

## A Handful of Soil: An Ecocritical Reading of Land in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Where the Streets Had a Name*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article explores how Randa Abdel-Fattah (1979-), a Palestinian-Egyptian Australian diasporic writer, engages with the land as being ecocritically functional in her Palestinian-centred novel *Where the Streets Had a Name* (2008). The premise of the article is that a fictional representation of the Palestinian struggle for emancipation against occupation can be read for its environmental concerns; in particular, for the representation of the intersections of nature and culture. To this end, the article proposes a tripartite approach in reading politics of environment in the narrative by focusing on the effects of land on mind, body and voice. The analysis is carried out through the lens of ecocriticism and it reveals the symbiotic interconnections between humans and land. The findings reveal that the crisis experienced by the Palestinians in Abdel-Fattah's fiction goes beyond the need to preserve their past as the land has strong implications on their present state of mind, body and voice.

### Keywords

Ecocriticism, land, agency, diaspora, Palestinians, Randa Adel-Fattah

### Introduction

Over the last few decades, the advent of ecocriticism has been regarded as one of the most significant developments in literary studies and criticism worldwide. It has evolved out of many traditional approaches to literature to emerge as a field of study that focuses on the relationship between humans and the environment. Through the lens of ecocriticism, literary works are viewed in terms of "place, setting and/or environment" (Johnson 7). The first emergence of the term ecocriticism dates back to the 1970s when two scholars, Joseph Meeker and William Rueckert, applied the field of "ecology" to literary studies. However, the term remained inactive in critical literary studies until the early nineties when Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's work, *The Ecocriticism*

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*Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, became a fundamental guide to the continuing ecocritical debates in literary studies. Since then, ecocriticism has grown considerably as a literary theory that focuses on scrutinising the relationship between literature and environment. In addition, ecocriticism takes into account the intersection between ecology and ethics. Both land, in its collective meaning, and people are sums of the greater whole that Laurence Coupe describes as “the biotic community” which is governed by the concerns of “land ethic”:

The appeal to ecology is ultimately a matter of ethics.... Green studies may not want always to invoke a ‘land ethic,’ but it will actually concur with Leopold’s conclusion: ‘[A] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and the beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong [when it] tends to do otherwise.’ (4)

The present article sets out to investigate the extent to which ecocriticism forms a suitable lens in the reading of Australian Muslim novelist Randa Abdel-Fattah’s young adult fiction which takes on the biotic community of the Palestinians displaced from their land of birth.

Randa Abdel-Fattah’s novel *Where the Streets Had a Name* narrates how a thirteen-year old girl by the name of Hayaat, who is caught up like the rest of her family in the nightmare life as a refugee in the curfew-blanketed town of Bethlehem, leaves home in search of a jar of soil from her former homeland to appease her aging grandmother’s last wish to touch the land of her birth. Hayaat is accompanied by her Christian Palestinian friend Samy and together they embark on a journey that takes the reader through some of the sites of the land. Despite the difficulty and risks undertaken by these two teenagers, given the severity of curfews, numerous checkpoints, the presence of soldiers everywhere and the Wall that separates them from Jerusalem, they manage to enter the city and retrieve a jar filled with its soil, albeit not the actual soil where their home used to be.

In this novel, Abdel-Fattah narrates emotional and moving events based on the real historical story of the Palestinians’ constant suffering and struggle towards the regaining of their land. This young adult fiction puts forward the unending longing of both the internally and externally displaced people from their homeland. The mutuality in the search for home and longing for a return to their motherland remains the crucial theme in the novel. This is shown through various depictions of Palestinians, the old and young – from the protagonist’s grandmother, father, the protagonist herself as well as her companion, all of whom have been forcibly removed from their land of birth. Nevertheless, it is Sitti Zeynab, the grandmother, who gives the novel its name, as her ardent wish to reconnect to the street of her home before she dies is

symptomatic of the longing of every Palestinian. Thus, it is true that a serious concern with ecology seems to be obvious in Abdel-Fattah's novel in which land has been used as an important backdrop against which the story develops. The prominent theme of land and home notwithstanding, this article explores how far Abdel-Fattah incorporates the ecocritical facets of the interaction between humans and land that reflect the contemporary environmental concerns of diasporic writings, especially of Palestinian diasporic writers.

