

The Intersection between Ecocriticism and Children's Literature: The Case of Abdel-Tawab Youssef

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Abstract

This paper investigates the extent to which the fiction of Abdel-Tawab Youssef the renowned Egyptian writer for children has managed to espouse pivotal ecological causes such as pollution, desertification, climate change, production and consumption malpractices, radiation, toxicity, and transgression against plants and animals while riveting the attention of child readers through a most poetic language and variously gratifying forms. In the first theoretical part of the paper, I explore the symbiotic intersection between ecocriticism and children's literature as two interdisciplinary genres whose integration could professedly bear fruits in the arduous, all-embracing process of educating children culturally, aesthetically, religiously, and ecologically. The second part of the paper substantiates the proposition put forward here through a sample collection of Youssef's fictional stories for children. Special emphasis will be laid on the writer's fictionalization of the relationship between children and animals, on his appropriation of the potentialities of language, and on his depiction of the ecological mentality as nonviolent, adaptive, responsive, and attentive to the environment, perceiving other

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creatures as subjects worthy of respect, whose different voices must be attended to, and with whom one is emotionally engaged, interwoven in an ecological and spiritual continuum.

Keywords

Children's literature – ecocriticism - Abdel-Tawab Youssef - the intersection between ecocriticism and children's literature - poetic language – Egypt - contemporaneity in writing for children

الملخص:

يتناول هذا البحث العلاقة الوطيدة بين النقد البيئي وأدب الأطفال في بعض كتابات عبدالنواب يوسف الروائية للأطفال، حيث تركز الدراسة على تبيان مدى نجاح هذه الكتابات في تعميق وعى وإدراك القراء فيما يخص بعض المشكلات البيئية الملحة وطرق علاجها مثل الحديث عن مسئوليتهم تجاه التلوث البيئي والتصحر والإعتداء على المظاهر المختلفة للبيئة مثل النباتات والحيوانات وذلك باستخدام لغة شاعرية ملائمة للأطفال ولا سيما عند الحديث عن العلاقة بين الإنسان والحيوان. وتولى الدراسة اهتماما خاصا بقدرة الكاتب على إيصال هذه الرسائل الإيكولوجية لجمهور قرائه من الأطفال دون الإغراق في التنظير أو الوعظ وذلك من خلال اختياره لقوالب وأساليب روائية ملائمة لهذه المرحلة السنية مثل القصة القصيرة والأقصوصة والقصيدة والحوار والتفكير التأملى التخيلى مع المزج الدائم بين منجزات العلم المعاصر ومقتضيات الواقع ومشكلاته مع طبيعة تكوين الأطفال التى تجنح للبراءة والطهر والفضول والاستعداد الفطرى للنمو الإدراكى والمعرفى مما يؤكد وجود تقاطع طاغ بين النقد البيئى وأدب الأطفال.

الكلمات الدالة:

النقد البيئي؛ أدب الأطفال؛ عبد التواب يوسف؛ التقاطع بين النقد البيئي وأدب الأطفال؛
اللغة الشاعرية؛ مصر؛ المعاصرة عند الكتابة للأطفال

Introduction

“Morals, like fruits, are the gift of nature. It is immoral to pick an immature fruit as this will be an abomination against nature, and it is man's chief responsibility to redress this corruption”

(Abdel-Tawab Youssef, Hayy Ibn Yaqdhan 8-9)

One salient function of ecocriticism and of children's literature is to raise the consciousness of readers towards pressing environmental issues such as pollution, desertification, climate change, production and consumption malpractices, radiation, toxicity, and transgression against plants and animals, among other things. As they discursively counterattack the ceaseless attempts to disrupt the innocence and pure-heartedness of nature and children alike, both genres intersect and integrate on more levels than one. Greta Gaard maintains that children's literature prepares “children all over the world to resist ... culturally, economically, and environmentally destructive developments” (334). To subvert the detrimental apocalyptic direction which contemporary civilization is heading to, children's literature has become a most propitious space for the development of ecocritical awareness in both children and adults. The message to be delivered seems to be directed to “various countries that are currently committing irreversible crimes against their natural environments under the spell of progress: you will

bring about your own collapse ... if you are not heedful of nature's bounty; your civilization will prosper so long as nature remains intact" (Oppermann et al. 1). Nowhere can this ecocritical message be fully comprehended as in children's literature which is deemed by many scholars as the most fertile soil for sowing the seeds of ecological awareness in young hearts and minds.

