

**Reading Egyptian Environmentalism: The Representation of Rural Life in
Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi's Novel *Al-Ard* (1954)**

قراءة في البيئية المصرية: تصوير الحياة الريفية في رواية الأرض (١٩٥٤) لعبد الرحمن الشرقاوي

By

Nashwa Mohammad Elshamy

Lecturer in English Literature

Faculty of Humanities

Al-Azhar University

Abstract

Al-Ard is a novel written by the prolific Egyptian writer Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi. The novel is set in the early 1930s and depicts the story of an Egyptian village that suffers under the oppression of a tyrannical regime. Beside the political and social themes tackled in the novel, the text emphasizes the ecological damage arising from corrupt governmental practices and its effect on the inhabitants of the village. An ecocritical reading of the novel brings to light the text's environmental potentials. The novel challenges the dualistic concept of man versus nature by representing a harmonious ecosystem where the natural world, both human and non-human, interacts with the cultural aspects. Moreover, it tackles the ecofeminist issue of the connection between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women. The aim of the paper is to apply an environmental-literary scholarship to al-Sharqawi's text to understand the environmental ethics of the Egyptian rural world.

ملخص:

رواية الأرض هي واحدة من أشهر الروايات المصرية المعاصرة التي قام بتأليفها الكاتب المصري الكبير عبد الرحمن الشرقاوي. تدور أحداث الرواية في بداية الثلاثينات من القرن العشرين وتروي قصة أحد القرى المصرية التي تعاني تحت وطأة ظلم واضطهاد النظام الحاكم. وتتناول الرواية بعض الأفكار السياسية والاجتماعية في هذا الوقت إلا أنها تركز أيضا على الدمار البيئي الناتج عن الممارسات السياسية للحكومات الفاسدة وأثرها على سكان القرية. وهذه القراءة النقدية البيئية للرواية تبرز الجوانب البيئية في النص الأدبي. فالرواية تفند المفاهيم الثنائية مثل الإنسان ضد الطبيعة عن طريق تصوير نظام بيئي متناسق ومتناغم حيث تتفاعل الطبيعة مع المفاهيم الثقافية. وتتناول الرواية أيضا قضايا النسوية البيئية والتي تركز على إستغلال الطبيعة والمرأة. ويهدف البحث إلى تطبيق نظرية النقد البيئي على رواية الشرقاوي لفهم مبادئ البيئية المصرية في ريف مصر

Reading Egyptian Environmentalism: The Representation of Rural Life in Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi's Novel *Al-Ard* (1954)

*'No one could put into words what the earth meant to someone whose hoe
had broken it, whose feet had trodden it.'*¹

– Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi, *Al-Ard*

Introduction:

Egypt is a country with a variety of ecosystems. Topographically speaking, Egypt has an area of 1,001,450 sq. km which is divided into four major parts: the Nile Valley and Delta, the Western Desert, the Eastern Desert and the Sinai Peninsula. Except for the Nile Valley and Delta, which constitutes about 3% only of Egypt's land area, the bulk of the country is covered by the Sahara. The colouring of maps shows Egypt as a green strip that runs across a huge yellow space and spreads in the north giving the shape of a giant lotus flower. This cultivated area (the Nile Valley and Delta) has been inhabited for ages by the *fallaheen*, the Egyptian peasants, the founders of one of the greatest civilizations in the history of mankind – the Pharaonic Civilization.

Since the Pharaonic age, the *fallah* (peasant) has always been the focus of most of the Egyptian cultural and literary productions. Many writers and artists have foregrounded the rural society in their works and have tackled the peasant question from political, economic and sociological perspectives. Few studies, however, have depicted the Egyptian agrarian world and the *fallah* from an ecocritical or environmental perspective. This study attempts to explore the relationship between nature and culture as represented in one of the most famous modern novels, *Al-Ard*, with the aim of providing a comprehensive understanding of the logic of rural Egyptian environmentalism.

Al-Ard

Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi's *Al-Ard* was first published in a serial form in *Al-Masri* newspaper in 1952, the same year in which the "Free Officer's Revolution" took place; the novel was later published in book form in 1954. The novel won a great critical acclaim and has been read as a prominent example of the socialist realism fiction committed to "the cause of the poor and oppressed" (Kilpatrick 245). In 1969, renowned director Youssef Chahine screened the novel into a film, which won several awards, and participated at Cannes Film Festival in 1970. The novel was translated into English by Desmond Stewart in 1990 as *Egyptian Earth*.