The focal point of the novel addresses the issue of the Palestinian people, their land and the Wall that separates one from the other. In witnessing the whole situation during her visit to the land of her ancestors, Abdel-Fattah was motivated to complete this novel. Commenting on how she gathered resources for her narrative, Abdel-Fattah explains:

The landscape has dramatically changed since I visited given the construction of the separation wall. So, I had to research the impact of the Wall's route on the geography of the West Bank and Jerusalem, the way the roads have changed, the location of checkpoints, the travel permit system and who could go where and when as at 2004. I spoke to many people and bombarded them with questions: people who live there, students, academics, taxi drivers, business-people, children, the Mayor of Bethlehem, lawyers, human rights activists, Israelis, Australians visiting Palestine. (Abdel-Fattah)

Her statement above shows a real insight into the situation of the occupied land and brings awareness of the numerous dilemmas and sufferings faced by the people of Palestine in their own homeland. It also provides a voice to the voiceless people who were forcefully cut off from their homeland. However, they remained emotionally and psychologically attached to their land as if they were in a blood relationship.

As a novelist, Abdel-Fattah's representation of the Palestinian crisis is both personal and civic. As a diasporic Palestinian, her novel is a fictionalisation of her grandmother's unfulfilled quest. As a lawyer and an advocate for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS),<sup>3</sup> a movement that censures and condemns the political manoeuvrings of the occupation of the Palestinian land by Israel the novel is an extension of her civic involvement in the Palestinian struggle. As Abdel-Fattah states, "There is nothing racist or anti-Semitic about BDS. Efforts to intimidate and defame its supporters are based on a concerted campaign of lies, bullying and deliberate distortions – a campaign directed from outside Australia" (Abdel-Fattah). Abdel-Fattah's public and private personas are

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<sup>3</sup> BDS was set up in 2005 after the Palestinian civil society called for "a campaign of boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights." <http://www.bdsmovement.net/>.

evident in *Where the Streets Had a Name* as the novel sets out to expose the novelist's sense of *being vis-à-vis* the land as set out by McDowell: "writers dealing with landscape tend to emphasize their sense of place and to create narratives that are so geographically rooted, that so link narrative and landscape, that **the** environment plays a role as important as the role of the characters and ~~the~~ narrator" (387). These themes will form the basis of our reading of Abdel-Fattah's novel.

### **Ecocriticism and Land in *Where the Streets Had a Name***

Ecocriticism, as a discipline, has been growing swiftly since the early 1990s. It focuses mainly on the study of the relationship between humans and the natural world. The first use of the term ecocriticism dates back to 1974 when Joseph Meeker coined the concept of "literary ecology" in his essay "The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology," sowing an ecological seed in the field of literary studies. Four years later, based on Meeker's ecological kernel, William Rueckert provided the first definition of ecocriticism as a literary tool:

Specifically, I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision, has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we live in of anything that I have studied in recent years. (107)

Rueckert's perception of ecocriticism focuses on how ecology and ecological concepts can be utilised to showcase the functionality of narrative, paving the way for a more engaging and current reading of literature.

However, the term ecocriticism remained neglected in the critical literary vocabulary until the early nineties when Glotfelty and Fromm developed the idea by Meeker and Rueckert and proposed a key definition of ecocriticism as a new way of studying the relationship between literature and "the physical environment":

Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xviii)

This "earth-centred approach" is further expanded by other scholars including Soper and Bradley: "this description is broad – each of its chief terms is open to interpretation – yet powerful in its simply phrased suggestion that relations between literature and environment form the basis of ecocriticism" (xxi). The term "earth-centred approach" clearly signals the shift from examining literary texts from an anthropocentric perspective which "considers humans to be the

most important life forms and other forms of life to be important only to the extent that they affect humans or can be useful to humans,” to a more “biocentric” perspective that holds the standpoint that “all life has intrinsic value” (Kortenkamp and Moore 2).

In a nutshell, ecocriticism considers the function of ecosystem not just from the human inhabitants’ point of view but from those of the community of life. Thus, if most forms of mainstream criticism focus predominantly on human relations and the social sphere, ecocritics, instead, look at relationships in a larger context with all living things and natural systems on land. The scope of ecocriticism, as one critic puts it, is as follows:

Ecocriticism is more than simply the study of nature or natural things in literature, rather, it is any approach that is committed to make change by analyzing the function (thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise) of the natural environment in relation to humans, or aspects of it, represented in documents that contribute to material practices in material worlds. (Estok 17)

Likewise, Estok argues that “while ecocriticism began as an American academic pursuit, it is now a multinational, multi vocal, multicultural area of scholarship” (1), indicating the globalised nature of the discipline.