This didactic nature of ecocriticism and children's literature is the groundwork of the fiction of Abdel-Tawab Youssef whereby every possible effort is exerted towards the ecological enlightenment of children while paying attention to the importance of moulding all this into a refined, aesthetic framework. This is what Youssef for example does in his novella, *My Father, An Egyptian Teacher*. In the endorsing words of the translator on the blurb of the book, "this is a novella narrating his story with affection and respect for all teachers. These are the leaders who show us the path, build a lofty edifice, and sweat to pave the road of hope" (119). One fine example of the didactic yet subtle drift of the narrative is the following one whereby the grandfather is humbly and generously treated by one of his ex-students who is now attending as a physician to his health problems:

The voice of the great learned doctor began to shake as he spoke. He said, "I do not think you remember me, my dear teacher; but I have never forgotten you. I am one of your sons, one of your students from the city of Bani Sweif. I know that hundreds, even thousands, of students have been taught by you in a steady procession over the years..... Your image is engraved upon their

minds..... You teachers are the real craftsmen in these cultural centers that produce doctors, engineers, journalists, lawyers, and all those who are successful in life.” (17-18)

In other words, a committed writer for children of the caliber of Abdel-Tawab Youssef, one whose oeuvre exceeded a thousand (Loubna Youssef “Abdel-Tawab Youssef: Praying” 5) must surely and painstakingly leave an imprint on the minds of his young readers, let alone delight them with consummate works of art so that the messages to be inculcated into them can be driven home. He regards this as the greatest of “messages, responsibilities and duties towards children⁽¹⁾” (Douha, O Douha 37). He follows in the footsteps of his father the committed teacher, asserting that he “inherited his mission, but rather than using chalk, I use pen and paper, the radio, TV screen, and theatre” (My Father was a Teacher 115). This twofold polarity in the fiction of Youssef represents the core of the current study in which an attempt is made to investigate the extent to which the writer has managed to espouse pivotal ecological causes while riveting the attention of child readers through a most poetic language and variously gratifying forms. In the first theoretical part of the paper, I explore the symbiotic intersection between ecocriticism and children's literature as two interdisciplinary genres whose integration could professedly bear fruits in the arduous, all-embracing process of educating children culturally, aesthetically, religiously, and ecologically. The second part of the paper substantiates the proposition put forward here through a sample collection of Youssef's fictional stories for children.

The umbilical cord between ecology and children's literature has increasingly dominated contemporary debates about the relationship between human beings and nature. The recent gruesome transgression (or "environmental holocaust" as Lawrence Buell (52) calls it) against almost all forms of nature has particularly accentuated the need for going back to the roots whereby children can learn afresh how to conserve nature. According to Garrard, "ecocriticism is, centrally, literary and cultural criticism, carried out from an environmentalist standpoint" ("Problems and Prospects"). As such, the primary concern of ecocriticism is the appraisal of works of art such as literature for children from an ecocentric point of view. Sidney I. Dobrin similarly believes that "ecocriticism and children's literature are bound together in intellectual pursuit, their methodologies and purpose overlapping to the point of inseparability" (21). The confluence and intersection of both genres can be attributed to their primary emphasis on man's precarious position in the face of highly imperiled emblems and manifestations of nature, particularly in the twenty-first century. Towards that end, both genres utilize similar strategies such as illustrations, animal imagery, fables, adventures, juxtaposition, and varying back-to-wilderness techniques .

Tessa Strickland highlights the interest of both genres in the inner and outer ecological education of children so that they would be inextricably tied up to their environments as they grow up: "the true value of stories in education is the way in which they offer children images and ideas that help them join up the ecology of their inner worlds, or selves, with the ecology of the outer world – ... the older, wilder world of stones, woods

and water” (7). M. J. Cella (2013) similarly argues that “literary narratives that incorporate an ecosomatic imperative ... have the capacity to reorient our sense of and behavior toward both the human body and natural world” (587). While ecocriticism caters to the reorientation and rehabilitation of the senses and behaviour of human beings towards the natural world, the artistic representation of the same values in children’s literature merges fact and fiction and will supposedly “redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (Love 237). Both disciplines ultimately contribute to examining “not only the reflection of the vegetative world in literature, but also the tropes that construct humanity’s relationship with the phenomenal world” (Kar 66). By foregrounding this tense yet rich relationship, ecocriticism and children’s literature can doubly contribute to the amelioration of ecological concerns and concurrently to man’s understanding of himself and of the universe at large.

Gaard’s 2009 question as to the value of ecocritical literature, which can well be extended to children’s literature, remains valid up till today: “As temperatures around the planet rise, as safe drinking water becomes scarce and costly, as food costs soar, populations swell, ... and the global violence against women, children, animals, and ecosystems proceeds unabated—what in the world are we doing by reading environmental literature?” (322). The answer she puts forward at this juncture lies in calling upon concerned people worldwide to think of creative ways to counterattack all these violations of the environment in whatever ways possible (334). By infusing children’s literature with direct and indirect

exploration of ecological perils, writers can build up generations of eco-conscious citizens, thus mitigating the onslaught of environmental hazards and crises. In the words of William Rueckert, “The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community” (107) .

