a peasant at heart and can relate only to the earth:

Abu Qais rested his chest on the damp ground, and the earth began to throb under him with tired heartbeats, which trembled through the grains of sand and penetrated the cells of his body. ... The smell which, he sniffed at, urged his head and then poured down into his veins. Every time he breathed the scent of the earth, as he lay on it, he imagined that he was sniffing his wife’s hair. (9)

This symbiotic relation with the land in this case, verging on an erotic desire, betrays what Oppermann has called a “biocentric worldview” (230). What strikes Abu Qais about Kuwait as described to him by his friend Saad is that there are no trees there. In his interior monologue, Abu Qais reflects that it took him ten years to realize that he has lost his ten trees. The arboreal tropes are dominant in the novella and they do not exemplify a twenty-first century ecological turn, but are examples of a premodern and preindustrial cultural sensibility. In the recollections of the denied homeland, Abu Qais resembles John Clare as analyzed by Williams: “It is not only the loss of what can be called ... a piece of ‘unspoiled’ country. It is, also, for any particular man, the loss of a specifically human and historical landscape, in which the source of feeling is not really that it is ‘natural’ but that it is ‘native’” (138).

The best-known Arabic novel showing how new technology devastates the ecosystem is that of the Saudi-Iraqi novelist Abdelrahman Munif in his epical *Al-Tih*, translated by Peter Theroux as *Cities of Salt* and discussed by such prominent novelists as John Updike, Tariq Ali, and Amitav Ghosh. Used as an example of the capitalist abuse and environmental violence, Rob Nixon devotes a chapter to it entitled “Fast-forward Fossil: Petro-despotism and the Resource Curse” (68–102). The novelist does not identify where it takes place, but it is clear from the setting and history of the inhabitants that it is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or possibly a similar Arabian Gulf, oil-rich country. It opens up with the greenness of an oasis:

Wadi al-Uyoun: an outpouring of green amid the harsh, obdurate desert, as if it had burst from within the earth or fallen from the sky. It was nothing like its surroundings, or rather had no connection to them, dazzling you with curiosity and wonder: how had water and greenery burst out in a place like this? But the wonder vanished gradually, giving way to a mysterious respect and contemplation. It is one of those rare cases of nature expressing its genius and willfulness, in defiance of any explanation. (1)

In the good years, water filled reservoirs and nearby streams, then “vegetables were planted and green plants appeared with the early rains” (2), which

in turn made the people excessively generous to their guests and even to passersby. The oasis, unlike the way it has been presented by some critics, including Nixon, is not presented as paradise. It is portrayed rather as an eco-community with a sustained way of life that was disrupted by the assault of foreign oil drillers. The young men, and even the young women, of the oasis wanted to discover the world and some of them left despite the counseling of the elders. They are described by the omniscient narrator realistically as people with strength and weakness:

The wadi's people were known for their strange mixture of gentleness and obsession. Peaceable and happy, they were always quick to help out and expected little in return, but they were at times prone to laziness and daydreaming.

(Munif 6)

Munif had once explained about the title of the first volume of his epical work, *Mudn al-Malh (Cities of Salt)*: such cities are unreal cities, unsustainable. They will dissolve like salt (qtd. in Nixon 101). Like castles of sand they have no roots that can sustain them beyond the end of fossil wealth. In the meantime, a capitalist system creates sharp class distinctions and a mode of inhumane exploitation for the benefit of oil companies. The strangers who assault the oasis are foreigners from the West.

In a description that sounds ethnographic the narrator depicts the inhabitants as poor and happy, but also prone to boredom by their monotonous diet and even indigestion and illness. So it is not exactly a dream place that Munif presents; his pre-modern world is like that of the Igbo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*—a precolonial community which had its own coherent and manageable way of life based on the nature of its habitat. The inhabitants of the oasis in Munif's novel are themselves seen in tropes related to nature as if they "had been sown in this place like the palm trees" (10).

In another collection of short stories by the Egyptian woman writer, Salwa Bakr, the protagonist is an unconventional woman. She questions urban squalor and tries to do something about it, only to find herself confined to a mental institution. The title of the short story is indicative, "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees." The story is about the deterioration of a young woman who could not adjust to her oppressive world, and in fact wanted to change it only to be suppressed and eventually confined to an asylum. It is narrated as a memoir by the protagonist; there is a correspondence between the narrator and her city. Both decline gradually but consistently. The decline of the city is measured in the loss of its green trees—a loss that the narrator refers to as a flood starting with drops that accumulate into a torrent overtaking the city: "a few drops from the flood had already made their appearance on the horizon affecting both people and things, and even animals and plants" (14).

