

The Kindness of Nature in Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*: An Ecocritical Reading

Majd M. Alkayid*

Department of English Language and Literature, Al-Balqa Applied University, Salt, Jordan

Raed A. Alqassas

Department of English Language and Literature, Al-Balqa Applied University, Salt, Jordan

Murad Al Kayed

Department of English Language and Literature, Al-Balqa Applied University, Salt, Jordan

Mais N. Al-Shara'h

The School of Foreign Languages, The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan

Malik N. Alkhalwaldeh

Department of English Language and Translation, Applied Science Private University, Amman, Jordan

Abstract—This paper aims at studying Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* through an ecocritical lens. The study investigates how environmental and postcolonial themes intersect in the novel, emphasizing the destructive colonial effect on the environment and on personal and cultural identities. The study also highlights how nature shapes the personal and collective identities of indigenous people. It shows how colonial exploitation of the land and the people leads to the destruction of the environment and the marginalization of people. Nature also is portrayed as a space for resistance and a means of healing.

Index Terms—diaspora, nature, ecocriticism, identity, Aboulela

I. INTRODUCTION

The study applies ecocriticism as a theoretical framework to analyze Leila Aboulela's novel *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015). The novel provides vivid depictions of nature, landscapes and the symbolic significance of the environment. The study aims to analyze the novel through an ecocritical lens to highlight the cultural, political and socioeconomic meanings.

Ecocriticism is relatively a new critical study that focuses on the relationship between the environment and literature. In fact, the term ecocriticism is coined for the first time by Rueckert (1978) in his study "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". Rueckert (1978) explains that ecocriticism is "applying ecological concepts to the reading, teaching, and writing about literature" (p. 107). In other words, ecocriticism is a critical approach that analyzes literary texts in relation to nature and its symbolic meanings. In addition, ecocriticism explores the interconnectedness between nature and human activities and behavior. In *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, Kerridge and Sammells (1998) discuss how Ecocriticism is a means "to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (p. 5). Thus, the aim of ecocriticism is to emphasize the importance of the environment and address any problems or threats that may negatively affect it.

This study analyzes Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) as a text that is embedded with postcolonial and ecocritical symbols, images and themes. It explores the symbolic and thematic implications of nature in connection with colonialism. By navigating different landscapes like Sudan, Scotland and Dagestan, and different historical periods including the 19th century and 21st century, the novel accurately depicts environmental issues not only in a specific location, but on a global scale, emphasizing how environmental concerns affect all humans across the world. In addition, the novel focuses on portraying the Russian colonization and its devastating impact on both people and the environment. This study also shows the deep connection between indigenous people and their land. They value it, and try to defend it facing all the military and technological powers of the colonizers. In the novel, colonizers believe that having political and military power gives them the right to conquer lands and destroy them and everything that lives there including humans, animals and plants. This research explores how Aboulela depicts nature and its interconnectedness with colonialism, cultural identity, racism, spirituality, and language.

A. The Author

* Corresponding Author.

The author Aboulela (1964) is a novelist and a playwright of Sudanese origins. She grew up in Sudan and in 1990 she moved with her family to Scotland where she began writing literary works. She has written many collections of short stories and novels such as *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), *Lyrics Alley* (2005), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), *Bird Summons* (2019), and *River Spirit* (2023). Her work focuses on the Arab diasporic experience, highlighting the hardships and challenges of migration, and how immigrants navigate issues like identity, belonging and cultural struggle.

B. The Novel

The novel *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) narrates two parallel stories of two different places and two different historical periods. The first story begins in 2010, and centers on the protagonist, Natasha, who is born to a Sudanese father and a Scottish mother. The Second story is set in the 19th-century Dagestan and focuses on Imam Shamil, the leader of the anti-Russian resistance who fought to defend his land. These stories are connected through the protagonist, Natasha, a history professor conducting research on Imam Shamil. As a result, the narrative shifts between the two storylines, portraying two different places, two different historical periods and two different characters. To clarify these settings, each chapter in the novel is titled with the location and year in which the events take place.