Herein comes the beauty and benefit of examining children’s literature against the background of ecocritical scholarship. Rather than delve deep into dry scientific quantification and theorizing, the intersection of ecocriticism and children’s literature will presumably contribute to vividly revolutionizing the very recesses of man’s ecological awareness. The fictional and nonfictional works for children written by Abdel-Tawab Youssef which will be examined in the following section of this paper, rich as they are with examples engaging with plants, animals, the weather, land, seas, and deserts, will primarily be analyzed for their stress on the relationship between human beings and animals. This is not a simplistic approach; it is not even opted for for the sake of convenience. Rather, it is more of a celebration of the writer’s genuine concern with the interrelationship between human beings, especially children, and animals. Peter Hunt underscores the “similarity of children to animals, the inevitability of child-like irresponsibility in both, and the resultant need for adult authority” (*Understanding Children’s Literature* 133). Besides, it is beyond the scope of this paper to exhaustively deal with Youssef’s contribution to ecological awareness in children in relation to the other manifestations of nature, a task that

can be taken up by other research works .

Gaard focalizes the presence of animals in children's literature as one of the cornerstones of ecocriticism. She argues that, "given the predominance of animal fables in children's literature, this branch of ecocriticism has developed an emphasis interrogating the relationship of culture and nature through the relationships of children and animals ..." (325). This is an ongoing, reciprocal process that will hopefully be much to the benefit of both worlds. Amy Ratelle contends that "the reliance on animals in children's literature over the past two centuries has become a key means by which the civilizing process that children go through has been mediated by the animal body" (10). Shun Yin Kiang also opines that "animality brings continuity to human and animal lives and ... the everyday reciprocity of friendship can connect different life worlds" (147). In addition to engaging with the imperiled position of animals in the postmodern world, children's literature can redirect the attention of child readers towards the reciprocity of both domains, stressing, for example, such common traits as innocence, compassion, generosity, kind-heartedness, and love of adventure .

Among other like-minded contemporary fictional characters, the protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's novella "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" takes pride in being able to destroy wild life, particularly animals: "I move through the wilderness with my gun . . . I leave behind me a mountain of skin, bones, inedible gristle and excrement" (79). For him, "The death of the hare is the logic of salvation . . . The death of the hare is my metaphysical meat" (79-80). For Coetzee then, it is either man

or animals. Man predominates and is depicted as triumphant by killing these innocent creatures. It is this exactly that Youssef's stories attempt to subvert. Rather than presenting human beings as antagonistic to animal life and as deriving relief and pleasure from slaughtering animals or encroaching upon them, Youssef's fiction exhorts children to reach out to animals, ubiquitously depicting them as animal-friendly and as craving sometimes to turn into physical ones. This is the exemplary attitude to nature as charted out by Josephine Donovan who regards an ecocritical mentality as "nonviolent, adaptive, responsive, and attentive to the environment, perceiving other creatures as subjects worthy of respect, whose different voices must be attended to, and with whom one is emotionally engaged, interwoven in an ecological and spiritual ... continuum"(10). M. M. Enani has rightly noted that the "main thrust" of Youssef's technique in "linking the human with the natural worlds" has been pedagogical, quintessentially aimed at "nurtur[ing] the "imaginative power of the young" ("A Personal Note" 31).

As only befits the narrative structure of most pieces written by Youssef to children, the only viable link between man and ecological awareness at large is language at its best, particularly the language of poetry. For him this is not only a means of communication and edification but also a most effective bridge between the idyllic world of children and their harsh realities. Youssef admits that he has been keen on refining this faculty and determined to perfect it as he is convinced that the language used in writing for children should be far from difficult ("Foreword". *Children's Literature* 15). In a televised interview with

Farouk Shoosha, he underscores his interest in “restoring children to the domain of poetry though he is not a poet himself” (“A Cultural Evening”). He maintains that on top of all objectives behind the writing for children comes delight rather than providing information, edification, or culture; for him, delight or pleasure is the objective correlative for every other aspect in the field: you cannot for example provide information without enveloping it in a delighting artistic framework (Poetry for Children 178). Carol Lynch-Brown and Carl M. Tomlinson suggest that children's appreciation of poetry is mostly centered on "narrative poems with distinct rhythms about humorous events, well-liked familiar experiences, and animals," 46). Scott Slovic also argues that ecopoetry “guides us to pay deeper attention to our physical senses and ... to develop and clarify and articulate our feelings about the world's meaning, its value” (136). Garrard justifies this affinity between poetic language and ecocriticism by stating that the language of poetry is “evoking and refraining, naming and marveling” (“Ecocriticism” 6), a fact which best behooves child readers. This is an ongoing process of acculturation whereby, through the most effective medium of poetic language, children are culturally attuned to the nuances and intricacies of nature at large. According to Kate Rigby, “culture constructs the prism through which we know nature. We begin to internalise this prism from the moment we learn to speak; the moment ... that we are inducted into the logos, the world as shaped by language” [Original emphasis] (154).