This degradation of the environment is described in terms of the reduction of trees from her street and thus diminishing the joy of nature:

Making my way along the street daily, coming and going to work on foot, I would generally amuse myself by gazing at the street's beautiful little trees, and I would count them. I would know that after the blue gum tree there would be the casuarina, then the Indian fig, and some ten metres before arriving at the door of the Water Company there would be a beautiful tree whose name I never got to know, a tree with spreading branches almost all of whose leaves would fall at the coming of the spring when it would be resplendent with a vast quantity of large purple flowers; it would look magnificent, a unique spectacle among other trees. I knew by heart the number of trees adorning the street and bringing joy to my heart whenever I looked at them. (15)

However, on some day she counts them and finds them to be only thirty. She doubts herself and her counting, but when she counts them again she becomes aware that one of the fig trees has disappeared. It was uprooted and thrown on the pavement; it seemed to her "like the dead body of some harmless bird that had been treacherously done to death without having committed any crime" (15). The simile here associates the flora with the fauna and personifies both by presenting the tree and the bird as innocent victims. The effect of this massacre is visceral. The protagonist begins to suffer from headaches and stomach aches. And when the trees keep disappearing and only three are left, she feels traumatized by her city and its inhabitants. Her thoughts are not only about the dismal present, but also about the even more morbid future. She thought to herself:

how could I one day get married and bear children who would live in this city? What misery they would experience when they looked around them and found nothing but a vast jungle planted with concrete. ... I was even more afraid for my grandchildren, when I thought about what it would be like for them when they came out into the world and lived in this city, without seeing a flower or knowing the meaning of the word. (16)

The protagonist is so engrossed in her love of trees that even the man she would fall for would be someone who would count the trees of the city as she did. Her day dreams matched her night dreams when she has a vision of her beloved trees back again on the street. This concern for greening her neighborhood and preoccupation with the environment of her city is seen as an abnormal obsession. In this fictional account, Bakr uses the technique of defamiliarization of the familiar to draw our attention to the horrible state of the city and the stifling of its breathing lungs. We as readers sympathize with the protagonist and see her victimization, her frustration, and her inability

to achieve her desires. The social condemnation of her behavior is portrayed as the repression of the city and the denial of its rights to greenness.

In another short story by the Iraqi woman writer, Daisy Al-Amir, trees are humanized. Instead of a city with dwindling and disappearing trees, we have a city that is embarking on greening. The narrator, herself, a woman living away from her homeland and feeling alienation in unfamiliar settings, hears at night wailing that she cannot pin down. Asking neighbors, she gets mixed reactions: those who hear howling storms; others who hear ringing laughter. She alone seems to hear crying that resembles the agony of a human being. This strange nocturnal weeping caused the narrator to be apprehensive about nighttime. She undertakes walks in the daytime to alleviate her anxiety where she encounters an effort of greening the city:

In one of my daylight excursions, I left the streets of the central city to stroll in a suburban district. There I noticed that a recent plantation of trees was close to reaching the goal set by the city's reforestation project. The project, which called for planting a thick belt of trees around the city, had been suggested to the city council by an environmental expert as a means to mitigate the impact of heat and aridity. (68)

While ecologically speaking, this short story stands in contrast to Bakr's, as the reforestation is attempting to heal the city; it nevertheless carries a note of sadness that is revealed in the finale. The narrator is calmed by the sight of trees—thus indicating the need for green spaces—for 'the kohl of the cement'—an Arabic expression that implies green spaces as beautification of the city:

At the time the decision [reforestation] was made, no one realized how long it would take for the trees to grow and complete the proposed belt of woodland. ... So it was that huge trucks came carrying tall, full-grown trees, complete with roots embedded in soil, to be set in deep gaping holes specially prepared for this purpose. ... I roamed through the forest, awed by the power of science to move these lofty trees with thick trunks and make them seem as if they had sprung here naturally from seed. The sight of the lovely forest with its verdant green and shadows soothed me. I returned home thinking I should visit the forest more often to calm my nerves. (68)

The narrator refers to the forest as a needed "cure" and "comfort" for the urban population: "The poplar trees stood strong and steadfast in the path of dust storms, buffering their severity and cleansing the air. More and more of the migratory trees arrived in our city to take up residence, finding rest for themselves and providing comfort for us" (69).