Al-Ard is one of the modern Egyptian rural novels that foregrounds peasant culture and brings the *fallah* back to the centre of the nation's artistic consciousness after centuries of neglect due to colonization and foreign domination. As Samah Selim points out in her book *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt*, nineteenth century anti-colonial struggle resulted in the need for a rooted national identity that can stand in the face of the foreign power. It was discovered that no one can play this role better than the *fallah*. As a result, the *fallah* started to dominate the political and the intellectual discourse of modern Egypt (1). Moreover, this growing awareness of the figure of the *fallah* as a national character entailed a realistic representation, with a socialist tendency, of rural life to reform his social, agricultural and economic problems. According to Selim, *Al-Ard* "initiated this trend" (20).

Since the publication of al-Sharqawi's *Al-Ard*, much critical analysis has focused on its sociopolitical themes. Among the plethora of studies that placed the novel as an example of the social realism literature of the 1950s and the 1960s is

Hilary Kilpatrick's *The Modern Egyptian Novel: A Study in Social Criticism*; Pierre Cachia's *An Overview of Modern Arabic Literature* and 'Abd al-Muhsin Ṭāhā Badr's *Al-Riwā'ī wa-al-arḍ* (*The Novelist and the Land*). Other studies focused on the narrative structure and language of the novel, such as Samah Selim's *Novels of Rural Imaginary in Egypt* and Al-Sa'īd al-Waraqī's *Ittijāhāt al-riwāyah al-'Arabīyah al-mu'āṣirah* (*Contemporary Trends in the Arabic Egyptian Novels*). These critical studies share a totally exclusive concern with the text's enriched rural and environmental themes and thus they could not capture the novel's environmental dimension or explain the complexity of the text's ecocritical disposition.

This paper shifts the critical focus on the novel away from the political and social ideologies and explores the ways in which elements of nature like land, water and animals interact with the Egyptian national figure of the *fallah*. This approach will pave the way for the establishment of a set of ideas that can be used to define modern Egyptian environmentalism. One of the issues raised by this study is the possibility that the Egyptian literary project of the 1950s and the 1960s could be part of the Egyptian nature writing canon as it displays a particular interest in the *fallah* and his rural world.

The ecocritical approach used in reading al-Sharqawi's novel as an environmentally-oriented literary text is based on Michael P. Cohen's definition of the genre in his essay "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism Under Critique":

Ecocriticism focuses on literary (and artistic) expression of human experience primarily in a naturally and consequently in a culturally shaped world: the joys of abundance, sorrows of deprivation, hopes for harmonious existence, and fear of loss and disaster. Ecocriticism has an agenda. (10)

Cohen believes that the texts that depict human experience in a context that is shaped by the interaction between nature and culture are more accessible to the ecocritical approach. This paper argues that al-Sharqawi's novel can be read as a dialogic process between nature and culture. The paper revisits *Al-Ard* and conducts an ecocritical analysis of the setting, the narrative technique, the plot structure, the themes and the characters to show how the relationship between nature and culture is contextualized in the novel.

The Setting:

Although the novel was published in 1954, two years after the 1952 Revolution, its setting takes place in the 1930s during the reign of the monarchy that was overthrown by the Revolution. Egypt at the time was suffering under the Ottoman rule and the remnants of the British imperialism that placed the privileged classes over the Egyptians. The novel is set in a Delta village during the reign of Ismail Sedki Pasha. It begins as the story of a young boy who goes off to Cairo for schooling and returns to his village one summer. The narrator disappears from the text in the middle of the novel and the story of the villagers' struggle against the tyrannical government, represented by the Omda (the mayor), Mahmoud Bey and the Pasha, emerges as the central plot.

The government decides to cut the irrigation to five days instead of ten. The *fallaheen*, led by Abdul Hadi and Abu Suweilim, decide to send a petition to the government. Yet, they are tricked by the Omda to sign a document asking the government to build a new road between the Pasha's Palace and Cairo. In a moment of despair, the *fallaheen* decide to resist the government and open all the water embankments. As a result, a large group of men are arrested, imprisoned and tortured and the government starts building the new road that will swallow up their

lands. Once more, the *fallaheen* resist by throwing the iron brought to build the road in the Nile. Their uprising is quelled this time by the Camel Corps who are sent by the government to punish the *fallaheen* and prevent any further intervention in the construction of the road. In the end, the narrator re-emerges, reflecting on how the governmental evil apparatus continues to dominate the village and he returns to Cairo in the autumn sadly affected by the events of the summer.

