

## Teaching Ecological Awareness Through Literature: A Case Study of Ghassan Kanafani's Returning to Haifa

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### ABSTRACT

Theories like Feminism, Marxism and Post-colonialism work on the contextualization of literature. Exponents of these theories promote the employment of such approaches in the field of education in order to raise the students' awareness towards social and political issues, and help them inculcate and develop the skill of critical reading of literary texts. In the 1990s, a new approach evolved in the domain of literary studies that called for the same task but from a different perspective, i.e. Ecocriticism. Hence, taking Ecocriticism as a theoretical framework, the paper in hand has discussed Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Returning to Haifa* with a special focus on the use of nature and environment with their various meanings and connotations in the novella. The paper's main objective is to contribute in the promotion of Ecocriticism as a tool for critical reading. It also aimed at raising students' awareness of environmental crises, particularly those caused by conflicts and wars. The paper has postulated that Ecological awareness would help students to gain better understanding of the consequences of conflicts and to be more cautious in their treatment of the environment around them. After the analysis of Kanafani's novella, the researcher found that the author attempted to convey messages to the readers through his treatment of nature. Most of these messages lament the loss of the natural elements as well as the human intuitive nature due to wars and conflicts that result in displacement of people and hence the destruction of environment and imbalance in the ecosystem.

### 1. Introduction

Every literary text is written for a purpose. Literature is saturated with implications and unwritten messages, which are nowhere yet everywhere in a text. These hints and messages lay hidden for the competent reader to unravel. However, untrained readers, and readers who have been misled by the Liberal Humanists of all ages, might miss out the point. Literature then becomes a tool for pleasure allegedly considered uninterested, politically, socially, culturally ...etc.

Hence comes the need for and significance of critical reading and teaching of literature. Since the 1960s, the attitude towards literature has changed considerably. Marxists and Psychologists came back to the scene, women gathered under the umbrella of feminism, non-European nations had their own theories and attitudes, and hence literature was proved interested.

One important ground for all this conflicting theories and perspectives to literature is education. Each group demanded that literature should be taught more critically and that students should be made aware of the implications in literary texts. This is clearly connected to the rising attitude towards both literature and education as the most powerful mediums of social change and transformation.

This comes in opposition to the uncritical reading of literature or what is known as 'art for art's sake'. As James Gribble (1983) stated, "however, pleasure in reading and talking about books may be necessary, but it is not (as the philosopher puts it) sufficient to justify its significance in education or in life in general." (Gribble, 1983, p. 2). The

gap between theory and practice is therefore attributed to a deficiency in education, considering it the only medium that can enhance the public's understanding of theory and its applicability in real life. Paulo Freire calls this 'critical consciousness'. For him, such consciousness is raised through the method of 'problematizing'. This process explained in Denis Goulet's introduction to Freire's *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 'to problematize in his sense is to associate an entire populace to the task of codifying total reality into symbols which can generate critical consciousness and empower them to alter their relation with nature and social forces.' (p. ix). Humans, in Freire's view, 'relate to their world in critical way' (Freire, 2005, p. 3). This relation entices humans to respond to 'the challenges of the environment' as they begin to 'dynamize, to master, and to humanize reality'. (p. 4). This understanding does not necessarily bring around something positive. However, it may raise readers' awareness of the negative effects a written text could have. This argument has been going on throughout history starting from Plato's scepticism about harmful literature. James Gribble explains this as he comments on Plato's attitude towards art:

Whatever answer we offer to this question, there is clearly a widespread belief that literature may be morally dangerous. For Plato this threat stemmed mainly from his belief that art presents deceptive but plausible images or appearances, and toys with the possibilities of evil in ways which lead them to be entertained because they become entertaining. (p. 5)

Literature, therefore, should not be taken for granted, as a medium for pleasure and students must be made aware of the intentions, messages, conflicts and struggles implied within a text. Among the theories that emerged in the late nineteenth-century is ecocriticism. This approach, which properly emerged in the 1990s, puts forth a new critical approach to the study of literary works. It is a novel path to the understanding of literature devoted entirely to the study of the 'relationship between literature and the physical world' (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii). It attempts to uncover the human beings' relation to their environment as implied in works of art.

