

## **The Role of Natural and Cultural Elements in Bahaa Taher's Novel, *Khalty Safiah wa Ddair* (Aunt Safiah and the Monastery): An Ecocritical Study**

**Abdel Kareem Qutb Shetata (Ph. D.)**

*Department of English Faculty of languages and Translation- October 6 University-Egypt*  
*Corresponding Author: Abdel Kareem Qutb Shehata*

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Ecocriticism is a new approach to literary study that started in America in the seventies of the twentieth century and spread throughout Europe and the world. It focuses on the non human elements in literature such as the land, landscapes, rivers, the trees; etc. It shows the importance of these elements through highlighting their connections to the elements of fiction, the characters and the plot of a novel, for example. "Indeed the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and nonhuman" (Garrad 5). Studying this relationship helps in understanding the human characters as well as the environmental elements.

Earth and the non human elements are no longer just a setting or a location for the actions of the novel. The relationships between these elements and the human characters explain a lot and introduce the world as one whole that includes the earth as well as human beings. More important, Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between Literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and Literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Glottfelty xviii) So earth and the environmental elements play the same important role as the characters in delivering the final message to the reader.

The relation between the literary texts and the world in its social perspective is not new in explaining and understanding these texts.

Literary theory, in general, examines the relation between writers, texts and the world. In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with society – the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of the "world" to include the entire ecosphere. (xix)

The subject of ecocriticism then is the study of the relation between the writers, texts and the ecological world: the earth, the landscapes, and the other natural and the cultural elements.

The Egyptian novelist Bahaa Taher (1935) published his novel, *Khalty Safia wa Ddair (Aunt Safia and the Monastery)* in 1991. In this novel love, land, revenge, Islam, Christianity and the Upper Egyptian characters are brought together to reflect the novelist's vision. The monastery beside the main character, Safiah in the title anticipate the great role of that cultural, non-human element in the conflict of the novel.

The questions of this paper are: To what extent the ecological elements in the novel are meaningful and vital? Do these elements influence the characters and the themes? Has the non-human realm a role in the conflict? So the main aim of the paper is to prove that the natural and cultural elements are meaningful and vital. Then, to discuss the influence of these elements in drawing the main characters: Safiah, Harbi, Beshai and El Bek, in order to find out the role of the cultural element, the monastery in the conflict of the novel.

Thus, the paper focused on three main aspects. The first: the ecological elements in the novel are examined to reflect their vital and meaningful importance. The second part of the research is devoted to tackle the influence of these elements on the characters and themes. The paper in its third aspect studies the significance of the non-human elements with regard to the conflict of the novel.

(1)

In Taher's novel the non human realm is so variable. It includes natural elements such as landscapes and animals beside cultural settings like the Eastern monastery and the houses of the village. From an ecocritical perspective the novelist succeeds in introducing most of these elements as of equal vital and meaningful significance as the main characters of the novel.

A most notable landscape in the novel is the lentil field. This crucial landscape is the place where El Bek unfairly tortures Harbi and then Harbi kills El Bek.

Ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character, when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, characters(s) and place.

(Scheese 11)

Taher describes the lentil field to the reader with emphasis on the beauty of nature on that day,

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I remember it was a nice winter day. The sun was warm. It was similar to autumn when the burning of the sun is relieved, when the pure breeze blows with no dust or storms. It was also a beautiful day because the lentil plants cover the fields with their green short stems. Their small yellow flowers quickly grew to decorate the whole land. Like a golden sea the breeze moves its waves gently and carries away its fresh fragrance which I have continued to love and recall all my life. (Taher 65)

This picture of the lentil field is vital, the green stems and the yellow flowers form a golden sea with moving waves and the breeze moves the waves and carries away the fresh fragrance at the same time. The landscape is not just beautiful but ecocritically; it stresses the importance of these fields for the benefit of the world. Besides their economic relevance as a source of food for man, they also add to the beauty of the world around us. This example includes the two types of ecology, "deep ecology foregrounds the value of nature in itself,... Social ecology, by contrast, tends to value nature primarily in its human uses" (Heise 507). So as a social ecological element, this landscape is meaningful as a background for the human crimes that take place amidst the beautiful landscape. Nature gives food, beauty and vitality while man provides acts of torture and murder.