Similarly, Johnson explains that “over the last three decades, ecocriticism has emerged as a field of literary study that addresses how humans are related to their environment in literature” (7). Hamoud Yahya and Ruzy Suliza Hashim maintain that “ecocriticism can help reveal how the relationships between people and their physical world are reflected in the literary works” (1). More importantly, the current study is based on the recent argument of Stacy Alaimo who asserts the inseparability between humans and environment:

Emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with more-than-human world – and, at the same time, acknowledging that material agency necessitates more capacious epistemologies – allows us to forge ethical and political positions that can contend with numerous late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century realities in which ‘human’ and ‘environment’ can by no means be considered as separate. (2)

Using the above discussed notions of ecocriticism and considering Alaimo’s argument, the article appropriates the term as a reading tool for the relationship between humans and land in the environmentally oriented text *Where the Streets Had a Name*. Like Borrelli et al. who adapted the lens of “ecomuseums” to interpret the dynamic relationship between nature and culture, the authors of this article will elucidate the environmental theme, specifically the functional role of land in Abdel-Fattah’s novel as a new way of showing the changing

relationship between humans and land. The analysis focuses on ecocritical reading which brings out the tripartite effect of the land on all the characters – namely, the effect of the land on the human voice, mind and body. The ecocritical reading of the novel also sets out to investigate the extent to which Abdel-Fattah replicates ecological awareness in the narrative akin to what Scott Slovic describes as “a sense of deep respect for the place and an awareness of the simultaneous fragility and power of the landscape and its inhabitants” (365). The methodology is based on three major aspects of human and environmental interconnections, namely land and voice, land and mind, and land and body.

In *Where the Streets Had a Name*, land signals the agency in the symbolic vocalisation of the people’s stories which they indirectly “articulate” through what they grow and harvest of the land. This facet remains informative and revealing throughout the novel and leads us towards the awareness of the important dimension of the ecocritical perspective on land and voice. A crucial indication of the Land-Voice relationship can be seen in Hayaat’s father and how the land influences his personality:

In Beit Sahour, he was loud and jocular. Working on his land made him happy and we felt that happiness when he came home to us in the evening. However, in our apartment in Bethlehem, Baba sits in silence, sucking his argeela or flicking through the news channels. (24)

This excerpt portrays the quintessential effect of land-attachment and its repercussion on human voice/voicelessness. In the past, being free to manage the land made Hayaat’s father articulate and active, and conversely, at present, being dislocated from it, brings about brooding silence. This showcases the land’s effect on a person’s articulation of himself. Once the land is taken from them, the people symbolically lose their voice as seen in the case of Hayaat’s father who becomes mute in the new place, Bethlehem.

In addition to being disconnected from the land, Hayaat’s father has also lost another aspect of his identity with the dislocation. Though he is within Palestinian soil, his separation from his primary function of toiling on the land of his birth disengages him from his present. In other words, the new land of Bethlehem, which is now “home” to the family, becomes a source of continuous mourning and unending silence for him, like “a parent mourning a child” (24). The narrative goes on to portray the silence of the father in the new residence:

When we lost our land, he imploded. We have no way of seeing the evidence of his demolition – the rubble and ruins are inside him – but he no longer talks and laughs and tells stories as he did before.... He eats breakfast with us, but his movements are those of a self-conscious guest. (24-25)

Together with the loss of the land, the father is shown to have lost his candidness and his voice, and becomes reticent, even with his own family. This representation of the voice changing to muteness is expressive of the Land-Voice interlink. The similes and images depicted such as “like a parent mourning a child” and “the rubble and ruins are inside him” reflect clearly the emotional and psychological wound of the displaced individual. Akin to a guest in his own house, he has become a visitor to Palestine – not its citizen who has had a loving relationship with the land.

Another mode of silence described by the novelist to further illustrate the Land-Voice connection can be seen during the curfew periods, as Hayaat narrates:

There is a deathly ghost-town kind of silence to the night. There are no cars, footsteps. No bats, owls, or rustling of leaves. Perhaps bats and owls have curfew restrictions too. The soldiers' voices crash against the silent night. (31)

This description reveals that silence has descended on occupied Palestine. The soundless environment at night is symbolic of the curfew that mutes the nocturnal creatures and the leaves in the occupied land of Palestine. In this respect, the interplay of both human and non-human, as far as silence is concerned, can be regarded as an important aspect of the ecocritical perspective on land in the novel.