Significantly enough, the rural setting allows the text to demonstrate a complex environmental perspective beside its political one. The struggle of the peasants against the government can also be seen through the ecocritical lens of their environmental ethical commitment to the protection of the land and through the human experience of their deep attachment to it.

The significance of the Narrative Technique:

The novel begins and ends in the mode of the first-person narrator; an adult who recounts parts of memoirs from his childhood. This narrator then disappears in the middle part of the novel and is replaced by an omniscient narrator who narrates the story of the village. Some critics interpret the occlusion of the first-person narrator in the middle part of the novel as the author's sudden realization of a technical flaw in his narrative technique. Al-Sa'īd al-Waraqī expresses his belief that al-Sharqawi, during the process of writing, might have realized the technical flaw of using a first-person narrator and thus replaced him with a self-reflective narration (164). In my opinion, however, these shifts in the narrative mode serve the ecocritical dimension of the novel because it gives the platform for a dialogic mode of communication in this middle part where the land becomes the primary voice that tells the story of its destruction. This, in turn, brings the natural and the

environmental themes to the heart of the novel and highlights the interaction between nature and culture.

For instance, the detailed description of the village's natural world, both human and nonhuman, draws us into the environmental milieu of the novel. In fact, the novel is full of references to the *fallah*'s farming tools, his animals, his crops and the different nature sounds. The *fas* or (hoe) is used in the cultivation of the land; Abdul Hadi is first introduced to us while he is hoeing his field using the *fas* (11). Moreover, we meet the Donkey when Muhammad Effendi travels on its back to the station (99) and the buffalo when it falls down the well during the *fallaheen*'s quarrel over the irrigation water (122). The novel also refers to cotton and corn as the major crops planted by the *fallaheen*. The village voice is also clear in the novel's continuous reference to nature sounds that are commonly heard in the Egyptian countryside, such as the cacophony of the market place, the "creaking water wheel" (41), the croaking of frogs, the barking of dogs (23) the chirping of crickets (206) and the cawing of crows (216).

Plot Structure:

The novel is written in the form of an open-ended episodic structure. It is made up of a series of episodes linked together by the same characters. This structure also helps in bringing the rural milieu to the focus. Moreover, it introduces the plot from the perspective of the village itself rather than recounts the story of the characters in a series of unified events with a definite conclusion. Finally, this episodic structure gives the text a chance to integrate the rural cultural discourse, including beliefs, customs and traditions, within the context of the *fallah*'s natural world.

For example, the ecocritical disposition of the novel is revealed in the passage in which al-Sharqawi's first-person narrator compares between his village and the romantic portrayal of rural life in Muḥammad Ḥussein Heikal's novel, *Zaynab*:

وتمنيت لو أن قريتي كانت هي الأخرى بلا متاعب، كالقرية التي عاشت فيها "زينب" . . . الفلاحون فيها لا يتشاجرون على الماء، والحكومة لا تحرمهم من الري ولا تحاول أن تنتزع منهم الأرض أو ترسل إليهم رجالا بملابس صفراء يضربونهم بالكرابيج

وكانت قريتي هي الأخرى جميلة كقرية "زينب" وأشجار الجميز والتوت تمتد على جسرها وتلقي ظلها المتشابكة على ماء النهر. وكان النهر في الظهر يبدو تحت أشعة الشمس كصفحة من فضة، وفي الأصيل يبدو من ذهب، وفي الليل كان مختلجا قاتما يتسكع في طريقه إلى المجهول كالحياء في قريتي!

وفي حوض الترعة من قريتي – حيث تنتزع الحكومة الأرض – كانت الحقول مجللة بمساحات رائعة بيضاء من القطن، وعلى حوض الجسر تمتد السماء بلا نهاية فوق خضرة متموجة من حقول الذرة، تتراقص ذوائبها الشقراء. (٤١٦)

How I wished that my village could be a village without troubles, like the village in which Zaynab lived. . . . The farmers there had no troubles with the irrigation water, the government did not take their land away, nor send them in khaki to flog them with whips. . . .