Another meaningful aspect of nature is that of the little palm trees in the farm of the monastery, "in the middle of the farm there was a small cottage which is built of reed, embraced by small neighboring palm trees that throw their shades all the time on the cottage" (37). These palm trees look after the simple house of Beshai and protect it from the hot sun. In this natural metaphor the trees are as kind as the mother who protects Beshai and his place from the hot sun.

The Eastern monastery is the most obvious cultural element in Taher's novel. He uses it as the title of his novel to draw the reader's attention to its significant meaning and its effective role. The environmental awareness of the reader begins with the monastery as a signifier, and Sarver makes it clear:

we will earn wider respect when our environmental readings expand to address not just the trees and rivers that inhabit the text we study, but also the nature inherent in humans and in settings. (10)

The monastery is built in the desert surrounded by a number of hills. From the end of the village, you walk to the east on an unpaved road through the desert until you reach the "mountain" as the villagers call these rocky brown hills. There, in the heart of three hills you find the monastery with its high walls which have the same color of the rocks around them. (Taher 29)

In his description of the monastery, Taher reflects upon the natural and cultural signifiers. Again nature becomes part of culture; the three hills embrace the monastery. The rocks also reflect their color upon the walls of the monastery. The three hills are significant connected with the Christian belief of Trinity. To reach that beautiful place, one should pay the price and walk on a long unpaved and difficult desert road.

Inside the monastery Taher introduces another example of a cultural place: the hall of the icons and the pictures of Jesus, Mary and the other saints. The narrator remembers:

when I entered this hall for the first time accompanied by Beshai, he stops in front of the picture of Mary, who motherly embraces her infant that is sucking her breast while she is kindly looking in his eyes. (Beshai starts to sing ...). (40)

The hall is not just the special place for icons and pictures, the description of the picture of Mary and the baby Jesus gives more meanings and feelings to the hall. And the song of Beshai after that adds to the meanings and the feelings that are given by the picture. The Muslim narrator respectfully describes the situation. In the description of this cultural place, the hall, both the Muslim and the Christian share emotions and feelings towards Mary and Jesus. The narrator is also influenced by the tunes of Beshai's song, "The echo repeats Beshai's song in the dark hall" (40). Here the human and the non human unite to influence one other, to live and co-exist.

Although the human influence and the non human elements are equally important for the welfare of one another; however, ecocriticism tries to focus on the importance of the non human and how the non human elements influence human life. "Ecocriticism, then attempts to find a common ground between the human and the non human to show how they can coexist in various ways" (Oppermann 2). The non human is influenced by the human and sometimes significantly stands for the position and the class of the human. An example of that is the house of El Bek which is called "Al Sarai."

Al Sarai is described in Taher's novel both in its external architecture and internal furniture to reflect the taste and the economic and social position of its owner. Al Sarai is beautiful and meaningful in itself as its function is to reflect the social position of a rich man. It becomes more meaningful when it reflects the wealth of El Bek in comparison to the poverty of most of the villagers around him.

This house was really as fantastic as a palace, with an eastern style architect. Its entrance and front are made of successive arches similar to the arcades. The furniture inside the house includes wooden chairs. The tables and the couches are inlaid with colored sea shell. There were precious Persian carpets on the ground beside those that are hung on the walls. (Taher 51)

The house of El Bek in Luxor is beautifully described. The reader cannot but admire the picture. More importantly, it shows how rich the owner is. The furniture, the carpets and the other parts of the house are not made only to function but they are also to delight the people of the house.

This house of El Bek or Al Sarai is built in the middle of a garden. Here Taher as novelist stirs our awareness of the environment and nature. The narrator remembers:

The best in that house and what I can imagine every moment as if I see is that long alley in the garden.

It was bordered on its two sides with western palm trees, whose white trunks looked like short posts that are planted on equal distances. These trees were connected by an edge that was covered by blue mosaic. Among that mosaic there was a decoration of white flowers. This alley was widened exactly in the middle to create a circle in the middle of which there was a small fountain with an edge of the same decorated blue mosaic. The water was coming down in falling arches like palm tree branches

(51).