There is another feature of the Land-Voice interconnection which is revealed while Sitti Zeynab, the grandmother, is in the refugee camp. The voice of the “woman prime minister” that “There were no such thing as Palestinians. They did not exist,” is overwhelming to the extent that it cuts off Sitti Zeynab's voice; it poisons her hope, chokes her vocal cords and impairs her vocalisation. The experience of being displaced from the land inadvertently impairs her voice, turning it into a bare “whisper.” However despite her hushed voice, her spirit remains undaunted and firm as she cries out to her granddaughter, “I existed, ya Hayaat. I exist!” (62-63). Similarly, the song she sings about her homeland equally demonstrates the voiced projection of her sense of self and her connection to the land:

The breeze of our homeland revives the body  
And surely we cannot live without our homeland  
The bird cries when it is thrown out of its nest  
So how is the homeland that has its own people? (233)

The overall wish of the grandmother reveals another facet of the deep rooted Land-Voice interlink manifested in the novel which illustrates the

interconnections between humans and their natural world. Her final wish is now the “heir-loom” for Hayaat, the next generation of Palestinians, who continues to be empowered by the former’s voice. The grandmother’s articulation of her life’s wish, like that of her son and family, indicates the profound rootedness of a displaced people: “If I could have one wish, Hayaat, it would be to touch the soil of my home one last time before I die” (63). Through the depiction of the strong mental, physical and vocal influence of the handful of Jerusalem soil on the old woman, this narrative illuminates Abdel-Fattah’s ecological awareness vis-à-vis the issue of land-human attachment.

Abdel-Fattah also makes her narrative carry a larger ecocritical agenda of land as an agency of human mindfulness. The significance of land to the psychological make-up of a person warrants attention. Bait Sahour, the homeland of the protagonist’s family, is a setting where the father, as mentioned previously, feels alive and attentive, as he is able to till the land. It is the place that gives him a sense of thoughtfulness, as the narrator informs us:

In Bait Sahour, he was mindful and jocular. Working on his land made him happy and we felt that happiness when he came home to us in the evening.... He tended to his farm before the sunrise... and he has never known our house in the early hours of the morning. (24-25)

This sketch of the father’s mental and emotional state reveals that he is seen in the best state of mindfulness when he is closest to his land. Farming land makes him lively and heedful. Land, to expand the earlier discussion, is a source of contemplation, in addition to livelihood, to a man.

Another illustration of this aspect of the human-land interrelationship can be seen in Siti Zeynab who continues to be mentally engaged with memories of her homeland. The land is constantly and influentially present in the mind of the grandmother. The images of various aspects of home, land and nature such as “the limestone house,” “the arched windows,” “hills,” “stones,” “jasmine,” “almond trees” and “olive trees” conjure a strong sense of memory that “suffocates” her present. To her, the land is an inexhaustible resource of scenes and scenery, memories, thoughtfulness and even, symbolically, the source of the air she breathes. As she admits to her granddaughter, “Those memories stow themselves in my windpipe until I dare not conjure another memory or I will scarcely be able to breathe” (50). This admission reveals the far reaching effect of the past images of the land on her mind which have transcended all limits of space and time indicating the endurance of mind-land interconnection.

Moreover, the strong awareness of land and mind attachment provides the old grandmother with a hope of returning to the homeland of her youth as she narrates:



I planted the seed. I am still responsible. I am a fool. I have one foot in the grave and I still have a severed soul, one-half in my village, one-half here. Even though my head tells me I will die in this house, in this town, I must confess to you, Hayaat, that my mind whispers treacherous promises: You will return, it tells me. It does not do to cling to false hope. But, it does not do to live without it either.... Oh, there I go again. I need to stop talking. (236)

The elderly Sitti Zeynab's remarks demonstrate overtly the ecocritical elements embedded in the novel. The effect of land on the human mind transcends all limits of age, time and place and manifests the psychology of the characters of the novel, particularly the grandmother whose mind is totally engaged with the land of her birth. This kind of attachment empowers her inner mind which remains active and lively while allowing her to hang on to the wish of return. She may be physically debilitated, but nevertheless, her continued psychological attachment to the land allows her to remain attentive and lucid. The power of her mind is plugged into the vitality and livelihood of the land where she was born and grew up. Thus using this ecological dimension in reading the characters' sense of self, we can deduce that the sense of mental alertness is rooted in the continued bond one has with the land.