The approach, however, has not been given the significance it is worthy of in the academia. As Glotfelty (1996) argues in her introduction to the famous anthology of essays *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*,

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that there was an earth at all. (p. xvi)

Richard Kerridge, has the same view as he comments that 'the environmental message is just about everywhere, yet makes too little difference to the kind of behavior that count.' (Kerridge, 2012, p. 12)

Hence, for eco-critics, ecocriticism should be included among the movements that give voice to the voiceless in literature since nature is marginalized and ignored in the academics. Kerridge's comment above implies the way literature relates to real life, a relation that represents the spirit of ecocriticism. Part of the mission of teaching literature is to enhance students' behaviours and cultural values. This cannot be achieved without relating the texts under study to students' lives and giving them the experience of crises that threatens their society and the world in general. Kerridge asserts "The task of English Studies is to recreate something like this in modernity, which means teaching, through reading literature, a set of values ...." (p. 15). These values are taught with relation to the whole world outside the classroom. Kerridge cleverly reformulates this relation in the light of ecocriticism, "If the ecosystem that produced the poems changes, the poems lose their meaning and their relationship with readers' lives, and are diminished." (p. 14).

The inclusion of ecocriticism in pedagogy also expands the realm of teaching methods and perspectives. It adds new dimensions, novel materials, new scopes and methods to the teaching of literary works. This helps making teaching literature more exciting in addition to the moral and environmental values mentioned before.

Moreover, ecocriticism as a pedagogy contributes in bridging the gap between science and literature. Louise Westling (2012) states that, since literary figures derive their imaginary settings from their cultural contexts and 'scientific understanding of the natural world', they are able to foresee potentialities of the future as inferred from the present sciences. "They can dramatise ecological dangers only beginning to be glimpsed in contemporary research projects." (p. 82)

Based on the arguments stated above, the paper in hand attempts to explore the applicability of the eco-critical pedagogy as a method of teaching literature. Its immediate goal is to contribute in establishing this approach as an

essential method of teaching. Another objective the writer aims to achieve is to uncover the hidden implications in the text under study so that it might set a model in using this method. It is also hoped that the paper would contribute in raising the readers' awareness and critical consciousness towards environmental crises, their variable causes and consequences as implied in literature. This is done by applying the eco-critical approach on the novella *Returning to Haifa* by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani.

Due to the unavailability of the translated version of Kanfani's novella in India or any reliable translation on the internet, all the quotations included in the paper were translated from Arabic by the researcher himself as a native speaker of Arabic.

### Eco-Critical Teaching Approach: An Example

It would be difficult to interpret Kanafani's literary works in isolation from their biographical, political and cultural contexts. It is worth noting that the writer was forced to leave his homeland, Palestine, when he was 12 after the 1948 Israeli invasion. He then moved between Syria, Lebanon and Kuwait until he was assassinated in Beirut in 1972. This left a remarkable influence on Kanfani's literary career. It is prominent in his works in which he usually deals with themes of diaspora, refugees, home, land and the uprooted Palestinian culture. These themes are often taken up with sympathy and lamentation for the loss of the balanced natural life of the Palestinians before the '*Nakba*' – the catastrophe of the 1948 war.

In his masterpiece, *Returning to Haifa*, Kanfani puts land as the central theme of the narrative. The events are narrated through the experience of the displaced couple, Saeed and Safyah who return to their homeland – *Haifa* – after 20 years of the war.

On their way back to Haifa, the couple silently watched the fields, the farms and the sea. Once they enter the city, however, the picture changes. Kanafani draws two opposite pictures to convey to us the consequences of human irresponsible work, wars. When Saeed and Safyah reach Haifa, the first thing Saeed observes is the 'smell of war' and the 'harsh, brutal faces' (Kanafani, 2013, p. 9). This comes after the narrator implies the peace that had prevailed in Haifa, which 'did not expect a thing'. In the flashback of events, the narrator relates Saeed's experience of the war while he was struggling to reach his family. 'The sounds of bullets and explosives started to fill the sky' (p. 11), and the sky was like 'fire flowing with the sounds of bullets and bombs' (p. 14).

Memory of place is another important motif in the novella. Most of Arabic writers in exile use the idea of land/homeland as a form of resistance to the loss of culture in their exile and, at the same time, preserve the Arabic identity. (Günther & Milich, 2016)'s comment on the representation of homeland in Arabic literature fits in this context. They write "... the ideas and concepts of homeland/nation (*watan*) expressed in this (Modern Arabic) literature functioned as a virtual space for creating, negotiating or reformulating concepts of Arab identity" (p. xi). (Sinno, 2013), similarly, comments:

The absence of exclusive focus on the environment, however, may be attributed to the more political nature of these texts whose themes include war, loss, and identity. In the context of these novels, nature becomes yet another means of developing these themes, which are so crucial to humanity. (p. 126)

Kanafani depicts this idea of '*watan*' in *Returning to Haifa*. The images of homeland fill the migrants' heads including Saeed and Safyah's. The couple 'silently observe the road which they know well' and which is 'stuck in their heads like 'flesh and bones' (p. 25). Saeed still remembers the 'three trees bending over the road' on whose branches the names of his people were engraved. Once the house comes to sight, Saeed's memories pour over his head as his life story flushes before him. The house as place, therefore, brings forth a bundle of experiences that constitutes the larger part of the couple's identity even in exile.