Taher draws a vital and meaningful picture of the house of El Bek in Luxor. The natural elements such as the palm trees, the white flowers, the water and the palm branches are distributed within the picture as cultural element as the edge of the blue mosaic and the fountain. One can imagine the beautiful picture with the falling water that adds vitality to the other elements.

These elements are representative of the wealthy life led by El Bek together with his social rank. There is then a common ground between the non human, represented by the house and the human, represented by El Bek. That is exactly what ecocriticism attempts to achieve. Though the landscapes, the house and the palace are beautiful in themselves, however, they function as meaningful signifiers and vital additions to the human elements and their actions.

Another very important function of ecocriticism is to find out and shed light on the non human elements that are made silenced. Ecocritic's job is to examine how the novelist is able to give the natural elements a voice to express their intentions, desires and reactions. "Eco- literary discourse can address how literary texts articulate the silence of nature and to what consequences" (Oppermann 4). And "Eco critics like Donna Haraway, Diana Fuss, Patrick Murphy and Evelyn Fox Keller urge for a reconception of nature as an active and speaking subject" (33).

In the ecocritical novels, the non human elements of nature are able to speak and listen. In Taher's novel Beshai welcomes the donkey of the narrator who comments, "His friendly reception for the donkey was not less than his welcome of me if not more. He was patting on his neck, talking to him with gently pampering phrases. He was about to kiss him" (Taher 31). Beshai, here, believes that the donkey is as important as the narrator. Beshai welcomes, talks to, pampers and is about to kiss the donkey. Beshai believes that the donkey listens, understands and is able to recognize the speech and the feelings of the others.

An ecocritical and environmental perspective attempts to give the non human elements the chance to be as important as the humans, "A basis for environmentalist thinking is the persistence of place, non human nature, culture's co- existence with nature, and giving voice to marginalized aspects of life" (Sormus 110).

While the white donkey is received by Beshai in a friendly manner in the monastery, the brown horse is able to exclaim. The narrator describes his and the horse's condition when they arrived at the monastery with Harbi, I was panting and the horse was panting. He was lowering his neck, turning his head towards me as if he was interrogating, I smilingly said: "Reverend Beshai come! This horse deserves your pampering too". (Taher 98)

The horse in this situation is as exhausted as the narrator, both of them were panting. Then, the horse looks at the narrator and seems to make a question and consequently the narrator reacts to meet the needs of the horse.

The narrator also describes how the horse was galloping down the road with the cart towards the monastery, "he was scampering with the cart on the wild road that he did not see before as if he knew each hole and each stone"(27). Here the horse knows, and later on the narrator reports, "but we know, father, the old horse and I, that we succeeded in saving Harbi" (98). The horse, equal to father and the narrator, participates in the noblest job in the novel. He helps in saving Harbi.

So the non human elements, the white donkey and the brown horse share the same verbs used by the human, they listen, interrogate and know. The narrator sees the horse as equal to him and to his father. He says: "father, the old horse and I" and in his speech, he speaks of the old horse with reverence. Thus, the ecocritical novelist, Taher, raises the level of the non human to that of the human. Similar to animals, soil and clay are also non human elements that are highly evaluated in Taher's novel. In his novel Taher uses the connection between the human and the land in its different forms, sand or clay, to highlight the idea of the unity of the world as one whole.

The connection between soil and our bodies emerges in many ancient and modern narratives. As Montgomery notes; "foundational texts of Western religions acknowledge the foundational relationship between humanity and the soil. The Hebrew name of the first man, Adam, is derived from the word adama, which means earth, or soil [and] the Latin word for human, homo is from humus or living soil". (Sullivan 4-5)

Thus the strong connection between man and soil is stressed in ancient and modern fiction. It also has its roots in most religions, where the believers hold that man is basically created from clay.