Yet my village was every bit as beautiful as Zaynab's; its sycamores and mulberries were interlaced along the river bank. The river's pale surface glistened like silver till the evening turned it to gold; and at night it trembled darkly, faltering on its journey to the unknown. And in the fields by the canal – where the Government were taking the land – the earth was thick with cotton and in the fields by the river, plains of maize waved blond summits as far as the eye could see. . . . (221)

The above quotation describes the major problems that threaten the *fallah*'s natural world; drought, destruction of crops and land usurpation loom heavily over the ecological heart of the village.

M. M. Badawi in his book *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* states that *Al-Ard* "is not just a novel in which events take place against a village background; it is a novel in which the protagonist is the Egyptian village itself"

(151). Significantly enough, the village's natural world has a strong effect on what happens in the novel. The Nile and the land help to move the plot and the main actions of the novel forward.

The Nile, for example, is always present when the main events in the novel take place. *Al-Ard* is full of images of the water. The male and female protagonists in the novel are introduced to readers while the water features clearly in the background. Waseefa is introduced to the readers playing in the mud and in the water with the children of the village among ducks and geese which hailed the children with their flapping wings:

كنا قبل أن نذهب إلى المدرسة الابتدائية بعام واحد نستحم في ترعة صغيرة إلى جوار دور القرية، وكنا نحن الصغار من أولاد وبنات نمرغ أجسادنا على التراب ونكسو وجوهنا وورءوسنا بالطين لنصبح شكل العفاريت . . ثم نقفز إلى الترعة الصغيرة، ونغطس في الماء المتقل بالظمي، وز عيقنا يختلط بصياح الأوز والبط الذي يسبح إلى جوارنا ويستقبلنا مصفقا بأجنحته. (٨)

The year before I went away to school we used to bathe in the small canal near the village, all of us together, boys and girls. We used to roll in the dust and cover our faces and heads with mud, to pretend we were demons. Then we jumped into the canal and plunged into the muddy water, our shouts mingling with the cries of the ducks and geese which welcomed us with flapping wings. (2)

Similarly, Abdul Hadi's first appearance takes place beside the water-wheel (11). Moreover, Alwani's encounter with Waseefa and how she answers back his attempts to harass her by throwing a product of the land and the Nile, a water melon, in his face occurs near the river (19-21). The romantic meeting between the narrator and Waseefa also takes place near the river-bank (28-32). Al-Sharqawi again turns to the Nile when plot-twisting events occur, such as Khadra's death (141) and the *fallaheen*'s throwing of the iron bars brought by the government for the construction of the new road (207).

Similarly, the land contributes to the conflicts that the characters face in the novel. As mentioned before, land destruction posits as the main problem in the story. Hence, the villagers' sense of ownership and belonging triggers their uprising to protect the land. When the government decides to cut the irrigation days down to five days instead of ten, the *fallaheen* rise up to save the land from drought and they defy the government's decision by breaking the water banks. Consequently, they are arrested and they face severe humiliation and torture: They were "beaten", "kicked", "forced to drink the stale of horses" and "to sit upon iron spikes" (174- 175). Furthermore, the threat of land destruction because of the new road that links the Pasha's Palace to Cairo urges them to challenge the government once more by throwing the iron used to build the highway in the Nile. This time the government sends the "Camel Corps" to enforce a curfew and the whole village is punished and beaten with their whips:

ومن بعيد تعالت دفعة واحدة صرخات متوالية مفزعة . . . واقتحمت الطريق جاموسة تجري،
ومن ورائها حمار يضرب الفراغ برجليه الخلفيتين . . . واصطدم غلام صغير أثناء جريه المضطرب
بالوز يهرب.. فزقق الوز وصفق بأجنحته . . . وامتأ الفضاء بأصوات الذعر وماج صراخ النساء
والأطفال والحيوان . . . والكل يصيح:

- الهجانة وصلوا يا وقعة غربا يا جدعان! الكرابيج اشتغلت في البلد. . . (٤٠٩)

Suddenly, cries rang out. Before they could move aside, a buffalo ran down the lane, followed by a donkey thudding its hind legs in panic, and children colliding with the sturdy wings of ducks and geese.