The first story portrays Natasha's relationship with one of her students; Osama—also known as Oz—who is a descendent of Imam Shamil and the owner of Shamil's sword. Natasha visits Osama and befriends his mother. The three of them frequently discuss many issues related to Islam, migration and cultural identity. During one of Natasha's visits, a snowstorm forces Natasha to stay at their house for an extra day. That day, Oz is arrested for conducting research on Islam and Jihad. Natasha and Oz's mother are informed that Oz is accused of planning a terrorist act. The narrative then focuses on demonstrating Shamil's strength and loyalty to his country in resisting Russian occupation. However, the Russian forces are very powerful as they kill people and animals, destroy the land and plants, and imprison many Dagestani people including Jamaliden; Shamil's son. In response, Shamil's men capture the Russian leader's wife; Anna, along with her children and their governess, in an attempt to exchange them for Jamaledin. In these two stories, nature is intricately woven into the fabric of the story, highlighting themes of racism, cultural identity, and the role of nature as both a spiritual haven and a means of symbolic linguistic expression.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Kindness of Enemies has been widely studied for its discussion of multiple themes, such as diaspora, migration, cultural identity, hybridity, and religion. For example, in "Dislocating Narrativity: Hybridity, Culture and Identity in Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*," Aladylah (2018) investigates the themes of cultural identity and hybridity, emphasizing that the novel "discusses the process of establishing a bridge of coexistence and tolerance amid cultural and religious differences" (p. 478). Aladylah examines the cultural conflict Natasha experiences in her search for identity and sense of belonging. In "From Inadequacy to Becoming in Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*," Benlahcene et al. (2025) argue that the protagonist Natasha goes through a process of change and "becoming" as she moves "from a state of insecurity to an enlightened understanding of her authentic self" (p. 208). Similarly, in "Of Hideous 'half-and-halves': Reading the Grotesque in Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*," Doosti and Nojournian (2019) study the novel through the lens of grotesque theory, drawing on theoretical works by Bakhtin, Foucault, Bhabha and Kristeva. They argue that "the Bakhtinian grotesque is exemplarily revitalized in Natasha's abject body at different strata, which turns her body mass from a definite individual figure to a becoming political body in a network of sociocultural and religious forces" (Doosti & Nojournian, 2019, p. 116). This suggests that Natasha undergoes a transformation from an individual identity to a more politically conscious entity shaped by social, political and cultural experiences.

Moreover, in "Islamophobia, Othering and the Sense of Loss: Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*," Alkodimi (2021) focuses on the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and their impact on the image of Islam and Muslims. Alkodimi argues that "Aboulela wisely related Islamophobia, racism and the distorted image of Muslims in the west ... to the terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda members and other militant groups" (2021, p. 154). In other words, the novel addresses Islam and the widespread misrepresentations of both the religion and its followers. Alkodimi notes that Aboulela "indirectly puts it that these are mere terrorist acts and have nothing to do with Islam and Muslims. On the contrary, it affected Muslims across the world and had negatively impacted Muslims in general and Muslim immigrants, in particular" (Alkodimi, 2021, p. 154). Thus, the novel emphasizes that such acts of terrorism are unrelated to the core of Islam. Moreover, in "Ensouling Agential Praxis in A Secular World: A Sufi Spiritual Turn in Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*," Chaoui (2023) explores how the female characters in the novel turn to Sufism to overcome feelings of alienation and marginalization. Chaoui argues that "Aboulela's novel maps out a turn toward spiritual traditions of Islam as transformative and liberating forces which endows her characters with a spiritual spatial horizon" (2023, p. 1). A more environmentally focused study is conducted by Al-Khayyat and Abu Amrieh (2023), who investigate weather conditions and their interconnectedness with the formation of cultural identity. They emphasize that Natasha "ends up accepting her Islamic half and identifying with weather conditions towards the end of her spiritual journey" (Al-Khayyat & Abu Amrieh, 2023, p. 12). In other words, Natasha's increasing awareness of her identity parallels her increasing awareness of weather conditions.

The above discussed studies do not directly investigate the novel through an ecocritical lens as they mainly focus on themes related to identity, migration, and religion. Therefore, this study attempts to examine the functions of nature and its political, cultural and socioeconomic implications. The study also highlights how war causes numerous environmental problems such as the destruction of crops, the killing of livestock, the murder of people, and air and water pollution. In addition, the study explores the relationship between nature, culture and racism, exploring how nature is considered by the characters as a safe haven, a source of healing, and a spiritual space. Additionally, the study demonstrates how some characters use nature as a form of language to express their emotions and thoughts, and communicate with each other.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative approach, applying ecocriticism as its theoretical framework to analyze Leila Aboulela's novel *The Kindness of Enemies*. It offers close textual analysis and examination of selected excerpts that depict nature, the human-nature interconnection, imagery and symbolism of natural elements. The study draws on the works of several key ecocritics including Loretta Johnson, Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, Arthur Boughey, Ian McHarg and William Rueckert.

Ecocriticism is a literary theory that examines the relationship between humans and the natural environment. This literary study first emerged as a field of study in the United States and the United Kingdom during the 1980s. Johnson (2009) argues that "Ecocriticism has emerged as a field of literary study that addresses how humans relate to nonhuman nature or environment in literature" (p. 623). Over time, the field expanded to Asia and Africa and eventually to a global scale. In their study, Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) argue that ecocriticism "has been predominantly a white movement" (p. xxv), and emphasize that scholars from all regions and backgrounds should engage with it, as the relationship between humans and nature is a universal concern. Glotfelty and Fromm describe ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (p. xx) and assert that "a diversity of voices is encouraged to contribute to the discussion" (1996, p. xix).

Glotfelty and Fromm also emphasize that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (1996, p. xix). They add that ecocriticism explores "interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature" (p. xix). Therefore, ecocriticism is concerned with nature and its interconnections with identity, language, literature and culture. These critics argue that literature is a powerful tool for raising human awareness of nature and the actions needed to protect it. They argue that "literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact" (p. xix).