In Taher's novel this connection is clear in how Harbi and his friends and relatives feel restful and secure when they are sitting on the sand, "He [Beshai] did not understand anything when he saw the man was shouting to his men to throw away their guns and to sit on the sand" (Taher 106). Here Fares and his men pass from a state of violence to a peaceful condition by sitting on the sand. Sand, as an element of nature has the power to bestow feelings of security and serenity upon humans. It gives the feeling of security and peace to Fares and his men. In another situation,

Fares was putting his hand on the shoulder of Harbi just after getting out of the monastery, ready to protect him with his body from any betrayal. Then, they sit on the sand and the men of Fares circle around them. (109)

Again the connection between the bodies of these men and sand secures safety and peace. And "Harbi answers Fares' request and sings while we are sitting on the sand" (111), the narrator reports. Here, while they are being united with land, the men, accompanied by the narrator, reach a state of elation listening to the beautiful songs of Harbi.

Clay as an element of earth is a source of protection and safety in Taher's novel. The monastery was built in the Upper Egyptian desert, where the heat of the sun is so strong and the weather is very hot; however, the hall in the monastery is described by the narrator,

No body told me the name of the man who built this strange hall. It does not know the hot weather in the heart of the desert. It was also built of clay as the rest of the monks' cells and the buildings of the monastery except the church and the wall. (40)

Clay as a material of building has strangely the power to protect the inside of the buildings from the outside heat of the sun in the summer of the desert in Upper Egypt.

So in Taher's novel, *Aunt Safiah and the Monastery*, the ecocritical images and metaphors introduce the non human elements in three ways: the meaningful and vital natural and cultural landscapes, the non human elements especially the silent animals are made voiced. They are also considered as important as the human elements. Finally the non human elements of earth, sand and clay are made important by stressing the strong connection between them and man.

(2)

In *Aunt Safiah and the monastery* there is also a strong connection between the traits of the character and his or her attitudes towards the non human elements, the plants and the animals. It is not clear whether the traits of the character decide his attitudes towards nature or vice versa. However, "narrative encounters of human and non human agencies can disclose new creative attitudes..." (Iovino 144). Thus, in such ecocritical novels, "The characters, who are themselves described as "earthbound" things... and nature fused together to form an interconnected world of culture and nature" (Oppermann 14).

The characters, who are strongly connected with land, the earth and nature, are in harmony with the non human elements. They understand the world in its human and non human realms as one unit. They love plants and animals and see them as important as humans. Harbi and Beshai are two examples of this type of the characters. While the characters, whose relations with nature are weak, are not in harmony with the entire world. Examples of the second type are Safia and El Bek.

Harbi's job was to superintend farming his own land and the land of El Bek so he was highly connected with the land. The narrator mentions that his mother used to send him with food to "the house of Harbi next to the fields"(Taher 65). He was a neighbor of the lentil fields and he used to sit on the grass and to walk between plants and trees everyday. As a land owner and a devoted farmer he watched the flowers and the leaves while they were growing. This life, where the sun, the water and the soil occupy a great part of the day, influences the character of Harbi.

In the monastery, after coming back from prison, Harbi continued to be very near to nature, He and Beshai were paving the floor for having their food under the palm trees, between their cottages, they were eating some bites of bread with some food, and then they used to immerse in their speech. (101)

The two friends prefer to have their simple food in the open air, in the heart of nature, where the palm trees stand as guards. There, Harbi and Beshai plunged in their sweet talk. As a land owner, a superintendent of El Bek's lands and a member of a respectable family, it was not acceptable that he works in the land himself. Harbi finds himself obliged to justify to the narrator's father:

I was not working, Haj, I was entertaining myself. Father exclaims: Oh dear?! Had you been entertaining yourself in the past by digging your land? Have you ever heard of a man of your class digging his land like the hirelings? Do you want to disgrace me in my old age? (103)

Because he loves the land, Harbi forgets about his class and digs the land to entertain himself. This indicates the strong connection between Harbi and nature. The land and farming became the joy of his life.

This strong connection between Harbi and the natural elements such as the land, the water, the sun, the trees and the crops, bestows upon character many positive traits. For example he was a handsome man: "exactly as aunt Safiah was beautiful among girls, Uncle Harbi was handsome among men". (46) Nature provides Harbi with inner happiness. The sun, the pure air, the sights of flowers and trees help to shape his handsome physical appearance.