One claims that it is mainly through maximization of the potentialities of language that Youssef could shape the world of child readers

especially with regard to what Nyman aptly calls “environmentality” (Nyman) which points to the necessity of enhancing children’s ‘mental’ awareness of environmental hazards. In the following ground-breaking quotation, Youssef calls for a real interest in the music and poetry provided to children as these “will lead them one day to the right path” (Poetry for Children 179). He maintains that

nothing competes with music and singing when it comes to touching one's feelings, sublimating and uplifting them. Man is not the only being who is subject to these effects; animals too are susceptible to them. It is sufficient to observe Arabian horses dancing to some tunes as a mark of their being touched by the music being played. It has been said that some experiments have proved that cows produce more milk while listening to music and songs and that human production itself can be doubled in the same way. This applies not only to the civilized man but to the primitive man as well. (Poetry for Children 181).

The reference to animals here, particularly horses and cows being susceptible to music and songs, highlights the inseparability of poetic language and nature in the writer’s mind. This is prototypically the job of ecocritics who, “while acknowledging the role of language in shaping our view of the world, ... seek to restore significance to the world beyond the page” (Rigby 155). Augmenting children’s sensitivity to the potentialities of language, according to Hunt, “will become deeper and more subtle through poetry than through any other form of literature” (Literature for Children 128) .

Youssef admits, though, that it is very hard to come up with purely delightful poetry which is didactic and edifying at the same time (Poetry for Children, 194). For M. M. Enani, this is “the vital energy of the Arab mind” discovered by Youssef; “it is the discovery of this power that accounts for his charming short stories, making them so brimming with vitality that we hear language “speaking us” rather than “to us” (“A Personal Note” 30). According to Ali Alhadeedy, children are naturally fond of animal poetry which deals with animals either in a serious or a comic manner; they would also be quite mesmerized by that type of poetry which talks about the weather and the different seasons" (Poetry for Children 24). Hady Elheety also confirms that poetry is a genuine part of children's literature which contributes to their intellectual, literary, psychological, social, and moral development (Poetry for Children 30).

The teacher in Youssef's biography of his father resorts to singing in class to revive nationalism in young hearts after the expulsion of Saad Zaghloul, his beloved national idol, and the consequent impossibility of anyone expressing patriotic feelings. What teacher and students sing about, though, is interestingly coupled with celebration of nature: “It was about a man praising the land and soil of Egypt in Qena and Luxor. This soil was used to make a clay pitcher to fill it with the sweet waters of the Nile. How dear were the soil and water of Egypt!” (86). Teaching, singing, and patriotism are depicted hand in hand with ecological awareness thanks, in the first place, to the writer's amplification of the potentialities of language which are made subservient to his grand fictional enterprise. Garrard's proposition that “ecocriticism is essentially

about the demarcation between nature and culture, its construction and reconstruction” (Ecocriticism 179) is most applicable in this context as the genre is aptly employed for the dissemination and conservation not only of nature but also of national culture .

Asked if writers for children could draw an ecological map most appropriate for this blossoming stage, Youssef responds by expressing grief at the distressing state of the environment and at the fact that pollution has been systematically correlated with nature in writings and discussions addressed to children; he then underscores the need for undermining this unhealthy affinity, suggesting that we build, in children’s innate consciousness, an intimate, beautiful relationship with the environment; once they recognize that, they will be environment-friendly and will naturally conserve, serve, develop, and beautify nature, let alone protect it from pollution (“An Ecological Map for Early Childhood” 14). However, Youssef ties this desired ecological awareness to the ability to fully appropriate the potentialities of language: “By perfecting the type of language used in writing for children, writers could help the latter to reproduce meanings and concepts, ... to develop on the social level, and to be able to interpret the surrounding environment” (“The Child and Language” 5).

In "The Poem", a story for children quoted by Youssef in his edition of a collection of Arabic Poetry for Children, the writer foregrounds the umbilical cord between the environment, man and animals in one "poetic" concoction through the story of the boy whose mother encourages him to take care of the she-camel through observing the

amount of milk it produces every day. The more milk the camel produces per day, the more moral reinforcement the mother provides her son. Conversely, when lesser milk is produced, mother rebukes her child for having been remiss in feeding the animal (9). When guests from another tribe visit one day, mother has to slaughter the small camel by way of the customary Arab generosity (10). Seen differently, this is an abomination that has its tragic impact not only on the boy himself but also on the mother of the small camel which goes sulky, falls into tears, and whines out of grief all the time. No matter how old little Mohammad grows, he can never forget the sound of the she-camel's whining, as if loud drums and mega-speakers resound irrevocably in his ears (10). When war erupts between the boy's tribe and the same tribe for whom the small camel was slaughtered, the motif of the camel's whining sound is reincarnated once again, this time as an accompaniment to the virtual defeat of the sacrificing tribe. Mohammad and other members of the tribe flee the land and the same sound not only magnifies in his ears but also sweeps the whole land and desert, as if the original abomination, the act of feeding a small animal to visiting guests, has transformed the boy (symbolizing human beings at large) and the surrounding environment. To the mentality of the young central consciousness of the short story, ecological perversion must inevitably result in existential havoc. By transgressing against the pure rights of innocent animals, man incurs the wrath of the environment, least of which, according to the plot-line, is the expulsion of the incriminated tribe to the Levant.

