The Stories Trees Tell: Jad El Hage’s *The Myrtle Tree* and Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the representation of trees in Jad El Hage’s *The Myrtle Tree* (2007) and Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* (2013). Due to growing concerns over global environmental crises, these writers have showed significant attention to nature by using trees as symbols to comment on political, social, and cultural issues. Through a close reading of these texts, this study analyses the multifaceted meanings of trees from a postcolonial ecocritical angle. It argues that trees in these novels carry symbolic meanings and provide a valuable understanding of culture, resistance, and violence in the texts. Trees represent an essential part in both characters’ lives and narratives’ structure and remain powerful icons to decipher thematic significations and understand metaphors. Further, it demonstrates how these writers enlarge their scope of writing, by adding postcolonial and environmental dimensions to the cultural, political, and historical issues they depict.

**Keywords:** Trees, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Culture, Resistance, Violence.

Introduction

“Trees tell stories. In their arrangements, locations, shapes, and even their tissues, they record changing environments, cultural values, social relations, and notions of the sacred.” (Kit Anderson 2003, 3)

Having the capacity to live for ages, trees represent a faithful kind of witnessing. Like old storytellers, they have a lot to say. Each tree, each species, is an author in the book of nature. A broken branch can narrate a tale of human invasion. A fallen leaf can recall memories of old inhabitants. The way a tree’s stump is cut can show the dystopic landscape wars create. The quote at the top is taken from Kit Anderson’s *Nature, Culture, and Big Old Trees: Live Oaks and Ceibas in the Landscapes*, in which she discusses “human-tree relationships,” among other issues. Anderson (2003) strongly believes that trees are able to
record history and tell stories as they witness ecological, social, and cultural changes (3). Trees, plants, lands, seas, deserts, and even animals represent the main concern of ecocriticism and have lately attracted scholarly attention due to the growing apprehensions about the environment’s vulnerability. In her article, “Ecocriticism: A Study of Environmental Issues in Literature,” Sandip Kumar Mishra (2016) confirms that like technology and science, literature has to “combat the global ecological crisis” (168). As a concept, Peter Barry (2002) suggests that ecocriticism arose in 1970s with Michael P. Branch, who “traces the word ‘ecocriticism’ back to William Rueckert’s 1978 essay ‘Literature and Ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism’” (161). As a literary theory, ecocriticism came into existence around the 1990s and found a welcome place among twenty-first century scholars, who “are still engaged in developing its nature and scope” (Mishra 168). To introduce this critical approach, Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as an “earth-centered approach” which studies the relationship between literature and environment (xviii). It displays the representation of nature in literary texts, putting a high value on the physical setting and metaphors of the land (Glotfelty xix). For Peter Barry (2002), ecocriticism, or green studies as he calls it, is an emergent critical approach, which revises the American transcendentalism and the British romanticism. Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer (2006) see ecocriticism as “a theoretical and methodological force that focuses on real and imagined boundaries between nature and culture without denying nature’s physical existence” (9). Therefore, the natural world remains the major part of ecocritics’ subject matter.

The increasing interest in spatial studies has helped ecocriticism to thrive. Also, “cross-disciplinary and extra-academic alliances... have had the positive and permanent advantages of stretching the new movement’s horizon” (Buell 2005, 7). Other cultural theories emerged out of this critical approach, as Mishra (2016) states: “New theories like Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Ecomarxism, Ecospiritualism are coming into light” (169). Marland (2013) believes that ecofeminism, and postcolonial ecocriticism brought “an understanding in which ‘Nature’ had been constructed to reinforce dominant ideologies of gender, class, and race” (852). This claim finds confirmation in Dana Mount and Susie O’Brien’s “Postcolonialism and the Environment,” in which they argue that “challenges to the race, gender, and nationalist bias of the field have been accompanied more recently by efforts to broaden its scope” (2019, 4). Efforts to conjoin the fields of postcolonialism and ecocriticism gave birth to a new interdisciplinary critical approach, defined as “a branch of environmental humanities that is heavily influenced by, but non-identical with, political ecology” (Huggan and Helen 2010, viii-ix). According to Elizabeth Deloughrey and George B. Handley, the first seeds of Postcolonial ecocriticism were planted by Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, who are seen as embodying early forms of postcolonial ecocriticism (2011, 3). They base their argument on Fanon’s claim that the land is the most important value and Said’s suggestion that imperialism is “‘an act of geographical violence’” (2011, 3). The words ‘land’ and ‘geography’ appear to open a door for the rise of postcolonial ecocriticism. The land for Deloughrey and Handley remains an important “recuperative site of postcolonial historiography” (2013, 8). This leaves critics with questions like the following: “How can the author recover land that is already ravaged by violence of history? How can nature be historicized?” (Deloughrey and Handley 2011, 4).
Under the light of postcolonial ecocritical studies, the relationship between postcolonialism and ecocriticism has been widely explored. In his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon (2011), like Deloughrey and Handley, builds on the works of Edward Said and other critics to present his postcolonial ecocritical philosophy. He takes Said’s concept of “wordliness” a step further by shifting focus to “earthliness” (x) as the land plays a crucial role in postcolonial ecocriticism. Nixon further problematizes the relationship between ecocriticism and postcolonialism by tracing four main complications. He believes that postcolonial concerns, including hybridity, displacement, nationalism, and history, go against the interests of ecocritics: purity, place, transnationalism, and natural spaces (236).

Deloughrey and Handley (2011) refute Nixon’s assumption. They persuasively argue that the fields of postcolonialism and ecocriticism can be brought into dialogue through four main eras: geography, hierarchies, anthropocentrism, and representation (24-25). Of these four elements, the question of representation seems to be the most important as they suggest: “Postcolonial ecocriticism importantly theorizes the question of who can “speak for nature”? (25). This question reminds us of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in which representation is of a great value.

Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010) regards capitalism as a meeting point between the two fields. He clarifies: “Capitalism is compelled to reorganize space, to expand geographically, and to insert itself unevenly across the globe” (13). According to this quotation, the land represents the subject of invasion by capitalists which upsets both ecocritics and post-colonialists. For Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt (2010), “it is the term ‘justice’ that provides a space for theoretical work bridging and merging ecocriticism and postcolonialism” (3). Roos and Hunt believe that just like ecocriticism which fights industrial waste to achieve environmental justice, postcolonialism maintains sovereignty and self-independence so that people gain justice (2010, 3). Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) see the relationship between postcolonialism and ecocriticism as a complex union. They argue that “the coming together of postcolonial and eco/environmental studies is hedged about with seemingly insurmountable problems” (2). This is due to the difficulties found in both disciplines. Yet, the dialogue between the two fields is possible as they are both concerned with “conquest, colonization, racism, and sexism, along with investments in theories of indigeneity and diaspora” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010, 6).

Questioning the possibility of linking the fields of ecocriticism and postcolonialism is what distinguished the first wave of postcolonial ecocriticism as suggested by Dana Mount (2012) in her study “Enduring Nature: Everyday Environmentalisms in Postcolonial Literature”. She remarks: “These critics were grappling with the question of whether these overlapping fields were actually intellectually compatible” (5). Over the past few years, postcolonial ecocriticism emerged as an independent field of literary criticism and gained recognition by contemporary scholars. It reflected “a greater sense of confidence”, which is regarded as a remarkable shift for the second wave of postcolonial ecocriticism (Mount 2012, 5). In her discussion of the development of this critical approach, Mount (2012) confirms that “second-wave critics have been able to interrogate culture and environment from a rich position” (18-19). Once a country is invaded, everything becomes under control: humans, minds, culture, lands, farms,
animals, and the whole environment. Postcolonial ecocriticism, hence, offers an approach of criticism for literature shaped by environmental and colonial dimensions.

Discussion

Trees in the selected texts occupy the heart of the narratives and hold great significations. The analysis stresses three major issues demonstrating how trees in the selected novels reflect cultural values and comment on the themes of resistance and violence. In fact, these issues have been widely explored in postcolonial studies. The purpose of the paper, then, is to ally these questions with environmental studies through an analysis based on a postcolonial ecocritical approach. It demonstrates the multiplicity of tree images which act as essential parts of themes in the selected texts. The selected trees for this study are: the olives and pines in *The Myrtle Tree* and the palms and a pomegranate in *The Corpse Washer*. These trees took on different connotations throughout history and civilizations. According to J. E. Cirlot’s *A Dictionary of Symbols* (2001), the olive tree symbolizes peace (243), the pine symbolizes immortality (256), the palm symbolizes victory (249), and the pomegranate is symbol of oneness of the universe (261). This paper looks at other readings of these trees in the Arab context and from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective.

**Jad El Hage’s *The Myrtle Tree* (2007)**

Jad El Hage is an Australian-Lebanese journalist, novelist, poet, and playwright. *The Myrtle Tree* is his third novel (second in English) and is set in Lebanon during the civil war in 1975 and after. It was published in 2007, but the number of studies on this novel remains relatively limited. One example is Ahmad Shboul’s “The Aesthetics of Healing in Jad El Hage’s *The Myrtle Tree*.” In this essay, Shboul focuses on two aspects: “the aesthetics of presentation, including the title, *The Myrtle Tree*; and the dynamics of moments of contest and irony in relation to war-torn Lebanon of the 1970s” (2007, 1). Shboul questions the significance of the title, the choice of names, and the absence of religious implications. Likewise, Nijmeh Hajjar problematizes the choice of the myrtle tree in her review “A Reading of *The Myrtle Tree*. But! Where is The Myrtle Tree?” (2010). Being unconvinced with Roland Barthes’ concept of “The Death of the Author”, Hajjar invites the reader to decipher the tree’s symbolic meaning through considering both “the reader’s reception and the author’s intention” (4). Although Hajjar’s ideas seem close to the purpose of this study, she does not elaborate on the topic and leaves the reader without answers. As the survey designates, *The Myrtle Tree* has not been thoroughly examined. Also, scholarship on the significance of trees in the novel is rare despite their importance in the narrative. Although the title highlights the myrtle tree, the analysis focuses on other trees which appear to be more central as will be explained throughout the novel’s discussion.

The novel revolves around the story of Adam Awad, an educated man who comes from an agricultural village, Wahdeh, where land is as precious as souls. With Yusra, his wife, and Meriam, his daughter, Adam lives in this countryside aspiring to restore his father’s olive press. He has a strong connection to the land and highly values olive trees. Wahdeh was a safe haven until one of the villagers joined militia. Life becomes harsh and survival comes to be a dream due to the Lebanese civil war. Violence caused by war touches people, lands, and even trees. The pine forest has been hit and hundreds of trees have been split.
Because of the growing fear and danger in Wahdeh, Awad’s family decides to move to Australia, which was a very hard step for Adam to take as he cannot let the olives go. Miserably, Adam got into a car crash while trying to escape and join his family in Cyprus, but the author does not tell whether he dies or not. Although Adam could not realize his dream to revive the olive press left by his father, the epilogue paints a nostalgic image which reflects a spirit of hope and resistance.

Jad El Hage employs trees in his novel to express various ideas. One way to decipher the symbolic meaning of trees in the narrative is linking them to the village’s culture. Actually, the relationship between nature and culture is a controversial question which occupies the minds of geographers, historians, and various other scholars. In his lecture, “The Link Between Culture and Environment,” Jon Hawkes discusses cultural aspects in relation to environmental thinking. He believes in the profound relation between them suggesting: “The Earth is our mother, and, as we do from all mothers, we learn from her” (2003, 8). During the course of the story, we see different manifestations of cultural values embodied in trees. The olives, as representatives, function as a mirror of the agricultural life of people in Wahdeh, which makes part of their culture and traditions.