Moreover, Boughey (1975) argues that "there is no population, community, or ecosystem left on earth completely independent of the effects of human cultural behavior, now influence has begun to spread beyond the globe to the rest of our planetary system and even to the universe itself" (p. 5). In other words, humans have a profound impact on the ecological system and must be aware of the consequences of any activity that may harm the environment. Boughey believes that each individual plays a pivotal role in saving the planet and correcting destructive environmental behavior. Similarly, McHarg (1969) demonstrates that "each individual has a responsibility for the entire biosphere and is required to engage in creative and cooperative activities" (p. 114). All these scholars highlight the shared responsibility of protecting nature, which both affects and is affected by human activity.

Literary texts have long addressed environmental issues and raised awareness about the importance of taking action to stop or modify harmful human practices affecting the ecological system. Rueckert (1978) states that "every poem which comes from a finally developed and refined ecological conscience and consciousness... enacts a whole program of ecological action" (p. 116). He also argues that individuals should "find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it human community" (p. 107). He adds that people should "find the grounds upon which the two communities- the human, the natural- can coexist, cooperate and flourish in the biosphere" (p. 107). Rueckert believes that nature "should be protected by human laws, that trees (dolphins and whales, hawks and whooping cranes) should have lawyers to articulate and defend their rights" (p. 108). In this context, literary writers alongside ecologists, serve as the metaphorical lawyers who articulate and defend the rights of the environment.

Ecocriticism, in essence, is concerned with human practices that both affect and are affected by the ecological system. Among the most harmful and destructive practices to nature is colonization. Postcolonial ecocriticism, therefore, investigates the interconnectedness of colonization, war, imperialism and the environment. Rueckert notes that "postcolonial Ecocritics have pointed to the ecological implications of settler colonialism and the negative impacts of industries" (p. 113). In colonized regions, colonizers often seize land, steal natural resources, destroy ecosystems, subjugate and kill indigenous populations, and erase their cultures. In addition, Mukherjee (2006) states that environmental studies should also consider the social and cultural aspects of the land. He explains, "any field purporting to attach interpretative importance to environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions and species" (Mukherjee, 2006, p. 144).

The study, therefore, highlights how the novel portrays the relationship between the natural landscape and human activities such as war, deforestation, pollution and the killing of animals. It also explores the interconnection between

nature and culture, particularly in relation to hybridity, identity and race. Nature emerges as a powerful force in shaping people's identities, choices and sense of belonging.

IV. DISCUSSION

Postcolonial ecocritics emphasize that colonialization affects the ecological system by polluting and destroying natural elements such as water, soil, plants, animals and habitats. In "Surfing the second waves: Amitav Ghosh's *Tide Country*", Mukherjee (2006) argues that postcolonial studies "cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts" (p. 144). Accordingly, nature, politics and culture affect and are affected by one another and are inseparable. Using military and political power, colonizers force indigenous people to leave their homeland, leading to problems of exile, displacement and cultural conflict. Alternatively, they allow them to remain but after destroying the natural environment and erasing their cultural identity.

Many literary writers have explored the effects of colonialism on nature and indigenous people. For example, Chinua Achebe examines the colonizers' destruction of the environment in his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), where the narrator observes how "the crazy men actually began to clear a part of the forest and to build their houses" (Achebe, 1958, p. 141). Thus, colonizers cleared vast areas of land to construct colonial institutions. The imposition of colonial power over the Nigerian people in general, and the Igbo people in particular, resulted in serious environmental degradation including deforestation, the hunting of wild animals, the loss of the wilderness and the erasure of cultural identity.

In *Ecocritical Postcolonial Studies on Humans, land and Animals*, Afzal (2017) emphasizes that "when any region is colonized, it means the whole environment is colonized. The environment begins to be manipulated by the dominant power" (Afzal, 2017, p. 2). Afzal further explains that postcolonialism opposes "economic and physical exploitation of native people and their lands and resources" (p. 2). In other words, postcolonial ecocriticism raises awareness of the need to preserve both human and natural environments and stresses the urgency of stopping or modifying actions that threaten their existence.

Edward Said, a prominent postcolonial theorist, demonstrates how imperialism transforms the ecological system of colonized lands. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said (1994) explains that "Europeans immediately began to change the local habitat; their conscious aim was to transform territories into images of what they had left behind" (p. 225). Said argues that this process takes a long time and it "was never-ending, as a huge number of plants, animals, and crops as well as building methods gradually turned the colony into a new place, complete with new diseases, environmental imbalances, and traumatic dislocations for the overpowered natives" (p. 225). He concludes that "a changed ecology also introduced a changed political system" (p. 225). In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, Huggan and Tiffin (2015) also demonstrate how Western colonizers have exploited the environment and destroyed human lives. They argue that "Western exploitation, both past and present, has resulted in the murder, displacement and impoverishment of people, animals and their environment; and it has also generated apparently 'either/or' situations in contexts of land and resource scarcity or degradation" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 154). Similarly, Junejo and Shaikh (2022) explain that "much of the human and ecological degradation is a result of imperial colonizing efforts" (p. 67).