It is only when the boy has recourse to reciting poetry about this saga

that the fissures begin to heal. The verses immortalizing the slaughtered animal and enlisting the sympathy of his brethren in the diaspora towards the killed animal reach his exiled tribesmen who collectively yearn for a more innocent and triumphant time, one in which the earth was appeased and harmony used to engulf the relationship between man, animal and nature (11-12). The conclusion allegorically points to the ability of this idyllic yet gratifying reconciliation between the three elements to effect and restore cosmic order. Inspired by the poetry spreading about the small camel, the tribe collectively decides to reclaim its lost dignity and to win the war against the insurgent faction. The poems reverberate among the exiled members of the tribe who repeatedly recite them and gradually get filled with the impetus to atone for the lost times. In the words of Youssef, "poetry is as important as tales and stories to children, perhaps even more important" (Poetry for Children 5) simply because "all children are poets and poetry lovers" (Poetry for Children 7) .

In *Anthills and Other Stories* from Indonesia, the narrative is ubiquitously focalized on the close relationship between man and nature especially animals. Shaja and Cilio the two brothers who live on the banks of the river in Sumatra are confronted with a life-long turn of events when the latter, an indolent but perseverant fisherman, discovers that the worms he recently came up with while fishing could turn into gold and silver once they are fried (4). Stupefied and shamefaced, Cilio's countrymen and even his own brother chase him out of the region and he ultimately finds himself amidst a primitive clan (5). Just as worms are utilized here to engender a fictional remolding of the life of the two

brothers, it is the dog Bersay that is introduced into the story to initiate a more harmonious relationship with nature. As if retaliating against the wrath of the whole universe, the dog starts to restore balance by leading Cilio to an idyllic uphill location whereby, full of tranquility and utter communion with nature, he builds up an admirable city in what would be known later as Sumatra, capital of Indonesia (6-7).

In a manner reminiscent of the magic of poetry in the foregoing short story "The Poem", Youssef's Anthills appropriates the beauty of language to edify and to teach, this time in relation to Islam and to the Holy Quran. This is peculiar to Youssef whose works teem with ulterior, objective enunciation of Islam, albeit in a moderate, roundabout way. Well into the middle of the story, the narrative drifts away from Cilio's nascent empire to a faraway land where some trusted messiah eloquently and convincingly advises his countrymen to follow in the footsteps of and acquiesce to the sage who resides uphill in Sumatra, who happens to be Cilio (10). Once approached with some beautiful verses from the Holy Quran, Cilio easily and enchantingly recites them in Arabic, much to the delight of the immigrants from the Arabic Peninsula. The reconciliation that was triggered off by the dog in the first half of the story is amazingly linked up with the one produced by the magic of Quranic recitation. For the child-reader swept with pleasure at the development of the story from mere brotherly struggle to final spiritual relief at the powerful message of the word of God, the one crucial locus of control is that of poetry, of language at its best when put to the service of the whole narrative. Enveloped in the subtle fabric of the story is the ecological message

contained in the inseparability of man and nature especially animals. As worms lead to the early dispute between Cilio and his brethren, it is the dog that can ultimately restore balance to this relationship by guiding him to a more spacious environment in which he could thrive and flourish. As Laurence Talairach-Vielmas puts it, “the discourse on the protection of nature interweaves mankind’s evolution with humans’ relation to animals and fashions the narrative into an evolutionary parable” (46).

In *The Pigeon-Cow*, the writer recreates a story that was narrated to him earlier in the KSA by Sheikh Zayd about an Arab sage who could manoeuvre his way out of tribal embarrassment by having recourse both to the animal world and to the potentialities of language. Known among all and sundry for his kindness and generosity, the Sheikh has always been associated in the minds of all villagers with his cow which he unties every day at noon to graze, renew its stock of milk and perhaps to go home alone. When suddenly visited in the field by a host of visitors, he insists on treating them to lunch, but they ask him not to send word to his wife back home so that she may not make special arrangements for them. He succumbs to their demands and goes back home with them at sunset to find, much to their surprise, that a delicious meal has been prepared for all of them by his wife. Eager to know the secret behind this discovery, they refuse to eat before being told about it. It turns out that upon releasing the animal, the Sheikh wrote a message to his wife asking her to prepare a generous meal for his guests and stuck it to the tail of the cow. Upon milking it, the wife got the terse yet very expressive message and behaved accordingly (*The Pigeon-Cow*). While the backdrop of the

cow imagery interweaves the strands of the story together, it is the magic of language that works miracles in the final analysis, bridging the gap between fact and fiction and approximating the world of animals to little minds. Not only are they indirectly instructed about Arab generosity and magnanimity: they are also drawn into unconscious veneration of the role animals can play in fostering continuity and reciprocity with human beings.