Opening the narrative with this seasonal harvest reveals the crucial position trees occupy in the novel. Most people of Wahdeh are uneducated and rely on cultivating the land to earn a living. Addressing the officer, Adam says: “We have fourteen wheat fields. God knows how many orchards. Grapes, figs. All needing to be harvested. And that’s only the beginning. Then there’s taking the olives for pressing, making the Burghul, distilling the arak, drying the figs and the grapes...” (El Hage 2007, 14). This passage, faithfully, portrays the role of trees like olives, figs, and grapes in sustaining villagers’ lives. These are simple peasants who rely on their ancestors’ land to survive, which is one of the cultural aspects of this village. Janak Pandey points out: “People’s experience in making a living from earth resources has differed in various geographical eras of the world, leading to changes in habitat and culture” (1990, 256). As such, the fact that villagers depend on olive trees to sustain their lives contributes to shaping their culture. That is because the difference in geography and the physical world leads to the diversity in people’s cultural features and attitudes as Pandey clarifies. In addition to that, villagers in Wahdeh rely on trees, especially olives, to prepare medical cures. Speaking of his grandmother, Adam states: “She routinely treated the ill
Sadouni, Awad

effects of evil eye, using olive oil, water and prayers. And she had herbal medicines for every malady” (El Hage 34, 2007). The quote reveals the role of trees and their products in curing different diseases. Based on simple recipes from nature and olive trees, villagers produce their own medicine. Hence, the novel depicts how inhabitants of Wahdeh live in union with nature and trees which provide them with food, medicine, and happiness. These elements represent some features of the culture in Wahdeh.

Because of the villagers’ strong connection with olive trees, it seems that their culture progresses in relation the physical environment. Adam says: “It was September, the brief period of respite after the relentless heat of summer and before the furious rush of harvest. The village should have been warming up with songs of Mijana exalting fertility and the joys of a plentiful crop” (El Hage 2007, 8). The quote displays the traditional songs performed by villagers to celebrate the harvest festival. These songs, which glorify trees and harvest, are highly important to understand one’s culture for telling us how people of the same community saw issues, what concerned them during a particular period of time, and how they expressed shared delights. At this point, the author employs the harvest of olive trees to project traditional songs and cultural rituals of the village. The agricultural and rural life of villagers, then, helps constructing their cultural identity. Discussing the relationship between culture and the physical environment, A. A. Goldenweiser (1916) clarifies: “As culture progresses it makes different uses of the same environment... Environment absorbs culture and becomes saturated with it” (631). Accordingly, the environment (olive trees in this case) contributes, to a certain extent, in shaping the community’s culture which is a compound of historical, religious, political, social, and ecological factors.

Culture is also embodied in people’s behaviours and attitudes. Trees in the novel tell us about the villagers’ attitudes towards the physical environment. The relationship between characters and trees in the novel is solid and inextricable. Trees are highly valued and treated as humans at times. Introducing his grandmother, Adam says: “She started her day long before dawn: praying, watering her plants while talking to them as if they were friends” (El Hage 2007, 33). As this quote shows, trees are not mere humans; they reach the level of friendship. Also, in a lovely tone, Adam’s wife describes the olives, “‘They seem happy’, she said of the trees, ‘like grannies leaning over generations of babies’” (El Hage 2007, 78). The passage shows the pure and true love given to trees. Of all villagers, Adam’s relation with trees is the strongest. He explains to his wife: “Each tree is an individual, and that’s how we treat them” (El Hage 2007, 78). This is evident when the officer asks the villagers to leave the harvest and join military training. In an attempt to persuade him, Adam comments: “The olives are heavy, about to drop. You should see them; they are like pregnant women in labour” (El Hage 2007, 14). This comment reveals Adam’s strong emotions towards trees. He profoundly feels sad for them, especially at this crucial harvest time.

The olive harvest is a celebratory festival passed down from one generation to another and annually celebrated. Yet, this year is different: “For the last few days people had been gathering in the square to gossip and speculate, troubled by confusing reports about the spread of the civil war which had started in Beirut six months ago... Meanwhile, the early olives waited to be picked” (El Hage 2007, 8). The harvest festival and peaceful life in Wahdeh is disrupted by war, which affects the harmonious relationship between trees and villagers. People are now divided between harvesting the olives, or joining military trainings to
The officer addresses the Hakim, the village’s advisor: “Harvest and land are nothing compared to the danger at hand” (El Hage 2007, 15). But olives and the land are the greatest heritage left for the villagers. They make part of their history, culture, and traditions. The Hakim replies: “And if we don’t harvest, the crops will rot... Generations of hard work will be washed in a season. This land is dear to us, sir. Our fathers had to grind the rocks to make it fertile... You can’t ask us to throw it all away now” (El Hage 2007, 15). The quote reflects the villager’s attitudes towards what is part of their tradition and culture. It is not easy for them to abandon something inherited from their fathers. Hawkes (2003) confirms that “our culture is the expression of our desires to be happy, our desires to belong, our desires to survive” (7). In this respect, the struggle to survive and belong is an expression of culture in itself. The Hakim’s words strongly reveal the endless love for the land and its trees.

The villagers’ strong attachment to the land and olives is a mere reflection of their resistance. Bill Ashcroft (2010) rightly remarks: “But the most fascinating feature of post-colonial societies is a ‘resistance’ that manifests itself as a refusal to be absorbed, a resistance which engages that which is resisted in a different way... altering them into tools for expressing a deeply held sense of identity and cultural being” (20). At this point, one of the questions of postcolonialism comes to the surface, which is resistance. Defending the land and resisting the enemy is manifested through the bond between the villagers and the olive trees.