Aboulela's novel *The Kindness of Enemies* portrays colonial practices that lead to environmental destruction, displacement and the murder of indigenous people. An ecocritical approach is thus applied to examine nature in connection with themes such as displacement, racism, cultural identity and spirituality. The novel emphasizes the interconnection between the human and natural environments to highlight the devastation caused by colonial regimes. For instance, when the Russians invaded Dagestan, they "set aouls ablaze and destroyed crops; they were even destroying the forests in order to build their military roads" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 32). The colonizers show no regard for environmental destruction, focusing only on seizing the land and extracting by any means. At times, they even pollute the water and "foul the wells" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 33) in order to subdue the people.

Although Shamil and his people resist Russian colonization, the Russians succeed in destroying the land and murdering its inhabitants. The people suffer from starvation after being besieged by their enemies. Many people are murdered and death is everywhere; "death below them and with them – carrion birds circled above" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 30). The destruction caused by the Russians leads to severe air pollution, as "there was a bad smell, the stench of war, of fire" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 31). Dead bodies lie scattered across the land, unburied, as their relatives fear being killed by Russian forces. These corpses "lay in piles, decomposing and starting to smell, shameful under the morning sun" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 35). The Russians reduce Akhulgo to a site of death and ruin, creating "the stench of the corpses, the wailing of children, houses and stables turned to rubble" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 39). Shamil compares the Russian colonizers to poisonous creatures, describing them "as poisonous as the snakes that crawled in the steppes" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 38). In her effort to rebuild the destroyed Dagestan, Shamil's wife, Zeidat, demands that the Russians pay fifty thousand roubles in ransom for the kidnapped Russians, declaring that they "need to build our villages again, the ones you burnt down, the trees you cut down, the crops you destroyed, the pastures you razed, the cattle ... you shot down for no reason other than that you are evil Russians" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 146).

All these violent and oppressive acts of polluting water, burning houses, cutting down trees, destroying crops and killing cattle are done to erase both the natural environment and the indigenous population. The destruction of nature

forces people to leave their land and undergo an overwhelming experience of displacement, racism, marginalization and cultural loss. Russian colonizers destroy, kill and erase anything that stands in their way to seize the land. The destruction of nature reflects the destruction of cultural identity. Colonialism displaces and marginalizes people, creating spiritual and emotional conflicts. These displaced individuals are forced to face and endure alienation, loss of culture, and racism. This paper thoroughly analyzes these themes in connection with nature and its political and cultural implications.

A. Nature, Cultural Identity and Racism

The environment plays an important role in shaping personal and communal identities. The novel portrays the 19th-century Caucasus resistance to the Russian invasion and the devastation that results from this struggle. Within this context, characters and nature interact, affect and are affected by one another. The novel portrays Dagestan's landscape and its deep connection to people's lifestyle and culture. For example, the Caucasus's mountains, valleys and rivers represent the cultural identities and lifestyles of its inhabitants. The Caucasus region, which Shamil and his people defend, is naturally fortified by its mountains and cliffs, therefore, the Russians find it extremely difficult to reach. This area "was a natural fortress, high on one of the peaks of the Caucasus, six hundred feet above the river Andi-Koisu... only horses trained for such a twisted, vertical ascent could reach Shamil's aoul" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 25). The people and animals of Dagestan have adapted to life in these high and dangerous mountains. Their horses are trained to navigate the cliffs and swim across rivers, capabilities that Russian horses lack. One of the Dagestani fighters tells a Russian lady that the river is "too deep for your horses. But ours are trained... the horses were indeed swimming even though they were weighed down with their riders and the cattle were pulling" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 93). The mountains serve as a fortress, protecting the locals from Russian attacks: "any soldier only needed to lose his balance once. By nightfall three-hundred and fifty Russians were killed" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 28). Nature itself seems to defend the land and reject the Russian invasion by inflicting the Russians with diseases, as "typhoid swept through the Russian forces" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 30). Thus, defense and resistance come not only from Dagestani people, but also from the environment, whose harsh conditions act as a barrier to Russian invasion.

The protagonist, Natasha, struggles with her hybrid identity as her father is Sudanese (African) and her mother Scottish (European). Navigating the vastly different landscapes of Sudan and Scotland intensifies her feelings of loss, displacement and homelessness. The stark environmental contrast between these two regions heightens Natasha's sense of isolation and estrangement. In Khartoum, Sudan, the weather is too hot and the city was under "the supreme heat of the sun hanging down like a low ceiling" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 245). Natasha states that "I started to sweat and lost focus. My thighs rubbed against each other; gritty sand entered my sandals and chafed against my skin" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 245). Natasha also comments on the city's unclean environment as she explains, "rubbish piled on the side of a street; broken chairs stacked on top of each other" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 245). Natasha feels that this city is different from urban Scotland. Therefore, she distances herself from the city of Khartoum as she declares that "I stopped, like a tourist, took a picture of it with my phone" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 245). In contrast, when Natasha returns to Scotland, she finds an urban and modern city, but this too adds to her internal conflict. Being in Scotland intensifies her struggle between the Islamic heritage inherited from her father and the secular lifestyle from her mother.