In a series of stories partaking of the title: *What if I were*, the writer similarly draws upon the potentialities of beautiful language to introduce children to the profundity of the world of seas, trees, puppies, and butterflies. Hunt's dictum that child readers "get an agreeable thrill from imagining themselves coping heroically within an active environment" (*Literature for Children* 159) is herein fictionalized by Youssef who structures these narratives around the generic question of whether children can imagine themselves as turning into animals or some other emblems of nature. The impetus throughout is to seduce children into getting wholeheartedly involved in some selected environmental causes and to raise their consciousness about how best to interact with, honour and sustain them. For example, a story in which a child envisages himself as becoming a "physical" sea purports, naturally, to say more than just provide pleasure or even offer an alternative setting for children's literature. As Stefania Tondo argues, "water fantasies for children enforce the sense of a strong relationship between humans and their environment, between land and water.... They create paraxial worlds, dialogically speaking to each other, and fabulous crossover creatures,

half-land and half-water, who mediate the dialogue” (16). In Youssef’s *What if I were a Sea*, the child who implores his mother to help him to turn into a sea has the following to say by way of indirect initiation into ecology and its essential concerns:

Aren’t there any seas that have been contaminated by man? Don’t we have seas which suffer from the presence of oil and petrol slicks which are detrimental to pelagic organisms? Don’t we have seas in which the refuse of factories and industries is constantly thrown so that such seas have turned into very large dustbins? Does this make Allah pleased with us? And is this the reward of the sea which yields pearls and fish for us and serves as a wonderful means of transportation? (14).

Not only does the child draw our attention to the importance of the preservation of the environment; he also bemoans man’s ruinous, disadvantageous attitude towards nature especially the sea, an indispensable aspect of ecocriticism which is here beautifully focalized in a narrative form most appropriate for the reception of child readers. Lazu opines that the sea trope provides “a unique space within which to construct the most fantastic worlds imaginable – ones that offer limitless adventures for young travelers in children’s books” (189). Hunt also cogently maintains that one of the strengths of children’s literature is its ability to address family issues while concomitantly foregrounding ecological questions: “Some of the most popular themes for children remain fairly constant: nature, magic, weather, the sea, school and family life, adventure – and anything that makes them laugh” (*Encyclopedia of*

Children's Literature 397). The delight and laughter produced by this ecoconscious story resides mainly in the comic mixture of all these themes, on top of which comes the serious emphasis placed on man's relationship to the sea .

Equally important in the foregoing quotation as well is that the writer has not forgotten to imbue the whole ecocritical lesson with a religious tenor that is devoid of direct, disagreeable moralizing. According to Stephen Thomson, "in teaching children to read stories, ... it is of the highest importance to be ideologically aware, and to pass that ideological awareness on to the children" (144). For Hunt, "no work, even the most apparently simple book for children, can be innocent of some ideological freight" (Literature for Children 16). Even in dealing with something as sacred as the story of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Youssef has chosen to teach and to delight young children, at once enhancing their ideological awareness and whetting their appetite for aesthetic pleasure. He has also made ample use of animals and plants for narratological purposes. This is pretty much what M. M. Enani has observed in his introduction to his own translation of Youssef's *A Life of the Prophet Muhammad in Twenty Tales*:

A bibliography of the Prophet Muhammad, told by various unusual speakers—animals⁽²⁾, plants, rocks etc. and the book is addressed primarily to young Muslim readers. However, the literary quality and the novel presentation of the biography, as well as meticulous commitment to historical fact, recommended [it] to older audiences, regardless of religious creed. ("Introduction ")

Maha Ghanem states that religion has constituted a vital dimension of Youssef's methodology in writing for children, adding that Youssef has written a series of thirty books on Stories from the Holy Quran on Birds and Animals (122). Encouraged by his mother to give free reins to his imagination in his visualization of himself as a real sea, the child offers a ready-made formula for the exemplary way children (and grown-ups) can deal with the sea; together with the foregoing passage in which the child bemoans the dire effect of contemporary civilization on the sea, the following one positions Youssef at the forefront of Arab writers whose works encapsulate the essence of ecocriticism :

But I would like to require adults not to fill this sea I am thinking of with fleets, military warships, or destruction bases as this is quite devastating. I want vessels that can be made use of by real, understanding human beings; I also want trade ships, oil tankers, and fishing boats. I wish children can sit in tranquility on the beach as they hold their fishing rod so that, from time to time, I would grant them a fish that would make them quite happy. This is the type of sea I want to turn into (12) .