Towards the end of the novel, Jad El Hage seems to stress this relationship. In a conversation with Rameh, one of the villagers, Adam teaches him the love of olive trees: “We’ve got centuries of tradition behind us, Rameh. Something like that does not vanish overnight... If the olive press dies, so do my father and grandfather and generations of Awads, and the olive trees and the love linking us all from time immemorial” (El Hage 2007, 269). The quote profoundly reveals the significance of olive trees for Adam and his family. They represent the precious heritage passed down from one generation to another. As war breaks out in Wahdeh, it becomes dangerous to live there. Adam finally decides to join his sister in Australia, along with the rest of his family. He even makes a promise to go back after the war ends and revive the olive press. Sadly, Adam has a car accident. Yet, the epilogue epitomizes a sense of continuous resistance and hope as well. The end paints an image of Awad’s family (most likely after death) sitting by the myrtle tree during the olive harvest. The narrator says: “My father has a handful of jerjar in his palm... ‘Here son, fill your basket’” (El Hage 2007, 287). The narrative starts as Adam gathers olives, and ends as his father gives him olives. This demonstrates how the love for olives passes down from one generation to another and endorses its function as a cultural tradition. The author, hence, is emphasizing the importance of olive trees which represent a valuable treasure for Awad’s dynasty and a faithful mirror of Wahdeh’s culture as they reflect some of their customs and traditions.

The novel also projects the author’s use of trees to express his concern for the exhaustion of nature that is taking place during years of wars. Jad El Hage criticizes the Lebanese civil war and its consequences through depicting a depleted nature that has incurred injuries from an ongoing civil strife. One of the soldiers tells the officer: “‘Our homes have been burned, our trees bulldozed, our children slaughtered, our women raped...’” (El Hage 2007, 92). Like humans, trees have been blown up and did not survive the brutal
attacks. In another painful incident, the Hakim is leaning against a poplar, lamenting the loss of his mother. Watching his uncle in pain, Adam sadly reports the event: “My cry was lost in a massive explosion that split the poplar and filled the air with a cloud of dust... Dazed by the acrid smell of the shell, blinded by the dust and the smoking tree, we pushed on until we saw him” (El Hage 2007, 135). The quote sorely depicts the consequences of war violence on the poplar tree. It has been torn apart and totally burnt. This is what Peter Stoett calls “the ecocide”, which he defines as the “the deliberate destruction of nature as part of a military strategy aimed not at destroying nature, but at subjugating an enemy” (2010, 4). The military attack which targeted Wahdeh led to a tragic destruction of the poplar tree. Throughout the novel, the pine trees also emerge to be witnesses of violence. The pines are often associated with Faour, Adam’s friend and the second narrator, who develops a profound relationship with them. His diary largely demonstrates the love for the pines as he often writes about them. Of a savage sudden attack, Faour writes: “Bullets hailed down on us. Long-range machine guns were splitting branches, pulverizing wheels and stabbing mercilessly into to the trunks of the ancient pine trees” (El Hage 2007, 199). War does not show mercy for the natural environment. Neither the old trees nor the young ones survived the enemy’s unexpected attack. The pine trees are portrayed as both victims and witnesses of war violence. The author, seems to emphasize the problem of representation, from an ecocritical point of view. Trees are so badly destroyed for committing no crime, which raises a very significant question: “Who can ‘speak for nature’”? (Deloughrey and Handley 2011, 25). El Hage, here, is giving voice to the bleeding pines to narrate their own stories, to tell the world about the effects of war violence on them. Faour is also a talented writer which gives him a chance to isolate himself from the shelling. Busily writing inside the tent, he is terrified at the tremendous explosion which harshly smashes the pine trees. He writes:

The ancient pine tree had taken the hit. It was split right down the middle. Still standing, yes, but its mystery was gone. Under the whipping sparkle of the moon it looked humiliated. What seemed invincible and lofty for centuries had finally fallen under the axe of war. I took in the degradation helplessly. There was nothing I could do. History was in labor and I was inside its belly. (El Hage 2007, 216)

These few lines speak volumes about human crimes against nature. The quote is very telling and conveys a deep meaning in relation to environmental violence. After a row of bombardment during the Lebanese civil war, fields and trees have been affected just like humans. El Hage bitterly depicts the consequences of war violence on nature, especially trees. ‘The ancient pine tree’, represents a witness of violence as it lived for centuries, but it is also a victim as it has been affected by ‘the axe of war’. ‘It looked humiliated,’ which is an environmental crime. The author is personifying the tree by giving it a human adjective, demonstrating his strong concern about trees. The ancient pine does not only witness war violence, but it also witnesses a crucial historical event. At this point, El Hage appears to leave his pen for the tree to engrave what it has witnessed and contribute in writing human history. He, therefore, gives voice to nature by writing the Lebanese civil war’s history as an environmental history, employing the pine as a non-human witness to the violent civil strife. This reinforces El Hage’s text to be “environmentally
oriented.” According to Deloughrey and Handley’s explanation of Buell’s argument, “a text that is environmentally orientated has to exhibit particular identities: the connection between human history and the nonhuman environment, empathy with the nonhuman, accountability on the part of humans toward the environment,...” (2011, 80). These elements are evidently presented in El Hage’s novel, as previously discussed.

Despite the tragic death of the ancient pine tree, El Hage leaves the reader with a glimpse of hope: “It was split right down the middle. Still standing” (2007, 216). The pine is ‘standing’ regardless of the hit it had taken, which reveals an attempt of resistance. The author, thus, is questioning the issue of resistance from and ecological perspective. After the bombardment, Adam and Faour go to the valley, where “hundreds of trees had been hit by the shelling” (El Hage, 2007, 220). Wondering at the split pine tree, Adam says: “Don’t touch it... ‘it won’t die. As long as its trunk is holding it’ll live” (El Hage, 2007, 220). The holding trunk here keeps the tree’s roots alive, while the roots absorb water and minerals preserving its life. The tree is portrayed as both vulnerable and resistant at the same time. Adam has a strong faith of the tree’s ability to resist. “‘Trust me, this tree has roots all the way to the center of the earth.” (El Hage, 2007, 220). The author stresses the role of roots in keeping trees alive, which can be seen as a metonymy for the resistance of villagers. People of Wahdeh strongly defended the olives and the land, which represent their own roots. As long as they protect their roots (the land, olives, identity, culture … etc.), they can resist the war and its devastating outcomes. By writing about trees’ struggle to survive, the author is symbolically commenting on human resistance during the Lebanese civil war, which embodies Hamoud Yahya Ahmed and Ruzy Suliza Hashim’s concept of ecoresistance. It is an “ecopostcolonial concept,” coined “to signify the employment of both pure and cultivated forms of nature for resistance to the colonisers of the land” (Ahmed and Hashim 2014, 95).