Natasha states, "I was a failed hybrid, made up of unalloyed selves. My Russian mother who regretted marrying my Sudanese father. My African father who came to hate his white wife" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 46). Natasha feels that she is a hybrid because of her parents' different races and cultures. She feels that "my atheist mother who blotted out my Muslim heritage. My Arab father who gave me up to Europe without a fight" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 46). Being split between two different worlds complicates her sense of identity. She is torn between her Western and Arab identities. She likens herself to a snow-covered branch, saying she can see herself "in the black-white contrast of a winter branch that was covered on one side with snow" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 46).

Natasha's feelings of homelessness, fragmented identity and lack of belonging are crystallized in a dream in which she sees herself as half human and half reptile. She explains, "from top of my head all the way down in one straight swoop, I split in two, half human and half reptile" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 80). This sense of alienation is rooted in her memories of her mother, who regretted marrying a Sudanese man. From the moment she arrived Sudan as a bride, Natasha's mother felt out of place and rejected both the land and culture. The mother "hated the henna, the sandalwood and the gold" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 136). In Sudanese culture, brides traditionally use henna; a dye made from the leaves of a plant, to adorn their hands and hair. By rejecting the henna and sandalwood, Natasha's mother not only rejects her husband, but also rejects Sudanese culture as well.

After her long journey to understand and accept her identity, she finds out that she is "not an isolated member of a species but simply one who had wandered far from the flock and still managed to survive, for better or for worse, in a different habitat" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 303). In this way, Natasha compares herself to a bird that has strayed from its flock but still manages to return, belong and survive. By using this image of a natural behavior among birds, Natasha expresses her feelings and thoughts about cultural hybridity.

Another character who suffers from an identity crisis is Jamaleldin, Shamil's son, who is kidnapped by the Russians, lives with them for many years, and eventually becomes like them. Jamaleldin conveys his feelings through using images drawn from nature. He compares himself to a crab because it moves backwards. When he sees a picture of a crab, it irritates him because "no living thing should walk backwards. It was unnatural and gloomy" (Aboulela, 2015, p.

219). He knows that he will soon return to his people after many years in Russia. He still possesses “the mountain spirit” of his people and remembers their lifestyle activities like “leaping over boulders, sitting on the ground to eat, wrapping his head in a turban” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 219). Therefore, he feels that “like a crab, he was edging backwards to them (his people)” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 219). Loneliness, loss and split identity make Jamaleldin feel that he belongs neither to Russia nor to the Caucasus. This feeling is unnatural and gloomy like the crab’s backward movement.

Moreover, the novel exposes how colonizers use natural imagery to assert racial hierarchies in order to legitimize the occupation and exploitation of the land and its inhabitants. In fact, Postcolonialism discusses how colonizers maintain their superiority and hegemony over the colonized by asserting the latter’s inferiority and weakness. Colonizers often dehumanize subjugated peoples by portraying them as “savages”, “barbarians”, “monsters”, and “animals”. They use natural (particularly animal) imagery to dehumanize the colonized people and reinforce racial hierarchies, thus justifying exploitation and violence.

In *The Kindness of Enemies*, Aboulela compares the Caucasians to Native Americans, as both groups are portrayed as barbaric, savage and monstrous to justify colonization. Aboulela demonstrates that “the Caucasus represented as Russia’s wild west, Shamil the noble savage, as magnificent and inscrutable as a Native American Chief” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 20). Thus, the Caucasus is described as a “wild” land inhabited by “savages” who supposedly need the Russians to “civilize” them. In addition, the novel demonstrates how colonizers depict the colonized as cannibals or monsters who must be subdued or killed to save humanity. For instance, a Russian lady claims, “they say Shamil is a monster who eats Russian flesh” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 54). This falsehood reflects how the colonized are demonized to justify violence and the so-called civilizing mission. By asserting their superiority as enlightened, educated and civilized, colonizers legitimize their colonial policies. The West, thus, stereotypes other cultures as weak, backward and uncivilized; a process Edward Said refers to as “othering”, which relies on binary oppositions that place the colonized and the colonizer at opposite poles. These stereotypes are lies and fabricated tools of oppression and control. In the novel, Jamaleldin notes that his people, “were wild not because he remembered them as such but because Russia and Europe said they were” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 219). In other words, the Russian imperial discourse dehumanizes the colonized to justify their domination.

