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Acronym in text: AHDR (*Arab Human Development Report*)

Ecological Literacy in an Egyptian Short Story

Gail Ramsay

Abstract

This ecocritical article explores a way in which an urban society in the Arab world may respond to an ecosystem and the needs of a non-human entity by acquiring a measure of *ecological literacy* (also referred to as *eco-literacy* and *ecolacy*) in a short story by an Egyptian author. Guided by David W. Orr's concept of *ecological literacy* (1992) and *eco-literacy* (Amy Cutter Mackenzie and Richard Smith, 2003) I aim to show in which way this short story expresses awareness of ecological interrelatedness and an attitude of care and stewardship towards nature. In the vein of Christopher Manes (1996) and Don Kulick (2017), I also argue that an environmental ethics which speaks on the behalf of nature and empathetic engagement with life beyond the human, comes to the fore.

Key words: Ecocriticism, ecological literacy, eco-literacy, Arabic literature, Egypt, the Nile.

To think like a mountain

Until the emergence of environmental history, particularly in the United States in the late 1960s, it was rare indeed for historians to “think like a mountain”, in the expression of Aldo Leopold, i.e., to narrate history from the point of view of animals, ecosystems and other non-human entities (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016: 37).

This article represents an endeavour to ‘think like a mountain’, to explore in which way a human, urban society in the Arab world may respond to a non-human entity and an ecosystem by acquiring a measure of eco-literacy as expressed in the short story *al-Maṭba‘a al-Qadīma* (*The Old Print-Press*) by the Egyptian author Muḥammad al-Mansī Qandīl. I aim to show that the protagonist of this short story expresses an individual step towards eco-literacy meaning

that he gains insights towards comprehending ecological “interrelatedness, and an attitude of care or stewardship” towards nature (Orr 1992: 92). The protagonist also gains an “environmental ethics” with which he breaks the “silence of nature” and learns how to engage empathetically with life “beyond the human” (Manes 1996: 26 Kulick 2017: 370).

In order to discuss the protagonist’s acquisition of awareness of the mechanisms of ecological systems leading to corrected actions we will set this short story in the frame of David W. Orr’s concept of ecological literacy or eco-literacy (Orr 1992; Cutter Mackenzie and Smith 2003).¹ Deep-seated ecological literacy running through societies at all levels, national, geographical and political, may be a response to the situation in which humanity finds itself in the present era, the Anthropocene, being characterized by the fact that

the human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system (Steffen *et al.* 2011: 842).²

This is an epoch that requires

the substitution of the “ungrounded humanities of industrial modernity by new environmental humanities that adventures beyond the great separation between environment and society (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016: 33).”

Eco-literacy includes, among many things, “knowledge on how to build healthy cities and to revitalize rural areas, how to grow food in an environmentally sound manner, and [conduct] research on the conditions of peace” (Orr 1992: 92-93). Eco-literacy also implies an understanding of ‘how people and societies relate to each other and to natural systems, and how they might do so sustainably.’ Moreover, the ecologically literate person “understands the dynamics of the environmental crisis, which includes a thorough understanding of how people (and societies) have become so destructive” (Orr: 1992: 92-93). Importantly, the ecologically literate person, is a person who “has the knowledge necessary to comprehend interrelatedness, and an attitude of care or stewardship” as explained by Orr (1992:92). In

¹ For the term eco-literacy, consult Amy Cutter Mackenzie and Richard Smith who set out from Orr’s theory of ecological literacy by adding to it the concept *eco-literacy* “in order to appropriately encapsulate (*measure*) both ecological literacy (complex knowledge) and environmental (*eco*) philosophy (belief) indicators” (2003: 502). For more on these terms consult Gail Ramsay (2019).

² Also quoted by Bonneuil and Fressoz (2016: 4).

other words, “[A] viable environmental ethics must confront ‘the silence of nature’ – the fact that in our culture only humans have status as speaking subjects”, as expressed by Christopher Manes (1996: 26). The “silence of nature” is corroborated here, metaphorically, by a lack of “ecological literacy” as pronounced by Orr. This means that a lack of ecological literacy and inability to ‘think like a mountain’ make people unaware of what is required of human societies in order for the ecological system including its flora, fauna and topography to survive and to do so in a healthy manner. Consequently, learning to read the language of ecology and thus being able to communicate with, or at least, listen to and comprehend the communication of nature and its non-human inhabitants in some measure, is something that is required of modern, urbanized people.