Portraying the bitter death of the ancient pine tree, El Hage goes on depicting Faour’s feeling for losing a faithful companion. He writes: “I grieved at the memory of the majestic green umbrella when it was whole, home to the birds and squirrels and cicadas” (El Hage, 2007, 220). Faour is lamenting the death of this tree as if he lost an individual, which embodies the author’s engagement with what Stef Craps calls the ecological grief. In his “Introduction: Ecological Grief,” Stef Craps (2020) refers to the role of literature in raising awareness about environmental loss. He remarks: “many contributors approach the topic via literary texts, films, or other artistic creations that are seen to provide form and structure for grief related to environmental loss, which remains largely unspoken and unrecognized” (5). As such, El Hage portrays an ecological grief through Faour’s mourning. By presenting this solid relation between Faour and the majestic pine, the author emphasizes the crucial role played by trees in the narrative. Addressing Adam, Faour says: “It’s bleeding, look!... ‘It’s split right down the middle” (El Hage, 2007, 220). Again, the author is personifying the tree, describing it as ‘bleeding’ to show the cruel crime committed against nature. Serval times, trees are given human qualities. The repetitive descriptions of the wounded trees demonstrate the extent of violence that the trees had witnessed. El Hage portrays trees as struggling to live in a severe contaminated landscape, just like people do during the civil war. Trees, mainly pines, are used by the writer as large metaphors to report the violent Lebanese history in the course of the civil war.
A question may be raised at this point: why does the author neglect the olives which represent a cultural and religious heritage in Lebanon and the pines which are more central than the myrtle that is mentioned in the title? A possible interpretation could be the symbolic signification of the myrtle tree. According to Michael Ferber’s *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, the “myrtle is an evergreen and thus suggestive of life’s power against death” (1999, 132). Hence, it implies a sense of hope and resistance which explains the writer’s choice to use it as a title of his novel despite the minor position it occupies in the narrative. He, then, comes to say that Wahdeh will live for ever as the myrtle is an evergreen plant.

Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* (2013)

Sinan Antoon is an American-Iraqi poet, novelist, translator, and a scholar. *The Corpse Washer* was first published in 2010 in Arabic as *Wahdaha Shajarat Al-rumman*. In 2013, a self-translated version was published and has been the subject of study by many scholars since its publication. For instance, in “Writing Trauma in Iraq: Literary Representations of War and Oppression in the Fiction of Sinan Antoon,” Zahraa Qasim Habeeb explores the textual representations of “traumatic neurosis” (2015, iii). Similarly, Radwa Ramadan Mahmoud focuses on the trauma caused by war violence and its effect in her study, “War and Violence in Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*” (2016, 49). In “Writing the Dismembered Nation: The Aesthetics of Horror in Iraqi Narratives of War;” Haytham Bahoorah also raises the question of war but sheds more light on the style of narration, considering the novel as a postcolonial gothic (n.d, 206). One more research about war is Pshtiwan Faraj Mohammed’s “The Representation of the Iraq War in Selected Anglo-American and Iraqi Novels,” in which he emphasizes on themes of violence, “malice’, ‘abjection’, ‘torn bodies” (2015, 145). Apart from the question of war, Nibras A. M. Al-Omar analyses Antoon’s translation in “Cultural Identity in Sinan Antoon’s Self-Translated ‘The Corpse Washer’”, proposing that “Self-translation can be a powerful tool in the transmission of cultural identity” (2018, 215). Ibrahim Awni Ibrahim Abu Rob (2017), likewise, emphasizes the issue of translation in his research, “A Translation Analysis of Sinan Antoon’s Language in his Novel (*The Corpse Washer, 2013*): A Socio-Cultural and Ideological Construction”. In “Disintegration and Hope for Revival in the Land of the Two Rivers as Reflected in the Novels of Sinan Antoon,” Geula Elimelekh examines magical realism (2017, 229). As the review demonstrates, studies have focused on the question of war and translation among other issues, while the representation of trees has not been approached.

The novel recounts the story of a traumatized Iraqi man, Jawad, who hails from a family of corpse washers but tries to escape this profession to be an artist. Jawad’s pious father spends his days in the mghaysil, washing dead bodies and praying for them. In the mghaysil’s garden grows a pomegranate tree,
which captures Jawad’s imagination as an artist. Disobeying his father, Jawad joins Baghdad’s Academy of Fine Arts but has no opportunities of work. He undergoes a series of traumatic events like the loss of his beloved, the death of his brother and father, the failure to leave the country, and the unprecedented violence that tears up Iraq’s social fabric because of wars (the 1980s war with Iran, the 1991 Gulf War, and the 2003 occupation). Wars turn the city into a graveyard, and Jawad finds himself forced to continue his father’s occupation in order to support his mother. He now spends most of his time waiting for corpses in the mghaysil’s garden, sitting next to the pomegranate tree which becomes his faithful companion.

Antoon opens his narrative with a verse from the holy Qur’an: “In both gardens are fruit, palm trees and pomegranate” (2013, 13). Actually, the verse introduces the reader to the two species of trees mentioned in the novel, palms and a pomegranate. According to the Islamic tradition, these two trees make part of flora in paradise. In the narrative, they represent important keys to understand metaphors and allegories employed by the author. Through multiple images of trees in the narrative, Antoon portrays some religious cultural aspects and practices. On one occasion, he writes: “Hammoudy went to the garden and brought back a branch from a palm tree. He handed it to my father, who broke it into two pieces. He placed one alongside the right arm between the collar bone and the hand and placed the other at the identical spot on the left side” (2013, 25). The quote describes a traditional Islamic ritual, which is corpse washing. It shows how a branch from the palm tree is used in this religious practice. Jawad further clarifies: “Later, my father told me that the branches were supposed to lessen the torture of the grave” (Antoon 2013, 25). This explains the cultural significance of the palm tree and its branches. According to the religious beliefs of Jawad’s father, the branch of the palm tree reduces the punishment of the deceased in the grave. This image keeps recurring throughout the novel, which emphasizes the role of this tree and its religious importance in Baghdad’s culture.