As it has already been stated, Arabic literature in general and Palestinian literature in particular are saturated with expressions of exile, cultural loss and displacement. As (Yahya, Lazim, & Vengadasamy, 2012) argue, "most of the literary works written during the postcolonial period express the intense relationship between the Arab literary writers and their homeland from which they get the spirit and inspiration to resist the colonizers." (p. 76). This idea represents the intersection between ecocriticism and postcolonialism. They both resort to a lost and destroyed culture. They diverge, however, in that ecocritics do more than reimagining what has been lost; they rather attempt to reconcile the human being with what is left. To put it in (James, 2012)'s words "While postcolonialists often concern themselves

with displacement, ecocritics tend to seek out literature of place.” (p. 61). As a pedagogical approach to literature, ecocriticism should therefore take ‘the students’ awareness of the importance of “place” as a central goal of the course.’ (Dobrin & R., 2002, p. 141)

Kanafani’s notion of this relation between human and non-human extends to the signification that humans attach to things. This symbolisation of the non-human as part of the human’s identity is another theme in *Returning to Haifa*. The feeling of displacement invades all the characters in the novella including the Jewish. When the Jewish couple go out, they notice the change the British invasion left in Haifa. Miriam tells her husband with tears in her eyes that she is crying because ‘there is a real Saturday, yet there is no real Friday nor real people’ (p. 42). Friday symbolizes the displacement of the Palestinian cultural values after 1948. Similarly, Fares is flung into ‘unknown worlds’ (most probably memories) once he enters his home and the smell of the sea pervades the room.

Miriam’s comment pulls her husband’s attention to the reality of the events. Only then, he notices the repercussions of war on the place. He becomes aware of and anxious about the destruction it brought to Haifa ‘suddenly, the aftermaths of the damage, which he started to notice, took a different form and meaning’ (p. 42). He tries to avoid any reflection that might cause him anxiety, but Miriam insists on thinking critically about the situation. She does so because the incident of the killed ‘Arab child’ reminds her of the murder of her younger brother by the German soldiers. The common link between the two incidents is that they are both man-made and both result in an imbalance in the human life and in the ecosystem around. (Sinno, 2013), comments in this regard that “Similar to the human characters ... nature too is a victim of war and the devastation that it brings.” (p. 127)

At the end of the novella, Kanafani seems to show the relation between environment, represented in ‘place’ and the human identity. When Saeed first enters his *home* in Haifa, he is strongly attached to its tiniest details (like the bell and the seven peacock feathers in the vase). This attachment is derived from his memories of the place and the hope that his son, Khaldoun (whom he unwillingly left twenty years back), would recognize him. As he and Safyah lose their last hope, the value of the *house* is lost. In the last scene, Saeed leaves the house ‘staring carefully at all the things while they seemed of less value to him than they did hours ago, and unable to stir any feelings inside him’ (p. 79). This goes well with Kanafani’s central statement in the novella ‘man is a cause’ (p. 67). The cause here is land and home as expressions of resistance against displacement and loss of culture and identity.

## Conclusion

It is concluded from the arguments above that the eco-critical approach to the teaching of literature is a fertile ground for exploration. Approaching literary texts from an environmental pedagogy has several advantages to education. Ecocritical approach raises the students’ awareness of ecological threats. In age of industrial and technological rapid advancement, there is an urgent need for such ‘critical awareness’ towards the ecosystem. As (Sinno, 2013) argues,

The inclusive and embracing nature of the field—in addition to the rising significance of global environmental concerns today—make it valid and even necessary for international scholars, including Arab scholars, to contribute to the growing ecocriticism discourse. (p. 126)

This method would also enable learners read literature more critically and with a new perspective in mind. This in turn would add new dimensions and novel activities and materials to language and literature classes. Moreover, education is a key means for social change. Ecological pedagogy is one of the steps towards such change as it gives students the space to reflect on environmental issues from the perspective of social ethics and values. Hence, it would implement in the students the value of loving one’s homeland and make them more conscious of the repercussions of wars and loss of refuge. Consequently, students would understand the effect of the evils of war on their surrounding biosphere, the role of human beings in the destruction of environment and help them embrace more sustainable practices on mother earth. Therefore, the inclusion of the ecocritical teaching approach in the curriculum is strongly recommended in language and literature classes as it effectively contributes in the making of responsible generation that consciously and critically analyses environmental issues threatening the society and environment.

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