Leopold, Orr, Manes and others foresee practical action in the wake of an application of concepts such as “thinking like a mountain”, becoming “ecologically literate”, i.e. understanding the mechanisms of ecosystems and “breaking the silence of nature”, by speaking up on behalf of and responding to the needs of natural systems and non-human entities. It is relevant to mention here that this reasoning has been questioned by sociologists specialising in human ecology, Ebba Lisberg Jensen and Pernilla Ouis and contested by environmental studies professor Elizabeth R. DeSombre (Lisberg Jensen and Ouis 2008: 19; DeSombre: 2018). In fact, DeSombre finds that information, moral persuasion and fear are not necessarily conduits to behavioural change to avoid causing environmental harm (DeSombre: 2018). Nevertheless, as I aim to demonstrate, action is taken in the wake of acquiring a measure of eco-literacy in the short story, *The Old Print-Press*, to which we will apply an ecocritical reading presently. The ecocritical perspectives described above link *asking* about the ecological system, *acquiring* eco-literacy and *acting* in order to avoid pollution and destruction of the environment and its human and non-human inhabitants, and in this order. We will apply them to *The Old Print-Press* by Qandīl by keeping in mind questions such as “What is wrong?” implying that a first step towards becoming ecologically literate is awareness of the fact that something is wrong. “Why and how is this happening?” meaning that understanding the ecological system is a step on the way towards ‘thinking like a mountain’ and breaking the ‘silence of nature.’ And “What can be done?” by which is meant acting upon that which is communicated and thereby confirming that a measure of eco-literacy has been acquired.

An ecocritical theme in *The Old Print-Press* by Muḥammad al-Mansī Qandīl

The Old Print-Press is the first of three short stories in the short-story collection, *Thalāth ḥikāyāt ‘an al-ghaḍab* (Three stories about anger) by the Egyptian author Muḥammad al-Mansī Qandīl. We do not argue that *The Old Print-Press* necessarily be included in a set of literary works to which we may apply the term *eco-literature*, by which we intend “the whole gamut of literary works, including fiction, poetry and criticism, which lay stress on ecological issues, as expressed by Subramanian” (2017). Rather, we are guided by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, who propose that eco-environmental criticism demands a particular way of reading, rather than “a specific corpus of literary and other cultural texts” (2010: 13). In essence, *The Old Print-Press* may well be included in what Layla Shereen Sakr names a discourse of *thawra* (revolt or revolution) and to which I have made reference in my study on popular Egyptian blogs (Ramsay 2017: 6-7, 79, 127). This Egyptian discourse springs from a long history of uprisings in Egypt, beginning with the Urabi revolt in 1882. From there we move on to Saad Zaghloul’s uprising against the British in 1919, the Free Officers’ revolt against the monarchy in 1952, the bread riots of 1977 under Anwar Sadat and reach “the leaderless revolution of 2011” in which Hosny Mubarak was ousted, as explained by Sakr (2013: 248).

In Qandīl’s story, an old print-press is uncovered in a hidden passage adjoined to the cellar of Café Riche in Cairo. It is revealed that it has been used to produce communiqués and lists over activists who have lost their lives in action, *shuhadā’*, during these uprisings. *The Old Print-Press* belongs to the category of Arabic teenage literature or literature for young adults. As such, I argue, it is especially suitable for an ecocritical analysis considering that the urgent questions of ecology require the attention of both present and coming generations, young and old, globally. An ecological point made in this story is related to the problem of Nile-water pollution and destruction of natural resources leading to loss of wildlife. Although the theme of revolts or revolutions, Sakr’s discourse of *thawra* in the context of the modern history of Egypt, certainly deserves academic study and attention, our attention in this article will be on the point of an ecological concern made visible in this story. It begins with an episode of an unexpected arrival of Nile birds at Café Riche.

Birds of the Nile

In *The Old Print-Press* the reader meets Filfel, a waiter at Café Riche, located roughly 500 meters from Tahrir Square on Talaat Harb Street. The café is one of the most renowned landmarks in Cairo. It opened in 1908 and became a meeting place for intellectuals and

writers and many historical events of the 20th century are said to have taken place there. Among the famous personages to frequent the café was Nobel Prize Laureate of Literature, Naguib Mahfouz who would hold meetings there for the literati and intellectuals on Fridays. Filfel does not have the economic means to study and his work keeps him busy throughout the day. Yet, he dreams about becoming an author and of being included in the group of intellectuals to whom he caters.

Then, all of a sudden, in a magic realist mode, strange events begin to take place at the café.³ One is the appearance of a shoe-shiner, who takes the place of the previous one who has disappeared. This new shoe-shiner not only shines the shoes of the customers but also strikes up conversations with them while relating details from their personal lives. He gives them advice as to how to act in personal dilemmas and predicts their future. Another strange event is that of the sudden appearance of beautiful many-coloured birds that begin to flock at the café. Filfel does not understand why.