While all the above seems a healthy ecological project disseminated through fiction, the narrator goes on to note that one of the trees was bending down

by the day: "Its trunk inclined even more so that its branches almost touched the ground ... leaves getting smaller, branches thinning, until it [the tree] no longer resembled its companion poplars" (69). The sick tree finally dies and its death is graphically portrayed:

it lay nearly flat on the ground. The leaves had become smaller and turned yellow, and the branches had grown even more thin and emaciated. Finally the tree lay down to sleep once and for all, its leaves falling around. Sand began to cover the fallen tree, no wind stirred it, and the white trunk turned black. ... When I saw insects boring its trunk I realized the tree had died. (69)

It is as if we are witnessing an image of a dying person, complete with sand burial, and followed with worms mangling the body. The humanization of the tree corresponds to a deep-rooted reverence for vegetation in the Arab heritage to the point of attributing to the Prophet the saying that the palm tree is an aunt to man. The personification of the tree is further indicated when the narrator sees in its death a suicide, "the weeping willow had killed herself after dropping to her knees, imploring the earth for water but not finding the river that had once quenched her thirst" (70). The use of the feminine gender to the neutral tree is not arbitrary. It establishes the semi-otic correspondence between the unhappy tree away from her native land and flowing river with that of the narrator-protagonist, displaced and away from her Two Rivers (Mesopotamia). The ending of the short story reveals indirectly the enigma of the nocturnal wailing: the narrator-protagonist recognizes that the weeping is hers or so it is timidly hinted by the finale. This explains the weeping she had been listening to earlier. Was it her own all the time mistaking it for an external weeper or was it her nervous condition which made her hear crying when there was none? The story is open-ended, but in this uncanny mood (Ghazoul 13–14), the message of gardens, parks, and forests as relief is highlighted.

In another short story, "The Palm Tree Said to the Sea ..." by the Emirati writer Abd al-Hameed Ahmad, another twist to the motif of vegetation and greening is interwoven in the narrative. In the story a "lonely palm tree" which is lonely "by the uprooting of all the others around it to facilitate oil drilling" addresses the sea in several dialogical scenes (Elmusa, "Faust" 356). In this short petrofiction, the theme of technology violating an ecosystem is clearly articulated. It is a beautiful, lyrically composed story that is part magic realism and part metafictional. The story starts with a narrator using the first person singular who is telling a secret story told by a palm tree. Fearing he might die without telling it he begins to recount it. What he had overheard from a palm tree was narrated to the sea. Here we have a case of perspectivism, a narrator is telling the story he has heard and starts in the typical 'once upon a time'; only in this case it is 'once upon a night': "One night, when there was no moon or star, the solitary palm tree bent

towards the shore and began to tell of the things she'd seen and heard and lived through" (Ahmad 284). The story also ends with the same sentence as a grandmother is telling stories to her children. The circularity, as well as the story narrated a second remove, betray a Conradian setting—a yarn unfolding while others are listening. The narrator is telling us about what the palm tree said to the sea, which is the story of a forbidden love between Salma and Selim, the Sailor. Salma was wedded to the cruel and rich Captain rather than the loving Sailor. In a setting that recalls the traditional diving for pearls, the sick Sailor is forced by the Captain to dive; he dies, and is buried in the sea. But before death he had met Salma under the palm tree in a passionate encounter. The fruit of their love-making is born and lives the life of a wandering stranger. This very stranger turns out to be the narrator himself. Within this story that turns upon itself both ecological and class exploitations intertwine. Sorrow and love are viewed in terms of similitude with the tree. Salim says to Salma: "You're ... sad too, like this palm tree standing alone in the desert" (287). The palm tree that is narrating their illicit encounters under her shadow admits that it empathized with their love as it felt "like [its own] love for the soil which warmly enfolds [its] roots" (287). The palm tree confides in the sea that once the earth was full of trees and fruit. The sea wonders why this desolation now, and the palm tree says: "They found plenty of oil" (287). Degradation is also expressed in terms of tree similes that characterize a culture on the wane: "corruption set in, boring into the proud edifice like woodworm eating into the trunk of a tree" (289). Wavering between a folktale and a parable, the story partakes in narrative complexity while pinpointing the violation of the ecosystem and the resource's curse.

There is no shortage of greening discourse in contemporary Arabic literature if one cares to look with an eye for environmentalism. This green language is not that of a romantic nostalgia for rural life as in Wordsworth nor is it a contemplative, apolitical privileging of the wilderness as in Thoreau. It is the role of ecocriticism to unearth environmental issues as implied in literary postcolonial texts. This chapter, I hope, moves towards future postcolonialism by modestly addressing its ecological trend.

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