Not only palm’s branches are used during corpse washing, but also branches of lotus or pomegranate at times. Observing Hammoudy, Jawad recounts: “Then he went out to the garden and I heard branches being broken. He came back with a branch of pomegranate, which he snapped in two, placing both pieces along the arms inside the coffin” (Antoon 2013, 63). In fact, putting a branch in the tomb to ward off the torment of the grave is one of the controversial issues in Islamic religious studies. According to Muhammad bin al-Hasan al-Hurr al-Amili’s Wasa’il al-Shia, it is desirable to use branches of palm trees to lessen the grave torture (n.d. 24). Also, other trees can be used such us the pomegranate, al sidr or any other tree as long as it is soft (n.d. 24-25). While Muslim Sunnis do not believe in this religious ritual, the Shiite communities give it an essential interest, which is the case of the community that Antoon depicts. It is important to note that Jawad’s family descends from a Shiite branch since his father keeps ‘a portrait of Imam Ali’ in the mghaysil. Antoon, therefore, is probably projecting some Shiite beliefs through the use of trees and their branches while washing dead corpses. He emphasizes the significance of this religious practice through repetitive images of the same act throughout the narrative.

Apart from the religious implication of trees, Antoon alludes to another cultural dimension embodied in the portrayal of palm trees. Throughout the novel, we see that the floral landscape in Iraq is dominated by palm trees. The only other kind mentioned in the novel is the pomegranate, which grows in the mghaisl’s
garden. An example of this is when Antoon writes: “A group of theater students wearing black were sitting around a palm tree” (2013, 37). In another case, Jawad describes the house of his sister: “The palm tree’s fronds in the far right corner were touching a window on the second floor. Its bunches were full of dates” (Antoon 2013, 154). Actually, scenes of palm trees are painted often in the narrative. What should be noted here is that Iraq contains many trees’ species which are not mentioned in the novel. Antoon’s neglect of other trees and the strong focus on palms brings to one’s mind their cultural and historical importance. These trees are regarded as an important historical heritage which dates back to ancient Mesopotamia, a historical region that corresponds to modern Iraq and other neighbouring countries. Gábor Kalla (2018) remarks: “The date... was of paramount economic value in ancient Mesopotamia, and its importance did not fade in the next millennia” (869). They also represent a common motif of art during this era. Geula Elimelekh explains: “This tree was revered and even sanctified, and that images of palms were carved on the walls of temples and adorned the thrones and crowns of Sumerian and Babylonian kings” (2017, 247). The rich and long history of palms in Iraq, then, may justify the author’s choice to valorise palm trees to the exclusion of all else.

As previously discussed, palms and pomegranate trees are both portrayed in the novel as an embodiment of certain religious and historical beliefs, which make part of the author’s cultural identity. They are employed by the novelist as symbols of some Shiite religious aspects which characterize Baghdad city and as emblems of the historical heritage left by their ancestors in Mesopotamia. However, the pomegranate tree emerges to be more central and symbolic in the narrative. It is presented as a living being, growing, blossoming, extending its roots into the earth and its branches to the sky, but also watching and recording. It transcends the cultural and religious signification to stand as a witness of war violence as it sees many dead bodies of war’s victims every day. It is not surprising then that the title of the novel in Arabic, Wahdaha Shajarat Al-Rumman, foregrounds the pomegranate tree as unique and special. In fact, the Arabic version of the title, which means the pomegranate alone, better serves the purpose of this study as it centralizes the tree which occupies an important position in the novel. In his re-writing of the novel, Antoon changes the focus of the title to the protagonist’s profession, which is far different from the Arabic version. One may even view the two titles dichotomy as a divide between life and death since the pomegranate alone implies a sense of life as it thrives on a harsh landscape, while the corpse washer implies a sense of death as the protagonist spends his time with the dead. In the novel, scenes of corpse washing are more present than the pomegranate tree which means that death is dominant. Towards the end, the pomegranate is emphasised by the author in an attempt to show that life prevails in Baghdad despite the brutal continuous wars.

Describing the mghaysil, the narrator says: “Directly beneath the window was a door leading to a tiny garden where the pomegranate tree my father loved so much stood. Next to the door was a wooden bench on which relatives would wait and watch their beloved dead be washed and shrouded” (Antoon, 2013, 22). The quote, precisely, describes the position of the pomegranate tree which grows in the mghaysil’s garden. It stands in a strategic position, watching dead bodies being washed and their relatives in grief. The pomegranate’s position is central in both the mghaysil’s garden and the narrative. Having the capacity to
live for ages in such a strategic location enables the pomegranate to witness the consequences of war violence and chronicle the Iraqi nightmare.

Jawad’s relationship with the pomegranate is complex and disturbed, which projects the disorder of life he lived in Baghdad during the years of war. Ever since he was a child, Jawad loved the tree and eating its delicious fruits. He says: “When I was young, I ate the fruit of this tree that my father would pluck and bring home” (Antoon 2013, 63). Besides, he finds some kind of peace and solace in this tree. Being remorseful as he sketches the face of a dead man, he says: “I felt ashamed and humiliated and went out to the little garden and sat next to the pomegranate tree, tending to my wounds” (Antoon, 2013, 33). Jawad seeks the tree to overcome feelings of remorse, as if the pomegranate is a close friend and can heal his sorrows. The quote, then, illustrates the solid relationship between them. Moreover, he looks at the tree from the eye of an artist. He is a sketcher and appears to be enchanted by the beauty of the pomegranate: “I turned to a new page and started to sketch the tree and the pomegranates it bore” (Antoon 2013, 33). Jawad, here, is responding to the call of the tree by painting its gorgeous fruits and branches, cementing his relationship with it.