Birds began to appear at the café... It was during the afternoon siesta... The small, many-coloured birds settled on the tables, they looked around with small, bright eyes, their heads brought close together as if whispering to each other. Maybe they were telling one another: "This place is the best!" (Qandīl 2014 [2013]: 19).

بدأت الطيور تظهر حول المقهى... كانت هذه ساعة القيلولة... هبطت طيور صغيرة ملونة على المناضد، تلفتت حولها بعيون صغيرة براقعة، تقاربت رؤوسها كأنها تتهاشم، ربما تقول لبعضها: إن هذا هو المكان الأفضل.

The birds keep returning in ever-larger numbers. Puzzled over this appearance of such great numbers of spectacularly many-coloured birds, Filfel ponders the question of why they have arrived and why they have chosen this particular café, indeed, his own work-place.

What brought them here? Why did they choose this café? (Qandīl 2014 [2013]: 20).

³ Another expression in place here could be *cli-fi* (climate fiction) as a correlate to *sci-fi* (science fiction) indicating that *cli-fi* "often ventures into the realms of sci-fi and/or speculative fiction when the narrative gets rooted in future or in an imaginary geographical locale" (Subramanian 2017). This reasoning would give the reader a sense of urgency and insecurity as to the setting of the story at hand. It might evoke questions such as does this story take place in the Cairo with which we are acquainted or, is it a question of a parallel world or universe?

ما الذي جاء بها هنا؟ لماذا اختارت هذا المقهى؟

Soon, Filfel notices that they do not leave a single crumb on the tables but leave them shining clean. At this point, it occurs to him that the birds come to the café because they are hungry and thirsty. He rushes inside and brings out a bowl of water and a piece of bread that he tears into small pieces. Next, he moves away from the table upon which he has strewn the crumbs so as not to frighten away the birds with his presence. Once more, the birds draw near their fluttering of wings filling the air.

The place was filled with the flutter of their wings, but when they saw the breadcrumbs and water, they returned. They promptly began plucking the crumbs with their small beaks (Qandīl 2014 [2013]: 20).

امتألاً المكان بحفيف أجنحتها، ولكنها عندما شاهدت فتات الخبز والماء عادت. وعلى الفور بدأت تلتقط الفتات بمناقيرها...

Astonished at how efficiently and quickly the birds clean the tables from crumbs and leftovers Filfel realises that the immediate need of the birds is sustenance. Consequently, he brings them breadcrumbs and water. However, he is not aware of the underlying reason behind their need and subsequent appearance at the café.

The owner of the café, who is portrayed as a lazy bully who sits and sleeps on a chair when he doesn't ladle out orders to Filfel is displeased with the new guests and demands that Filfel get rid of them. Saddened Filfel claps his hands and the birds immediately obey him and soar up on high only to return later in even larger numbers.

It is the mysterious shoe-shiner who has taken to spend time at the café, offering his services to the customers, who explains to Filfel that the birds are "Birds of the Nile" and that they are looking for food and water. Indirectly, he addresses the alterations of the environment caused by human action and the effects of water pollution and direct damage these have had on the birdlife of the Nile habitat.

They are "Birds of the Nile." They have left the river and do not want to return. They are hungry and thirsty (Qandīl 2014 [2013]: 22).

إنها «عصافير النيل»، لقد هجرت النهر ولا تريد العودة إليه، إنها جائعة وعطشى.

In other words, it is from the character of the shoe-shiner that Filfel learns explicitly what the problem is: The birds cannot find proper sustenance in their natural habitat, the Nile, its banks, flora and fauna. The café owner though, emerges as unresponsive, uninformed and disinterested and responds to the shoe-shiner's explanation by asking how they arrived at this state considering that they hover over the river "all day long."

How did they end up in this state when they fly over the river all day long (Qandīl 2014 [2013]: 22)?

كيف تصل إلى هذه الحالة وهي تحلق على النهر طوال اليوم؟

Filfel assiduously feeds the birds crumbs and is relentless to the degree that even the café owner stops protesting and gives in. Their number increases. They flock around Talaat Harb square settling on the buildings surrounding it. They sit silently, waiting and watching, Filfel keeping an eye on them, while the passers-by make note of the birds and wonder what might be taking place. At this very moment, and without a word uttered audibly, the silence of nature is broken. After the café-owner's pointless question, there is silence but it is a silence replete with meaning.

There came no answer. Thousands of small, bright eyes surrounded the square, not offering anyone an answer (Qandīl 2014 [2013]: 22).

لم يكن هناك جواب، كانت هناك آلاف من العيون البراقة الصغيرة تحيط بالميدان ولا تقدم جواباً لأحد.