The themes of environment, cultural identity and racism are intricately woven into the fabric of the novel. The portrayed landscapes shape and redefine the characters’ sense of self and belonging. Geographical, environmental, and historical forces influence people’s lives. Both Natasha and Jamaleldin navigate different landscapes that affect their personal and communal identities. Their painful experiences of displacement and cultural identity challenge and redefine their identities. For Natasha, the contrast between her Arab-African roots and the modern landscape of Scotland highlights the difficulty of having a unified identity. Similarly, Jamaleldin is torn between two cultures; the Caucasus culture into which he was born and the Russian culture in which he was raised. Therefore, the novel depicts the tensions and struggles that individuals face in reconciling their personal and cultural identities. The novel also exposes the political and linguistic tools employed by colonial powers, particularly and the use of animalistic imagery, to justify violence and oppression.

B. *Nature as a Cure, Haven and Spiritual Space*

In “The Sacralization of Nature and the ‘Naturalization’ of the Sacred”, Carvalho and Steil (2008) argue that there are “common imaginative horizons between ecology and spirituality, which we will call practices of self-cultivation, as the path to health and the physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing” (p. 1). In other words, nature provides physical, mental, and spiritual healing powers. It offers shelter, peace, harmony and tranquility in human lives. In *The Kindness of Enemies*, nature is portrayed as a space capable of healing people not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually. For example, when suffering from tuberculosis; a deadly disease during the 19th century, Jamaleldin surrounds himself with roses to “overpower the smell of illness” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 267). These roses offer Jamaleldin physical and spiritual strength. He seeks comfort and solace by keeping these roses close, using them as a form of resistance against death. Despite their small size, roses serve as a reminder that even in a world full of violence, war, death and destruction, humans can still find small but significant sources of happiness and hope in nature.

Nature is also portrayed as both a literal and symbolic refuge for the colonized. For example, after being pursued by Russian soldiers, Shamil and his people seek safety and concealment in the mountains. The narrator explains how “steadily they reached the summits and sandstones of Chechnya, crossing for days the looped river; wading, climbing and clinging to the cliffs” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 40). These mountains and cliffs serve as strategic sites that help the Caucasians to defend their land and also resist the Russian invasion. These mountains and cliffs also provide refuge for Shamil and his people. The narrator explains that “the mountains closed in against them and, looking above, the sky was a jagged strip between two cliffs, but these moss-covered boulders were their refuge too” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 40).

The river, too, serves as a natural space that provides shelter and protection for the colonized. The novel portrays the sexual violence of the Russian soldiers against Dagestani women who, in desperation, throw themselves into the river. Aboulela demonstrates that “young women, fearing rape, covered their faces with their veils and jumped into the river” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 39). The river provides women two dangerous choices; either to hide in the water until the soldiers leave, or drown themselves in the river to protect themselves from the humiliation of rape. In either case, the river becomes a savior and a means of protection or a desperate act of preserving dignity and honor.

In the novel, natural resources are used as tools of defense and protection and this mirrors the Dagestani people's resistance to Russian invasion. For example, when Dagestani men leave to fight the Russians, women and children are left behind to depend on themselves in protecting themselves, their families and their homes. In their desperate situation, these women and children turn to the earth itself, taking its stones and using them as weapons to fight back the Russian soldiers. The narrator clarifies how "in every trench, in every stone hut and cavern, women and children fought desperately with stones" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 40). Despite the simplicity of these stones, they become important symbols of resistance and national pride. Within this context of violent struggle, many women and children are brutally killed. A tragic scene of this violent struggle is portrayed when a mother "picked up the dead body of her son as if it were a weapon and heaved it at the soldiers" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 40). This scene highlights the brutality of war and how it makes a mother defend herself with the body of her dead child. Therefore, the novel emphasizes that war has devastating impact on humanity.

For Muslim Dagestanis, nature holds deep spiritual and religious meanings. In the Holy Quran, nature is always described as testament to God's greatness and power. The Quran invites readers to reflect on God's greatness, power and wisdom in creating the earth, the sky, the stars, the moon, the sun, animals, plants, water and the interconnectedness of all creation. More particularly, Islam emphasizes the purification of the soul by connecting it with the cleansing of the body. Wudu, an Islamic practice of washing main parts of the body before performing prayers, reflects the spirituality and reverence of nature. Therefore, wudu and water are not merely physical elements; they also symbolize cleansing, purity and spirituality. Water and wudu play a sacred role, reminding Muslims of the importance of both physical and spiritual cleansing and purity. In the novel, Shamil and his men perform their religious duties; wudu and prayers, even amid the military struggle. The narrator explains that they are "making wudu in the river, the truncated prayers of the traveler, and inland through dry brushwood" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 40). This act of performing wudu and prayers highlights their physical and spiritual connection to nature and honest commitment to faith even in times of hardships.

In these examples, nature provides shelter and spirituality to the Caucasians. Nature is not a passive space but an active force of resistance and spirituality. Mountains, rivers and stones symbolize the oppressed people's determination to defend their dignity, culture and honor. Additionally, the novel shows that the destruction of nature through colonization reflects the brutality and violence of the colonizers, who seek to control the land regardless of the environmental and human cost. In short, the novel highlights nature's role as a source of solace, peace, and spiritual purity.