'The Camel Corps are here! Their whips are at work in the village. . . (216-217)

Significantly, this passage reflects a kind of unique bond that ties the *fallah* to the village, particularly its animals. It is a kind of emotional, symbiotic, and correlative relation in which both human and non-human living creatures harmoniously take action. The extract above reveals how animals share in a revolutionary act where

they strongly identify with men and children and acquiescently share with them moments of despair and joy as much as they shared moments of joy.

Remarkably enough, this locally-driven problem reveals one of the important environmental ethics that are present in the novel; the *fallah* lives in perfect harmony with nature. This is clearly demonstrated in the novel in the emotional attachment between man and the land. For example, the state of the land is always reflected in the mood of the characters. When the land is deprived of water, the *fallaheen* are sad, furious and aggressive towards each other in a most *unnatural* manner:

كانت طاقات هائلة من الضيق تنفجر من كل نفس، وتضرب كل من يتعرض لحرمان الأرض من الماء.

وباسم الدفاع عن حياة الأرض – عن الحياة نفسها – مضى كل فلاح يضرب ويضرب بلا توقف كل من يريد أن يناقش حق الأرض في الماء!

كان الرجال يضربون بعضهم بلا حساب وبلا مراعاة . . . كأنهم لم يعرفوا بعضهم أبداً، ولم يحبوا بعضهم من قبل . . .

كان من الممكن أن يصنع كل واحد بجسد أخيه أي شيء: أن يقذف به إلى أعماق الماء . . . أن يقطع منه . . . وحتى أن يأكله! (٢٠٧)

In a surge of violent feelings, to protect the land, to give it water, the villagers set upon each other, beating and being beaten, without thought or care: as if they were strangers to each other, as if there had never been between them ties of love . . . as if each could do anything, however terrible, to his brother . . . cut from him . . . eat him . . . do anything to obtain water. (120)

"كانت الفؤوس تضرب أرض: Yet, when the land is irrigated, they are happy and joyful: الجسر في قوة ونشاط. . . وتشق قناة كبيرة في عرض الجسر بين النهر والحقول. . . وهلل الفلاحون وهم "the men attacked the embankment يرون الماء يتدفق في موجات سريعة مثقلة بالطين" (٢١٨) with might and main . . . and merrily the villagers saw to it that all the fields were awash with water, heavy with silt" (127). The harmonious relationship between

the *fallah* and the land is also evident when the villagers are imprisoned for breaking the water banks. The *fallaheen* discover that their chief pain is not because of being physically detained or even tortured but because of being separated from their “beloved fields” (174). Significantly, it becomes evident that this emotional attachment is reciprocal when nature warmly welcomes their release and safe return to the village: "كان كل شئ في القرية يرقص، والدفء يغمر الأفق، والأصيل ينسكب على القرية بألوان Everything in the village seemed to be dancing. The rays of the dying sun gave a flower colour to mud lanes” (173).

Much more interesting is the fact that the major characters in al-Sharqawi’s novel are represented through the lens of their attachment to the land as Badr points out in his book *Al-Riwā’ī wa-al-ard* (*The Novelist and the Land*) (128). To express it in ecocritical terms, the characters in al-Sharqawi’s novel are delineated through an environmental dialogic process that associates them with the land.

Abu Suweilim:

Abu Suweilim is an old Egyptian *Fallah*. He is the father of two daughters; one of them is Waseefa the beauty of the village. He had been dismissed from his job as a Chief Guard because he refused to help Sedki Pasha’s government in forging the elections. Since then, Abu Suweilim has dedicated his time to farming and the cultivation of his land. As the novel shows, the pride and dignity of Abu Suweilim is conveyed through his relationship to the land. He is sent to prison; he faces torture and he has his moustache shaven as a sign of humiliation because he has refused the government’s new irrigation cycle. He shows great courage in the face of his jailers; "ودون أن يقول كلمة، جمع كل لعابه. . . وقذف بها في بصقة كبيرة على وجهه" (329) he “spat all his saliva into the eyes of the Magistrate” (182) using water from his body, as it were, to combat water deprivation.