The child's earnest call for the presence of a world of rapport between man and nature is a motif that runs through *What if I were a Puppy* as well. The child's mother does not reprimand him for wanting to be a puppy (2), and the ensuing interesting dialogue between them indirectly yields profound propositions that are quintessential from an ecocritical perspective. As mother thinks twice before agreeing to make the virtual puppy eat with her on the same table for sanitary reasons, the child

retaliates by stressing the need to love the puppy and sympathize with it in the same way mother deals with him, on the grounds that it cannot talk or complain, being kind-hearted and weak (10). He demands that the envisioned puppy be fed and treated in the same way he as a human being is (14). In line with the same pattern of thought characteristic of Youssef's fiction, the narrative alludes to the Islamic heritage to substantiate the ecological issue at hand. Both mother and child refer to a prophetic tradition in which the Prophet Muhammad exhorts us to have mercy with dogs as in the story of someone who was rewarded with paradise simply because he helped a thirsty dog to drink and in the story of the woman who went to hellfire because she put a cat in a cage, neither feeding it nor allowing it to feed on its own (10). The religious turn of the narrative is calculated to lend depth and credibility to the narrative voice's stress on the importance of linkage between human beings and animals. In the words of Werner and Riga, "religion plays an increasingly prominent part in books for children [as it] is what provides the necessary mental and spiritual security to bring order out of the chaos that modern writers are concerned with" (2).

In *What if I were a Butterfly*, the imagined butterfly is introduced into the story for the affinity it has with idealized human beings who aspire for liberty, jubilation, and merriment (2). At the outset of the narrative, then, a bond is instantly created between man and animal as the child exhorts mother, once she turns into a butterfly, to allow her to run freely and move from flower to flower. However, she acquiesces to her mother's conditioned approval that she ought to share with her the choice

of friends and colours without taking this as a violation of her own right to free choice (8). By laying this subtle emphasis on the correspondence between the value of liberty in the butterfly and in the child, the story creates some noticeable confluence between nature and the child's identity formation. The narrative walks a tightrope connecting both worlds whose divergence and convergence buttress the intersection between ecocriticism and children's literature .

Once again, mother fine-tunes her description of the life-cycle of the butterfly by turning to spirituality as she underscores the "message" (10) imparted by the insect which contributes to the maturity of flowers by the process of interpollination (10) in a most sublime journey of cooperation between emblems of nature. One more important religious lesson the narrative highlights in this context is the importance of thought and dialogue which, as mother says, are likened to pure religious worship by the Prophet (16). Thus, the narrative voice subtly moves from man to animals and then to the settling tranquility of religion in an ongoing, cyclical structure that engulfs all three dimensions in one indivisible paradigm. The writer could be read here as saying that, by paying homage to nature, man is delivering the right message of God and his messenger and that, conversely, by violating this bond, he incurs His wrath and punishment. As Tom Burns has put it, "many scholars regard religion as one of the thematic foundations of children's literature" (Burns). However, this "thematic foundation" should not turn, through direct moralizing, from teaching into preaching; having recourse to it for some narratological purposes and pinning it into the fabric of eco-

literature as does Youssef's fiction is guaranteed to yield maximal benefits .

Semiremis, for example, is not a purely religious story, yet the religious backdrop is not to be mistaken. It is made subservient to the overall theme of the interrelationship between the twin worlds of man and animals. There seems to be a divine compassion overseeing the schism that threatens to mar man's relationship to the whole universe. The narrative is essentially structured around the balance inevitably superimposed on the universe through the intuitive integration of children and animals. Semeramis the central consciousness of the novella is born parentless at the start and it is the pigeon that not only regularly cares for, feeds, and shelters her but also finds an outlet for her cries and plea for salvation (8). Once spotting the bereaved girl, the pigeon informs its pigeon-folks who are immediately perturbed at the calamity of the deserted child (9). It is nature, at this juncture, that is described as taking the lead in caring for man, not the other way round. An analogy is instantly drawn at this juncture by the narrative voice between the pigeons' meticulous care for the immediate needs of their own young ones and that of man, the former even bemoaning the cruelty of human beings who fail to take proper care of their offspring (9). The spontaneous communion between the pigeons and the orphaned child epitomizes the desired rapprochement between humans and non-humans which is the essence of the ecocritical theory. When Semeramis is about to be attacked by a snake, the pigeon-folks unanimously agree to come to her rescue, automatically "darting upon it like an arrow" (11) .

Her only consolation when she gets married to a Syrian officer is her communion with the vast ambiance of the Mediterranean Sea in the company of pigeons and horses (33-34). It is also the pigeons, still, that give her a clue, in one dream, as to how to help her husband to conquer the enemies behind the impregnable fortress. She minutely abides by the clandestine message imparted by the birds and manages to help her husband to crush the enemy (38-40). When the despotic king plans to take her as a wife against her husband's wishes, she resorts once more to the world of dreams whereby premonitory pigeons are seen as being attacked by an eagle (44). When the king dubiously dies, she is sworn in as queen, and she asks her people one single favour: she wants them to stop slaughtering pigeons (53). As the cyclical structure of the narrative comes close to an end, Semeramis exploits the pigeons once again to send messages to other countries (53) as she begins a new phase of colonial expansion .