Jawad’s relation with the pomegranate changes as he discovers one day that the tree is irrigated by the water which comes from the mghaysil: “It had drunk the water of death for decades, and now it was about to drink the water flowing off his body through the runnel around the washing bench. My father and I were strangers, but I had never realized it until now” (Antoon 2013, 63). This tree thrives on the water coming from dead corpses which reveals its significance as a witness of war violence. The more people are killed in the war, the more this pomegranate drinks water and, ironically, grows bigger. Jawad is astonished at this discovery and his attitudes towards the tree become different. “I stopped eating it when I realized that it had drunk of the waters of death. I heard the sound of water being poured inside. Seconds later I saw it rush through the runnel and flow around the roots of the tree” (Antoon 2013, 63). He no more enjoys the delicious fruits that had been offered by the tree for years. On being asked if he likes pomegranates, Jawad answers, “I do...but not from this tree.” (2013, 107). He loves the pomegranate but not from the tree which grows in the mghaysil’s garden since it depends on the water of death to grow. The tree becomes a reminder of death for Jawad, a reminder of how many people had been killed, washed, and shrouded because of war and its violent progression.

During Saddam Hussein’s reign and the American invasion of Iraq, Baghdad has become a graveyard. The number of war deaths has increased in a short time. In the mghaysil, Jawad receives damaged corpses and separated organs at times. One day, he washed a head: “Next to his name I wrote, ‘severed head.’” (Antoon 2013, 137). Both Jawad and the tree are tied to death: “Like me, this pomegranate’s roots were here in the depths of hell” (Antoon 2013, 160). All these tragic events were taking place, while the pomegranate tree stands fixed in the garden, drinking the water of death and recoding in silence. Each drop of water is a letter in the tree’s book of memory. Death sustains the disturbed relationship between Jawad and the tree. Being unable to cope with the tragic situation that dominates the cityscapes of Baghdad, Jawad seeks peace in his father’s beloved tree. He says: “I told Mahdi that I was going outside to sit next to the pomegranate tree. I’d been sitting the last few months on the chair I’d put in front of it to converse with it.
Sadouni, Awad

It has become my only companion in the world” (Antoon 2013, 160). In a world where the protagonist finds no one to share his grief with, the pomegranate becomes his faithful listener as they both share a painful memory. They both lived and survived the 1980s war with Iran, the 1991 Gulf War, and the 2003 occupation.

In spite of the aggressive attacks and terrible explosions in Iraq, the pomegranate tree stands fixed and grows bigger every day, revealing a sense of resistance: “Its red blossoms had opened like wounds on the branches, breathing and calling out” (Antoon 2013, 160). The quote paints a painful image of a war’s survivor. The tree is still alive but appears sad, injured, and suffering. Its ‘red blossoms’ and fruits probably symbolize blood. Its roots absorb the water that comes from corpses and transport it to the branches and leaves. But, “Do the roots reveal everything to the branches, or do they keep what is painful to themselves?” (Antoon 2013, 160). The branches are rising and growing at the expense of the roots which painfully resist and transform death to life in a deep image of resistance. Antoon uses the pomegranate tree to express his strong belief in resistance to face the foreign invasion. The tree’s struggle to survive reflects that of Jawad and, therefore, of all citizens in Iraq. Jawad goes on saying: “I looked at its dark soil, wet with the washing water it had just drunk. It’s a wondrous tree, I thought. Drinking the water of death for decades now, but always budding, blossoming, and bearing fruit every spring” (Antoon 2013, 160). The phrase “Drinking the water of death for decade” reveals the long time the tree had suffered and resisted. Despite all these years of agony and grief, the pomegranate has always kept “blossoming”, which implies a profound sense of resistance and resilience. Like Jawad, who tries to cope with the harsh circumstances of war, the pomegranate tree is living in a constant struggle since it grows in a tough landscape. The resemblance between Jawad and the tree evokes the author’s use of nature as a form of human resistance against the occupation. The pomegranate is both vulnerable and struggling since it learnt how to survive in a harsh environment. The tree’s refusal to give up on life demonstrates its power to resist and reflects Jawad’s quest for life. Using the tree to express Jawad’s resistance is conceptualized by Hamoud Yahya Ahmed and Ruzy Suliza Hashim as “the greening of resistance”, which is “a new way for expressing human resistance via nature”, through “the parts of the biotic community in a particular place” (2014, 14).

It is also important to note that tree imagery is profoundly symbolic in the novel. Narrating a dream he had seen, Jawad says: “I see Reem standing in an orchard full of blossoming pomegranate trees... I see two pomegranates on her chest instead of her breasts... the left pomegranate falls to the ground. When I bend down to pick it up, I see red stains bathing my arm” (Antoon 2013, 105). Reem is Jawad’s girlfriend who discovers later that she has cancer. She leaves Iraq suddenly to seek medical treatment in Jordan. Antoon figuratively compares Reem’s breast to the pomegranate fruits which is a powerful expression of language. The quote illustrates how the author uses the pomegranate tree to metaphorically write about breast cancer. Reem’s breast is contaminated with cancer, just like the pomegranate tree is contaminated with the water of death. Both are resisting contamination and struggling to survive under the severe circumstances of war. Another interpretation could be that Reem is going to die as the pomegranate tree is very close to death. Yet, the novel does not tell whether she dies or not; her fate remains unknown.
The Stories Trees Tell: Jad El Hage’s *The Myrtle Tree* and Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*

The pomegranate tree acquires different powerful symbolic values during the course of events. On its function as a witness of violence, the narrator remarks: “But it’s a tree. Its fate is to be a tree and to remain here” (Antoon 2013, 160). The quote portrays the pomegranate as a stable, fixed, and immovable tree; whereas the outside world is changing. As Zuhair and Awad succinctly put it in their description of the representation of trees in Susan Abulhawa’s *Morning in Jennin*, people “come and go, and live and die” (2020, 12) while the tree keeps standing and remains immovable. Given this continuous stability in the mghaysil’s garden, along with the capacity to survive and live for ages, the pomegranate tree gets an opportunity and develops an ability to record changes and to witness violence caused by successive wars in Iraq.