In fact, the birds have already communicated to Filfel that they need sustenance by their act of cleaning the tables from crumbs, waiting patiently for the next meal to be served and not returning to their natural habitat. Their need is emphasized by the fact that they arrive in ever-increasing numbers and settle on the buildings surrounding the square, without leaving to return to the river. They wait silently, until Filfel has strewn the bread and left water for them on the tables.

The people in the street make note of the arrival of birds in great numbers as they settle on the buildings and wait in silence for food to be served by Filfel at Café Riche. However, we do not learn whether they realise what the plight of the birds may be. Albeit having been

made aware of the immediate needs of the birds, we cannot conclude that Filfel is aware of the underlying reasons for their appearance.

Awareness & action

The water-science research organization dedicated to solving the world water crisis, *Save the Water*, offers a perspective on the environmental reality of the site upon which the fantasy story of *The Old Print-Press* takes place. “Besides the population growth and lack of water, there is another huge danger,” writes *Save the Water*-writer Fady Michael, namely, that of water pollution. “Water is polluted when a direct or indirect change occurs in its elements or in its physical or chemical properties.” Sources of pollution into the Nile may include industrial wastewater discharge, pesticidal and chemical fertilizer residue from agricultural application and oil pollution. Pollutants include heavy metals dumped by factories into the river and sewage remnants from floating hotels. Michael notes that an Egyptian custom of getting rid of waste in the river adds to the pollution problematic (Michael 2014). As expressed in the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) of 2009:

Poor access to sanitation services... is also a factor contributing to water pollution with widespread consequences for human security. In Egypt high levels of pollution from raw sewage in the Nile Delta region ‘undermines the potential health benefits of near universal access to water’ (AHDR 2009: 3, 45).

Moreover, the 2009 AHDR emphasizes that “[W]ater pollution in Arab countries has grown into a serious challenge” (p. 3). Add to this the ecological challenge of desertification as explained in this same report: “Ongoing desertification threatens about 2.87 million square kilometres or a fifth of the total area of the Arab countries” (AHDR 2009: 3). Speaking of the increasing world temperature Bonneuil and Fressoz warn of “the extinction of bio-diversity”, something which

is already proceeding at a speed unmatched for 65 million years. This means that human societies will have to face up in the coming decades to changes of state in the Earth system to which the genus *Homo*, which appeared only two and a half million years ago, has never experienced (2016: 24).

Factors such as those given above seem to frame the perspective of the spokesperson for eco-literacy and environmental awareness in *The Old Print-Press*, the character of the shoe-shiner. He spells out the problem of lack of sustenance in the natural habitat of the birds, the Nile and its riverbed. The routine of the birds to return regularly and finally to settle near the café is the wakeup signal for Filfel to take a first step towards eco-literacy. He is on the way to become an “ecologically literate person” who “has the knowledge necessary to comprehend interrelatedness, and an attitude of care or stewardship” as explained by Orr (1992: 92). While Manes makes clear that “environmental ethics must confront ‘the silence of nature’ – the fact that in our culture only humans have status as speaking subjects, Kulick explains that one way of breaking the silence of nature is to rethink what human-animal communication may implicate. It may encompass “a conduit to re-thinking fundamental conceptual, practical and ethical issues, such as... the capacity that humans have to empathetically engage with life ‘beyond the human’” (Manes 1996: 26; Kulick 2017: 370).

In summary, the routine of the birds to return regularly and finally settle near the café is the wakeup signal for Filfel to take a first step towards ecolacy. Filfel is made *aware* that the birds want to communicate something to him. He is informed by the shoe-shiner and by his own query as to the reason for why the birds suddenly appear and subsequently *understands* that their immediate need is sustenance. As a result, he *acts* by bringing them breadcrumbs and water. He does not however display awareness of the underlying reason behind their need, nor is he aware that most Nile birds do not eat, in fact should not be fed, bread or table scraps. Most of these birds feed on fish, rodents or insects. An exception is the Nile Valley sunbird (*Hedydipna metallica*), who lives entirely on flower nectar.

Consequently, I argue that Filfel is on the way to become ecolate, an “ecologically literate person” as spelled out by Orr (1992: 92). As requested by Manes, he learns how to interpret the silent communication of the birds (Manes 1996: 26). In the end, people walking in the street seem to become aware that there is a silent language of nature which they do not understand. We may suggest that the general public passing in the street also reach a degree of eco-literacy in as much as that they begin to ponder the question of why rare, many-coloured birds are flocking to and settling on down-town buildings in Cairo.



White egret on the Nile in central Cairo

©Gail Ramsay 2014

Literature

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