Nature, with its pleasures also taught Harbi how to love and to be loved,

It was well known that Harbi was in love with the white gipsy, Amoona, of the golden hair, who used to dance in the weddings. She loved him only out of the great number of men who hoped to be just near her. (48)

Harbi is an attractive man, who enjoys the delights of love. However, though an Upper Egyptian, and a member of high class, he is attracted by the beauty of Amoona, the gipsy dancer.

Harbi himself was skillful in dancing and singing. He participates in the wedding of El Bek and Safiah, Harbi danced in the garden of Al Sarai with a single stick on the music of the single-pipe. He sang a song for El Bek in which he changed some words to end with "Our Consul is the master of all men".

(56)

Thus the strong connection with nature provides Harbi with beauty, love and his great skills in dancing and singing. He is sociable enough to love his people and to participate in their weddings. He also is involved in a love relation with a beautiful woman.

Beshai is another example of the so called earth-bound characters. He lives in a cottage in the monastery and he holds a position between a servant and a monk. He loves nature and the natural elements influence him as greatly as Harbi, although in a different way. He is a good farmer who planted good crops in the farm of the monastery. He is always ready to give many advice to the farmers on his way from and to the monastery. The narrator reports:

Father said that Beshai learnt many secrets from farming the sandy and difficult land of the monastery.

So father has been consulting him before each time of planting. (34)

Beshai, then, is one of nature's disciples who learnt the secrets of farming. In his turn, he was also a generous teacher. He would help any farmer with good instructions that could improve his land and increase his crops. The narrator's father himself asked Beshai's advice.

This strong connection with nature provides Beshai's character with many good traits. He was tolerant and he loved the entire world, the human and the non human. The narrator reports:

Reverend Beshai was the last one to wish death for anyone. One day, I saw him myself weeping while he was dressing a wound of an injured rabbit in the farm of the monastery. (42)

Nature also provided Beshai with a good knowledge of God. He mentions Jesus in many occasions and believes in all that happened between Jesus and his disciples. He told Hneen while he was washing his foot from blood: "Do you know, Hneen that our Savior washed the feet of Judas in the evening of the last supper? ... However, he betrayed Him after that Hneen... he betrayed" (120). Beshai here predicted the betrayal of Hneen as Jesus predicted the betrayal of Judas (Mathew 26: 25). Hneen came later on to the monastery to kill Harbi.

Living away from nature has a negative impact on other important characters. Safiah is the main character in Taher's novel. She starts as a beautiful girl and ends as a villainous, old hag. The narrator remembers:

I considered her the most beautiful human being... The happiest moments of my childhood were when aunt Safiah was taking me in her arms and I smelled the fragrance of Jasmine with which she was indulging her whole body. (Taher 44)

This beautiful and admirable woman whom the children used to enjoy being in her arms, has changed to a frightening creature. The narrator also reports: "I have seen children, who started weeping when she just looked at them. And they were holding their mothers' clothes in alarm" (80).

The connection between Safia and nature was not strong enough. She even developed the feelings of hatred for the non human elements later on. Safiah did not have a direct relation with the land. After the murder of El Bek, "she was renting the land to the farmers for fixed amounts of money" (81), she withdrew from nature and its pleasures, and even from life itself.

Safiah also ill-treated her animals as well as the people around her. She wanted to humiliate Harbi, so she named her donkey after him. The narrator's father was very enraged,

When he knew that Safiah named the black donkey of manure after Harbi and that she was ordering the cattle servant to bring the donkey to the hall of the house where she was beating him with a stick and was ordering the baby to spit on (him). (85)

This is how Safiah was dealing with her animals. She abused the donkey and considered him a tool to teach Hassan how to hate Harbi. She was also beating the donkey with a stick. However Safiah committed another crime against the animal. Safiah was the cause of poisoning the donkey when one who liked Harbi decided to kill the donkey to stop her plot against Harbi.

El Bek is a landowner and his connection with the land is supposed to be strong. However, he is changed in the middle of his life.