Furthermore, land is the source of an agency that nourishes the human body particularly that of the older generation. Sitti Zeynab, who remembers vividly every grain of sand in her homeland, becomes physically lively and active as long as she remains linked to the land of her birth. This kind of interconnection is interpreted from her physical reaction that can be deduced overtly from her song when she smells the fragrance of Jerusalem soil. Upon Hayaat's returning from her trip to retrieve a handful of Beit Sahour soil to revive the ailing body of her grandmother, the narrator informs us of the emotional reunion with her grandmother:

My heart beats furiously as I open the door to our bedroom. Sitti Zeynab is propped against two navy blue pillows, reading from the Koran. She looks up and lets out a yelp. Her eyes are bright and untouched, having never caught up with the wrinkling, shrinking curse of the clock. 'Hayaat' she cries and stretches her arms out to me. Entangled, her arms and my arms, her heartbeat and the sound of the bullets firing in my brain, we cry. (232-33)

The reunion becomes more meaningful when the grandmother touches the soil of her homeland that Hayaat brings back, which reinvigorates her weak body as can be traced from her narrative:

I quickly open the jar and thrust it into her hands. 'Look' I say. Frowning, she peers into the jar. She takes a sharp breath. I take the jar from her. 'Open your hands.' 'I pour some soil into her open palms.' 'Jerusalem soil'

I whisper. I see her eyes and I know that every step of our journey was worth this moment. (237)

The smell and feel of the soil combined with the hushed tone of Hayaat illustrate the raw emotions caused by the estrangement of the old and young from their homeland. The handful of homeland soil is symbolic of the Land-Body link depicted throughout the novel. In other words, the invisible and non-expressed interconnectedness between the old grandmother and her land becomes overt once she smells the handful of Jerusalem soil which Hayaat brings back.

Furthermore, Abdel-Fattah's description of the land-human association in *Where the Streets Had a Name* demonstrates another aspect of the ecological effect of land on human body in terms of the tremendous and unending sense of displacement that contributes to the failing health of both mother and son. For instance, when Hayaat converses with her grandmother about their homeland, an impulsive overflow of the sense of loss overshadows her physically, mentally and emotionally, as can be deduced from the grandmother's recollection of her hometown:

I am but six miles from Jerusalem and I am not allowed to enter it. Never again will I see the place where I was born, nor the home I entered as a bride. My olive trees, Hayaat. Oh, I miss them! We had eleven, dotting the grounds around our house. You would have loved my home. (50)

There is a perceived symbolic interconnection between the grandmother and the land of her birth – the homeland of her youth and adult life. The olive trees that surround her home, from which she is displaced, symbolise the physical environment of the healthy, wealthy and worthy woman when she was in a close association with land. By referring to her birth and marriage, the grandmother reiterates that land is the place that nurtures future generations; she is therefore wistful that her granddaughter will never know that physical heritage. Furthermore, her argument such as “Oh, I miss them” and remembering the exact number of the olive trees she used to be in association with emphasise the aspect of the material interconnections of human corporeality with the land. This kind of connection is central to the recent trends in the field of ecocriticism in which “... human and environment can by no means be considered as separate” (Alaimo 2).

The climax of the ecocritical aspect of Land-Body interconnectedness is revealed in Sitti Zeynab's sincere declaration to her granddaughter of the true promise of being part of the land:

Land, ya, Hayaat. There is nothing so important. The deeper your roots, the taller and stronger you grow. When your roots are ripped out from under you, you risk shriveling up. All I want is to die on my land. Not in my daughter's home, but in my home. (63)

The sense of rootedness that the grandmother imparts to Hayaat clearly signals the interconnection between the self and the land revealing Abdel-Fattah's interplay of land-human connections. The organic attachment between the body and land has transcended all limits of space and senses in Abdel-Fattah's narrative. The evocation between the handful of the soil and the body of the old grandmother exhibits the intimate rootedness between people and land.

### **Conclusion**

Abdel-Fattah's novel *Where the Streets Had a Name* demonstrates the land-human interconnectedness through the symbol of the iconic jar of the homeland soil. This handful of soil has the capability of regenerating the human mind, body and voice, and is symptomatic of the tripartite effect of land on humans that shapes our ecocritical perspective. By showing the effects of the loss of Palestine on the frail grandmother and disheartened father, Abdel-Fattah's novel makes clear how the land is crucial to these displaced people's sense of selves. By being forcibly removed from their land of birth, they have lost their sense of direction and self-worth. Abdel-Fattah's novel embodies the current sensitivity regarding ecology and sustainability, environmental concerns and intersections of nature and culture which have become more evident in contemporary novels especially those where land and identity are central concerns. Her story about Palestine is motivated by the conflict which is still being played out locally and internationally. The jar of soil symbolises the fervent hope of many whose minds, bodies, voices, and emotions have been changed or lost due to the displacement suffered through the occupation of their land of birth. The ecocritical perspective makes this connection even more persuasive and compels us to understand the nostalgia that brings about the memory of a distant homeland.

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