C. *Nature and Language*

Environmental linguists and ecolinguists recognize "the mutual relationship between cultural and ecological diversity, documenting linguistic structures and verbal practices by which speakers conceptualize, encode, and transmit knowledge about the natural world" (Harrison, 2023, p. 113). In his study "Environmental Linguistics", Harrison (2023) argues that "speakers of many indigenous languages ... perceive a deep unity and interdependency between their land and their language. The two are mutually constituting and reciprocally shaped" (p. 113). Harrison emphasizes the deep connection between a language spoken by the indigenous people and their natural environment, highlighting that "biophysical features such as caves, mountain passes, streams, trees, and rock formations possess spiritual significance and are worshiped through linguistic and ritual praxis on the land" (Harrison, 2023, p. 113). These people use imagery, symbols and expressions derived from their environment to communicate and pass on knowledge.

In *The Kindness of Enemies*, Aboulela highlights the deep connection of nature and language. The indigenous characters frequently express their thoughts and feelings through linguistic expressions rich in imagery, symbols and metaphors related to the environment. For example, Shamil tells the kidnapped princess, Anna, that if the Russians pay the ransom and his demands are met, he will take her back to her people "as pure as the lilies, sheltered from all eyes like the gazelles of the desert" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 126). In this linguistic expression, Shamil draws from his natural environment to express his intentions of protecting the hostages. The images of "lilies" and "gazelles" reflect sensory and emotional connotations that signify the physical and emotional state of the hostages; protected and safe, if his demands are fulfilled. In addition, natural expressions often convey wisdom, proverbs or moral advice. For example, Shamil frequently repeats the proverb, "the world is a carcass and the one who goes after it is a dog" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 130). This proverb implies that life is short and ultimately ends in death and that people who pursue material desires are compared to a dog scavenging after a corpse. This metaphor of an element of nature; dogs, emphasizes the importance of spiritual awareness and warns against the greedy pursuit of material objects and desires.

After his prayers, Shamil teaches and encourages his people to control their instincts and desires using images and symbols drawn from the environment. For instance, he tells his people, "Our ego is a wild horse. It is never satisfied. It wants more and more. Tame your ego and ride it. Don't let it ride you" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 214). In these lines, Shamil uses compares the ego to a wild horse which can be destructive and dangerous. He uses this metaphor of the wild horse to warn his people against the dangers of pursuing their ego and materialistic desires. The advice signifies that people should find a balance by controlling their ego, rather than being controlled and dominated by it.

In another scene, the Dagestani people are tired of war and start to wonder, "when will blood stop flowing on the mountains?" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 155), and the response is "when the sugarcane grows in snow" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 155). This dialogue highlights the increasing violence and bloodshed caused by Russian occupation. Moreover, the

image of blood flowing on the mountains reflects the huge number of people being killed in this military struggle. This question also reflects how the Caucasians feel of despair and frustration because they think that stopping the war is impossible. The answer to the question is given in the metaphor of sugarcane growing on mountains. This means that if sugarcane grows on mountains, war will end, but this is a biological impossibility that signifies the futility of hoping for peace.

Natural expressions are also used to describe people. For example, Shamil and his people are described through natural imagery. For instance, a Russian soldier describes Shamil and his people saying, “they are as stubborn as mules, as hard-headed as the rocks they live on” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 264). This environmental metaphor connects people to their harsh landscape, emphasizing how the land impacts their personal and cultural identity. Therefore, the Russians stereotype the Dagestanis as stubborn by comparing them to their mules and as hard-headed by comparing them to the rocks they live on. Therefore, nature affects and forms people’s personal and cultural identities. Similarly, Russians use environmental expressions to communicate, convey wisdom and give advice. For example, the Russian proverb, “keep the company of wolves and you must learn how to howl” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 215) illustrates the idea that individuals are affected and shaped by their surroundings and social environment. This saying suggests that personal and cultural identity is shaped by its surroundings because people imitate the group that they belong to. In other words, if a person is surrounded by strong people, s/he will imitate them and consequently will become strong. Likewise, if surrounded by weak people, s/he will become weak.

V. CONCLUSION

Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies* is a rich text that explores the interconnectedness of the environment, spirituality, colonialism, cultural identity and linguistic expression. Through the lens of ecocriticism, this study analyzes the various functions of nature in the novel. First, it highlights the interconnectedness of nature, cultural identity and racism. Characters and the environment affect and are affected by one another. Nature shapes and reshapes personal and cultural identities. The novel also explores how colonialism exploits indigenous people, their land and their natural resources. Russian colonial practices against nature in the Caucasus, such as killing people, polluting rivers, burning villages, and deforesting the wilderness, illustrate the environmental destruction that affects both humans and the environment.

Second, the study demonstrates how nature functions as a source of healing, refuge and spirituality. Natural elements, like roses, mountains and rivers offer healing powers to the characters. For Jamaleldin, roses help and empower him physically and spiritually in his illness. The river is also portrayed as a safe haven for Dagestani women who escape from rape by the Russian soldiers. In addition, the river becomes a site of cleansing and purification as the Dagestanis use its water to do wudu before performing their prayers. Thus, the river becomes a physical and spiritual space that people use to purify and cleanse their souls.