Abu Suweilim's imprisonment leaves him broken for a long time after his release. He finds consolation only on his land: "وهو يخرج إلى حقله في الفجر، ويقعد به طول النهار، ويترك وصيفة تحمل إليه غداءه هناك، ويعود مع أول الليل، ليعتكف في داره حتى الفجر، Every morning at dawn he went to his field, and stayed there all day. At noon Waseefa would bring him his food, and at dusk he would go home, to stay indoors till another dawn" (183). This strong connection to the land and to its tempo of dawn, dusk, dawn is disturbed when the government starts to drive stakes in his field for the sake of the new road. Abu Suweilim becomes full of anguish and despair. He begs the Overseer to give him a chance to collect his cotton before destroying the land, but the Overseer refuses. He firmly resists but he submits at the end.

Abu Suweilim's submission can only be appreciated in the light of an ecocritical interpretation of his character. The psychology of the Egyptian *fallah*, as Henry Habib Ayroun points out, is molded directly by the soil:

[T]he water and mud of the Nile enter into, and in a large part explain, the whole life of the fellah, his work and his home, his body and his temperament, and lend him both their qualities and their defects. . . . It is because this soil is incarnated in the fellah that he himself is enduring, but also so material and so stagnant. (5)

Thus, the *fallah*, as represented by Abu Suweilim, like the soil of his cherished land, endures the troubles of life. Yet, he is submissive because his character is affected, as Ayroun suggests, by the changelessness of the soil and the consistent monotony of rural life.

Abdul Hadi:

The character of Abdul Hadi is stable and deeply rooted due to his strong attachment to the land. His feet are firmly planted in the soil from which he draws his strength:

وإنه ليعرف قصة هذه الأرض كلها منذ كان يدق الوتد للجاموسة. . . . إنه مازال يذكر قصة هذه الأرض. . . ولن ينساها أبداً، وسيحفظها عنه ولده من بعده. لقد أدرك أنها تنبت الذرة والبرسيم والقطن. . . فلم تخيبه أبداً، ورفعت رأسه على الدوام. . . ولم يفرط فيها يوماً واحداً ولم تفرط هي فيه. (٦٣)

This land was his own life and his own history. . . . He knew the history of this land, of its corps, of its beasts, since the time he had first tethered a buffalo. . . . Not one detail connected with this land would he ever forget, and after him his son would inherit his memories with the land itself. . . . The land never let you down . . . always the land was generous, if you were generous to the land. If you were faithful to the land, if you tended it and cared for it, it would care for you. . . . (40)

This quotation reflects the intimate bond that ties Abdul Hadi to the land that keeps the history of his ancestors, provides him with means of existence and secures the future for his coming offspring.

Significantly enough, Abdul Hadi's love of his land develops into a kind of emotional attachment to all the lands in the village. For instance, the destruction of the lands of his fellow *fallaheen* for the sake of the construction of the new road fills him with deep sorrow, as the novelist describes:

وعبد الهادي لا يملك أرضاً في حوض الترعة. . . ولن ينتزعوا منه شيئاً. . ولكنه مع ذلك حزين ضيق الصدر. . فهو يعرف أنهم حين يعتدون على رجل واحد في القرية فكأنما ضربوا القرية جميعاً. . . إن عبد الهادي في الحق يحب أرض القرية كلها. . . وهو لا يطيق أن يمسي ويصبح فإذا الأرض الريانة بالخضرة، تغدو أرضاً صلدة جرداء يمر فيها الناس والعربات. (٣٨٣)

Abdul Hadi himself did not own land by the canal. . . . He was not threatened with loss. Nevertheless, he was as sad as though the menaced land was his. He felt that if one man was struck, then the whole village was stricken. If land was taken from one man it was taken from all. . . . He loved the land of the whole village. He could not bear that this green and fertile earth should become a barren surface for the wheels of traffic. (204)

Accordingly, Abdul Hadi's character in relation to the land displays two levels of ethical commitment to rural environment. The first is Abdul Hadi's awareness of the significant value of his land and the necessity of protecting it as a personal property. The second level of commitment transcends the borders of private properties and sees all the lands of the village as whole entity that also requires love and protection.