He had turned away from farming after the limitation of the land property to one hundred feddans. He left the land to his nephew Harbi to superintend. He lived in Luxor where he owned big whole sale shops. (53) He stopped to have a direct connection with nature. His land became a safe of money. He could no longer smell the fragrance of the flowers and the trees in his land. He lost the feelings and emotions that connect the farmer with his land.

He did not care about the land, the crops or the flowers. On the day of his murder when he came to punish Harbi, the narrator explains,

He was coming near the field in which we were sitting (the narrator and Harbi) surrounded by his guards. He and his men were not walking on the footpath, parallel to the canal. They were rushing with their feet into the fields and they were trampling down the plants and the flowers. (66)

Neither El Bek nor any of his guards had any feelings for the lives of the plants or the flowers. He was unaware of the beautiful nature around him. His head was full of evil thoughts of revenge and murder.

For El Bek, nature was not a source of beauty. He was no longer able to achieve pleasures from a scent of a flower or the beauty of a tree. For him natural elements became tools of torture. He ordered his men to use the palm tree to punish Harbi: "Tie him to the palm tree from his chest and his legs, but leave a distance between his body and the palm tree"(69). Instead of being a source of sweet dates, nice shade and beautiful sight, the palm tree became a tool to cause severe and painful injuries in the body of Harbi. Here, El Bek, not only commits a crime against Harbi, but also another against nature.

The connection between nature and these main characters decides the theme that each of them carries to the reader. The virtuous characters, who have a strong connection with nature, are positive in every aspect. Harbi gives an example of the love of life and loyalty to his people. Beshai teaches a lesson of the love of God and nature. While the evil characters carry negative messages. Safiah personifies hatred and revenge and El- Bek signifies ingratitude and arrogance.

(3)

In Taher's novel the monastery was placed at the eastern end of the village after a long sandy road .In a 2003 essay on Willa Cather Glotfelty suggested the term ecocriticism for a critical practice that would take as its subject" the interconnections between human culture and the material world, between human and non human" ( Barry 1).

The monastery then is not just a place; it is a point of meeting between the Christian religion, beliefs, history and the material world. It carries the values of the Christian God, saints and principles. It is the house of God where every creature, human, animal or plant can live safely.

The monastery as a place plays a serious role in the narrative between Safiah and Harbi. "Literature matters in so far as it derives from and reflects on human experience ..., and, as essayist Rockwell Gray reminds us, "all experience is placed experience" (Ryden 8). The monastery was the place of this great experience where internal tolerance and mercy are in conflict with external hatred and revenge. Moreover the monastery as a non human element with its cultural values becomes one among the characters of the good side of the conflict. If Safiah is the most important character in the novel, the monastery is the greatest symbolic character in Taher's fiction. Hence, he gives his novel the title using Safiah and the monastery.

The narrator's father, Al Haj, was intelligent enough to choose the monastery for Harbi to live in, "Harbi can live in the farm of the monastery. Safiah will not be able to touch him in the protection of the monastery"(Taher 96). Safiah tried repeatedly to send men to kill Harbi in the monastery but she failed. She ordered the two guards of her house to go and kill him, but they refused: "Lady Safiah, if he got out of the monastery we would kill him, but we could not kill him there"(100). And when Hneen agreed to go to the monastery, Beshai stopped him and he was killed by Harbi.

Thus, the monastery played the most important role in the conflict of the novel. It protected Harbi from the plots of Safiah until he died. He died as a good Muslim in that significant Christian setting of the monastery. He died in the presence of the good characters, his relatives, Al Haj and the narrator, and his friend, Beshai who lamented Harbi's death.

To conclude, in his novel *Aunt Safia and the Monastery*, Taher succeeds in introducing the landscapes and the non human elements in a vital and meaningful way. He allows some non human elements, especially the animals to listen, to know and to carry out certain human actions. He also stresses and focuses on the relation between the human characters and the land. Both the good and evil characters are drawn with precise accuracy to reflect their connection with nature. Finally the monastery stands as the most significant signifier that plays a vital role together with the natural and cultural elements in Taher's rich fictitious world.

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