The pomegranate tree stands as a witness of violence, and so do palm trees. Palms are both victims and witnesses of war violence. Jawad’s uncle says: “This is not the Baghdad I’d imagined. Not just in terms of the people. Even the poor palm trees are tired and no one takes care of them. Believe me, these Americans, with their ignorance and racism, will make people long for Saddam’s days”’ (Antoon 2013, 82). This passage realistically describes the effect of the American invasion and the violence imposed on both people and nature. The poor and tired palm trees paint an image of an exhausted nature, deeply damaged by war violence. Thus, the writer is dealing with the issue of violence from an ecological perspective by stressing its effect on the floral environment. This is also evident through the pessimistic article published by Jawad’s uncle. Publishing an article about the consequences of the aggressive continuous wars on trees is a way in which the author gives voice to nature. Media is one of the effective tools to raise people’s awareness about environmental issues. The author seems to make a call for non-fiction writing, such as journalistic articles, to expose nature’s depletion and to consider environmental violence caused by the brutal invasion. Elizabeth Deloughrey et. al (2015) believe in the power of non-fiction writing in visualizing environmental violence that has been made unseen by the effects of globalization. She remarks: “Nonfiction writing often shares this imaginative vision and, whether through journalism, testimonio, or even scholarly work, can also elucidate what a homogenizing globalization seeks to render invisible” (2015, 4-5). In this respect, Sinan Antoon appears to (in)directly draw media and non-fiction writers’ attention to the problem of war violence on nature and its consequences on trees. He offers an example of a true image about the colonial aggression and his violent attacks on nature. From an ecological angle, Antoon seems to challenge western media which has been manipulated as suggested by Edward Said in his book *Covering Islam*.

On the palm trees, Jawad’s uncle writes in his article:

Some have had their fronds burned. Some have been beheaded. Some have had their backs broken by time, but are still trying to stand. Some have dried bunches of dates. Some have been uprooted, mutilated and exiled from their orchards. Some have allowed invaders to lean on their trunk. Some are combing the winds with their fronds. Some stand in silence. Some have fallen. Some stand tall and raise their heads high despite everything in this vast orchard: Iraq. (Antoon 2013, 82)
The images depicted by the writer in these lines highlight the destruction of the Iraqi land that was once a vast green orchard. The passage reflects a bleak and miserable image of palm trees in Baghdad. They appear like loyal soldiers who sacrifice their lives for the life of the country. Using adjectives like ‘burned’, ‘beheaded’, ‘uprooted’, ‘mutilated’, and ‘exiled’ implies the barbaric military violence imposed on trees in particular and nature in general. It is also worth mentioning that one of the colonizer’s strategies is to destroy cultural landmarks of the colonized nations. In this case, the palms are targeted for their big historical value throughout civilizations. Publishing such an article on trees, Jawad’s uncle, and therefore the author, are trying to centralize the natural world other than the human one. Departing from anthropocentrism is in fact one of the essential principles in the field of postcolonial ecocriticism. Elizabeth Deloughrey and George B. Handley (2011) equally confirm that “[a]lthough it is never clear how we know if we have escaped our anthropocentrism, ecocritical postcolonialism attempts to imagine something beyond the confines of our human story” (25). Postcolonial ecocriticism, therefore, calls for narrowing ‘the human story’ and listening to the stories narrated by nature instead.

In the case of The Corpse Washer, Sinan Antoon permits the pomegranate and palm trees to tell their own stories and to expose human crimes against nature during the years of wars. Thus, he is recording history ecologically. The quote also evokes a sense of resistance. Despite the suffering, some trees are ‘trying to stand’, ‘some stand in silence’, and ‘some stand tall and raise their heads high’. Trying to stand is trying to resist and to fight and, later, to narrate. Trees’ struggle to stand is a metonymy for the resistance against foreign invasion. Whether Surviving the war or not, these trees tell the world what colonization had done one day. Palms, at this point, stand as witnesses of war violence. Antoon further emphasizes the violence imposed on trees as Jawad’s uncle wonders: “When will the orchard return to its owners? Not to those who carry axes. Not even to the attendant who assassinates palm trees, no matter what the color of his knife” (Antoon 2013, 82). Diction is very important in these lines. The author’s choice of words is really expressive: ‘axes’, ‘assassinates’, and ‘knife’ all reveal the brutality of violence caused by war.

Through the employment of pomegranate and palm trees in the novel, Sinan Antoon offers an indirect commentary on religious, historical, and socio-political issues in Iraq between 1980 and 2003. Both types of trees are utilized to write about cultural aspects, resistance, and violence. These trees are important and are used as metaphors to reflect life in a world terrorized by the violent history of colonial invasion. Sinan Antoon’s engagement with trees imagery and symbolism demonstrates how trees can be instrumental in writing literature.

Conclusion

Authors of The Myrtle Tree and The Corpse Washer create fictional stories in which they centralize the role of trees in both the character’s lives and the novels’ plotlines. The characters in the two novels live in different situations, facing continuous changes and difficult circumstances. In the meanwhile, trees show unique responses, contributing to the framing of the whole narratives and producing their own separate stories. Trees in these texts share cultural symbolism which includes religious aspects, historical values, and communities’ distinctive traditions and customs. Besides, they are employed to implicitly insert
The Stories Trees Tell: Jad El Hage’s *The Myrtle Tree* and Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*

comments on resistance. The resistance of trees in these novels is profoundly expressive as it reflects that of characters’. Furthermore, they are represented as witnesses of violence and victims at times. The violence caused by successive wars left great damages on trees. What should be emphasized here is that violence is destructive and that trees are always victims and witnesses of human crimes against nature. Throughout these novels, trees are allowed to tell their stories and expose the constant mutilation they endure. Hence, Jad El Hage and Sinan Antoon give voice to trees in particular and to nature in general.

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الأشجار، ما بعد الاستعمار الإيكولوجي، الثقافة، المقاومة، العنف.
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