Muhammad Effendi and his brother Diab:

Muhammad Effendi and his brother Diab are two characters who perfectly represent the difference between materialistic and emotional attachments to the land. As the novel shows, the two brothers are not tied ancestrally to their land. Their father left them only 15 karats and Muhammad Effendi, the educated schoolmaster, has succeeded, through saving money and mortgage, to raise them to an acre and 20 Karats. Diab is an illiterate peasant; he is the one who farms the land and toils day and night taking care of the crops. He sleeps in the stable to guard the animals (94), while his brother, Muhammad Effendi, stays in a room that has been specially built for him on the roof of their house separated from the "quarters" of Diab and his mother (95). Unlike his brother, Muhammad Effendi is not physically attached to their land; he does not at all work on it. In fact, he keeps the air of an intellectual who feels himself superior to the illiterate *fallaheen*. This is demonstrated in the following passage which highlights his preoccupation with his urbanised outlook and emphasizes his alienation from his fellow villagers:

ومحمد أفندي رجل هادئ الصوت . . . قصير . . . نحيل . . . رقيق الجسم . . . طويل الرقبة . . . يحلق ذقنه بانتظام، ونصف شاربه بطريقة لا يفعلها أحد غيره في القرية . . . والطاقيّة المربعة البيضاء على رأسه تميل عن منبت شعره الطويل المنسق: هو الشعر الطويل الوحيد المنسق بين رجال القرية . . .

وكان محمد أفندي يملأ وجهه بالعطر . . . ويهتم بإختيار أنواعه الفاقعة من عاصمة الأقاليم . . . ويضع في جيبه زجاجة صغيرة محكمة الإغلاق نفاذة الرائحة . . . (٩٦)

Muhammad Effendi . . . was a small, thin man with a quiet voice. Weedy, with a scraggy neck, he shaved regularly and trimmed his moustache in a way followed by no one in the village. . . . He wore his square white cap on the back of his head, so as to show his carefully combed hair, which he alone of all the villagers wore long. Another peculiarity: he would buy the strongest-smelling scents from the neighbouring town. He even carried a little bottle in his pocket wherever he went. (60)

The *fallaheen*, however, believe him to be an intellectual enlightened man. They entrust him with the mission of composing and sending a petition to the government to stop the new irrigation rule. Yet, his arrogance and detachment from the land bring about more calamities to the village; he presents the petition to the “distrustful” *Omda* and Mahmoud Bey overlooking Abu Suweilim’s warning about informing them (61-62). This step helps the *Omda* and Mahmoud Bey in playing a trick on the *fallaheen*. Exploiting their illiteracy, the *Omda* deceives them to sign a petition requesting the construction of a highway that runs across their land to link the Pasha’s new Palace with the main road to Cairo. All these incidents reveal the intellectual pretension and inexperience of Muhammad Effendi that render him ineffectual and out of context.

In contrast, Diab, the naïve uneducated *fallah*, proves to be more effective and more aware of the problems facing the land than his brother. There are many passages in the novel that harp on the theme of his physical attachment to the land. For example, the scene that describes Muhammad Effendi’s journey to the train station riding his white donkey and followed by his brother Diab emphasizes the difference between the two brothers’ identification with their village and the

surrounding environment. Muhammad Effendi travels to the station riding on the back of his white donkey with its comfortable “velvet saddle” (95). Diab, however, runs all the way behind his brother “barefoot in the dust” (99) in perfect symbiosis with the land. He runs without complaining or showing any signs of suffering, his feet sink “into the dust of the road” and are “broiled as if by hot ash”. Moreover, his eyes are “stung by the dust raised by the donkey’s hooves” (100). Diab, in this scene, displays an intimate familiarity with the earth and a harmonious identification with his surrounding rural milieu.

Diab feels lost after his brother’s departure to Cairo. He seems unable to take any decision regarding the land:

وفي الحق إن دياب لم يكن يصنع شيئاً غير ما يأمره به أخوه الأكبر محمد أفندي.

محمد أفندي هو الذي يفكر دائماً، وهو الذي يهتدي إلى حلول تبهر دياب عندما لا يستطيع فهم شيء. حتى في سوق المدينة. . . يشتري هو البهائم، ويبيع بسهولة. . . وهو الذي يقترح على دياب أن يزرع الفول بدلا من البرسيم أو البرسيم بدلا من القمح، وهو الذي يشتري السماد ويعرف أنواعه. . .

إن محمد أفندي عند دياب هو كل شيء:

هو الكبرياء والقدرة التي يمنحها إمتلاك المال، والجاه الذي توفره المعرفة.