If the tail of the cow in *The Pigeon-Cow* as carried the peasant's message of hospitality to his wife, the pigeons in *Semeramis* direct the human race to the plight of the lonely child by showing her whereabouts to an elder child who, in turn, informs his family. The story of the dead snake they find beside her goes viral and she is promptly idolized and mythologized by all (13) as is appropriate only to a narrative for children. Perhaps because she has been initiated into our world through the benevolence of pigeons, *Semeramis* is depicted as striking everyone with her distinction and extraordinary willingness to achieve something great (17). Her insistence on working as a shepherd grants the story a parallel

structure whereby she enjoys taking care of the sheep by day and incessantly dreams of leading a “flock” of people at night, thus merging the human and non-human, the factual and the fictional. The narrative describes the young shepherd as capable of protecting her sheep against the attacks of wolves and snakes and as getting very fond of horse-riding: “no matter how wild the horse becomes, she shows signs of keeping it under control” (22). What is intriguing, though, is that she is accompanied with and overseen by pigeons throughout (23). They are “her friends and companions wherever she goes..... It is as if there is one common language shared by both of them” (23). The ulterior message implied in this parallelism is that Semeramis longs for leadership and fame and that in achieving her dream of power and control she will be supported and motivated by ordinary people.

Once she subjugates the greater part of Asia, she decides to conquer Egypt as well (61) and to build an Assyrian empire that would immortalize her forever. She recognizes, however, that she will have to die one day and, grieving at the thought, she is transformed into a pigeon and vanishes altogether (74). The story ends on the remark of the narrative voice stating that after Semeramis's departure, the Assyrian empire has been accustomed to consecrating pigeons (75). But for the reciprocity of animals and children from the very beginning of the story, there would not have been any cosmic balance or ecological equilibrium of the sort that can contribute to the building of empires and the consummation of one's worldly dreams.

In conclusion, the critical trajectory of this paper has bifurcated

throughout into the divergence and convergence of ecocriticism and children's literature as two inevitably intersecting genres. The achievements of ecocriticism have been shown as providing much of the impetus for diverse stories by Abdel-Tawab Youssef, especially ones in which animals and children have been depicted as in perpetual liaison for ecological purposes. The writer's appropriation of animals and of poetic language, coupled with his inherently spiritual predilection, has been the chief parameters through which these stories have been investigated. One major value valorized by the works explored is the necessity of children becoming environment-friendly, respecting the lives and rights of animals, birds, and butterflies and truly cherishing the reciprocity between themselves and these creatures .

Equally important is Youssef's vociferous plea against the contamination of all forms of nature, particularly transgression against animals. It is no coincidence, then, that in the 1990s, his son Essam Youssef "established the Egyptian International Company for Environmental Protection" inspired by his father's contribution to the field (Loubna Youssef "Abdeltawab-Youssef: Praying" 8). This universal dimension of Youssef's fictional enterprise has been captured as well in his TV interview with Farouk Shoosha in which he asserts that, in writing for children, he tried his best to be contemporaneous and to urge children to be up-to-date by asking questions of relevance to their contemporary world. In fact, nothing is more contemporaneous than the linkage he has striven to initiate between the constitution of children and the challenging scientific and ecological dictates of their contemporary world. That is

why Youssef's works can be translated for their peculiar worth as the achievements of the most renowned writer for children in contemporary Egypt. As Enani has suggested, "foreign audiences need to know more about children's literature in Arabic by learning more about the writer of these works ..." ("Abdel-Tawab Youssef: A Personal Note 29).

The paper has also revealed that there is a dire need today, much more than any time in the past, for children to be taught systematically, particularly in books written for them, about environmental perils and how best to resist them. The return to nature has been cogently represented artistically in the selected texts as conducive to rehabilitation or, at least, as a haven away from the onslaught of the harsh realities faced by children, empowering them and helping them to grow into more experienced and more knowledgeable ecoconscious entities. If the emphasis has primarily been laid on animals, it is quite important, in future studies, to tackle Youssef's interest in plants, birds, deserts, water, the air, and flowers in so far as they impinge on children's awareness of nature and of the environment at large. Finally, Youssef's prolific works for children can be studied in relation to the works of other world writers in terms of their stress on ecological concerns and of the universal message they impart from an Arabic, Eastern perspective.

Notes

- ⁽¹⁾ My own translation. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from the works of Youssef are my own.

- (2) It is fairly significant that the blurb of the translated book carries the titles of the twenty stories which mostly make use of animals: “I am an Elephant; Tale of a She-Ass; I am a Stone; I am a Night; I am a Bunch of Grapes; I am a Camel; I am a Buraq; I am a Snake; I am a Dove; I am a Horse; I am a Goat; I am a She-Camel; I am a Well; I am a Mountain; I am a Rock; I am an Ewe; I am the Stump of a Palm-Tree” (A Life of the Prophet 39).

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