Third, the study explores the environmental expressions that form a significant part of the language of indigenous people. In the novel, the characters express their feelings and thoughts through using natural images, symbols and metaphors. By using these environmental expressions, characters transmit knowledge and offer guidance. For example, Shamil advises his men to focus on the afterlife rather than material pursuits by comparing worldly desires to a carcass, and those who chase them to dogs. In these examples, language is constructed of natural images and symbols.

Ultimately, *The Kindness of Enemies* intricately weaves together the various functions of nature to explore themes such as cultural identity, displacement, spirituality, and environmental expression. Aboulela highlights that colonial practices not only exploit, dehumanize, and oppress people but also devastate the environment. Thus, the novel calls for the preservation of both humanity and nature, suggesting that protecting one necessitates protecting the other.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aboulela, L. (2015). *The Kindness of Enemies*. New York: Grove Press.
- [2] Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- [3] Afzal, A. (2017). *Ecocritical Postcolonial Studies on Humans, Land and Animals*. University of Northern Iowa.
- [4] Aladylah, M. (2018). Dislocating narrativity: hybridity, culture and identity in Leila Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies*. *Annals of the Faculty of Arts*, 46, 478-485.
- [5] Al-Khayyat, A., & Abu Amrieh, Y. (2023). Islamic identity and weather conditions in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* and *The Kindness of Enemies*. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 10(1), 1-13.
- [6] Alkodimi, K. (2021). Islamophobia, othering and the sense of loss: Leila Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies*. *AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies*, 5(1), 144-158.
- [7] Benlahcene, M., Henni, I., Hellalet, S., & Alfino, J. (2025). From Inadequacy to Becoming in Leila Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies*. *Journal of Languages and Translation*, 5(1), 208-217.
- [8] Boughey, A. S. (1975). *Man and the Environment: An Introduction to Human Ecology and Evolution* (2nd ed.). New York: Macmillan.
- [9] Carvalho, I., & Steil, C. (2008). The Sacralization of Nature and the ‘Naturalization’ of the Sacred: theoretical contributions for the comprehension of the intercrossing between health, ecology and spirituality. *Ambient*, 4, 1-22.
- [10] Chaoui, S. (2023). Ensouling Agential Praxis in A Secular World: A Sufi Spiritual Turn in Leila Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies*. *Critique Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 65(1), 1-13.

- [11] Doosti, F., & Nojournian, A. A. (2019). Of Hideous 'half-and-halves': reading the grotesque in Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*. *Language Horizons, Alzahra University*, 3(1), 115-137.
- [12] Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press.
- [13] Harrison, K. D. (2023). Environmental Linguistics. *The Annual Review of Linguistics*, 9, 113-134.
- [14] Huggan, G., & Tiffin, H. (2015). *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. New York: Routledge.
- [15] Johnson, L. (2009). Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism. *Choice Reviews Online*, 47, 623–631.
- [16] Junejo, M., & Shaikh, T. S. (2022). Land Deterioration and Environmental Damage: A Postcolonial Eco-Critical Study of How Beautiful We Were. *Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 6(1), 67-88.
- [17] Kerridge, R., & Sammell, N. (1998). *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. USA: Zed Books Ltd.
- [18] McHarg, I. (1969). *Design with Nature*. New York: Doubleday.
- [19] Mukherjee, P. (2006). Surfing the Second Waves: Amitav Ghosh's Tide Country. *New Formations*, (59), 144-57.
- [20] Rueckert, W. (1978). Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism. In C. Glotfelty (Ed.), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (pp. 105-123). Georgia: The University of Georgia Press.
- [21] Said, E. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Majd M. Alkayid holds a PhD in English Language and Literature at The University of Jordan, Jordan in 2019. She worked as a part-time lecturer at The University of Jordan, in the years 2015, 2016 and 2017. She is currently an Assistant Professor at Al-Balqa Applied University, Ajloun University College, Jordan from 2024 until the present. She is interested in comparative studies, cultural studies, poetry analysis, literary criticism and language acquisition.

Raed A. Alqassas is an assistant professor of English Literature at Al-Balqa Applied University/ Ajloun University College. He previously taught at Taibah University for six years and Ajloun National University for one year. He has instructed courses in British and American literature, Shakespearean Drama, Literary Theory, and Translation.

Murad M. Al Kayed holds his PhD in Linguistics. He is an associate professor at Al-Balqa Applied University/ Ajloun University College. He taught many courses in linguistics, such as introduction to linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, and psycholinguistics.

Mais N. Al-Shara'h holds a Ph.D in English Literature and Criticism at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She is an associate professor at The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan. Her research interests are English Renaissance, Early Modern English Literature, Canon Studies.

Mallik N. Alkhaldeh holds a PhD in English literature from Sunderland University/ United Kingdom. He is an assistant professor at Applied Science Private University, Amman, Jordan. His research interests are ecocriticism, world literature, comparative literature and literary criticism.