هو المستقبل، وهو كل ما يثير الزهو في نفس الإنسان! (١٨٢)

Yet, during his whole life, Diab had never done anything except at the bidding and under the direction of his brother, Muhammad Effendi. He was the one who could solve any problem, who could haggle at the market over prices, or tell him when to plant beans instead of clover or clover instead of wheat, who knew the different kinds of manure. To Diab, Muhammad Effendi was everything in life; ability, the power that came from money, and wealth that was the product of knowledge. He was the future, and all that gives pride to the spirit of a man. (106)

Yet, the author’s ironic tone in the above quoted passage becomes obvious as the events of the novel proceed and Diab emerges as the real man of action in the face of the threats that endanger the land. He is the one who saves the land from thirst

and is beaten by Abdul Hadi in their quarrel over water irrigation. He is the one who is imprisoned and tortured severely by the government for breaking the water embankment.

Significantly, Diab's endurance of physical torture increases his attachment to the earth that develops into a special kind of relationship based on intimacy, mutual understanding and emotional identification. This is clearly illustrated in the following passage which describes his return to the land after being released from prison:

ودخل حقل القطن. . . ثم إنحنى على الأرض ونفسه تزخر بالحنين. . . فأمسك قطعة من الطين الجاف، وفركها بين يديه وترك ترابها يتناثر من بين أصابعه. . .
إنه ليشعر اللحظة بكثير من الأشياء. . . أشياء لا يفهمها أبدا كل الذين ضربوه في السجن. . . حتى المأمور!

كلهم لا يستطيعون فهمها، وهو نفسه لا يعرف ماذا يعني!

ولكنه يدرك على الأقل أنه لا يوجد من يستطيع أن ينتزعه من حقل القطن الذي وضع فيه البذور على مهل، ورواه متحديا أوامر رجال الري، وهوى فوقه بالفأس. . .
لا أحد. . . لا أحد يستطيع أن يقتلعه من هذه الأرض التي يغرّس فيها قدميه.

وتذكر دياب فجأة كل ما صنعوه به في المركز: كيف أذلوه وحرّموه الأيام الطوال من هذا الحقل!
وهز رأسه، وارتفعت أنفاسه. . . ثم مسح بكفه المتربة دموعا تساقطت من عينيه، واختلطت بتراب الأرض. (٣١٥-٣١٦)

[H]e stepped into the growing cotton, bent to the earth, picked up a clod of the dry clay, crumbled it and let its dust spill between his fingers. The people who had beaten him in the town would never understand the earth, neither the policemen nor the magistrate himself. None of them understood! And he himself found it difficult to explain. No one could put into words what the earth meant to someone whose hoe had broken it, whose feet had trodden it. As he knelt, he remembered that the chief pain he had suffered had been separation from those beloved fields.

He stood up and wiped tears from his eyes with muddy fingers. (174)

Diab's tears, as they get mixed with the mud in his fingers, further assert the fusion between man and the land in the novel. For Diab, land neither means power and pride, as it does to Abu Suweilim, nor stands for rootedness, as Abdul Hadi seems to believe.

Moreover, the disparity between Muhammad Effendi's and Diab's relationship to the land is accentuated when the news arrives that the construction of the new road is about to start. Once informed that the iron pegs are already being laid in their land, the two brothers react differently:

ولقد حاول دياب أن يعترض، ووقف في طريق الرجال . . . واندفع يحاول منع الرجال من المرور في حقله. ز وكان محمد أفندي هناك، فناداه بانزعاج وأمره ألا يتعرض لأحد. . وانسحب دياب في إذعان، وجهه يتشنج على دموع لا تنهمر، وقد اصفر لونه الأسمر، واخضر، وترك الرجال يدهسون القطن الأبيض. . . . وحين رأى دياب قطنه يهوي على الأرض، ويختلط بالتراب، رفع يديه وخبط بهما وجهه ورأسه، وأطلق صرخات يائسة ممزقة! (٣٨٠ - ٣٨١)

Diab had wanted to resist. . . . Diab had threatened the men, ordering them out of his field. Muhammad Effendi, however, had called him back, and the boy had reluctantly obeyed: his face yellow with rage the men had begun to trample over the growing cotton and the fresh green maize. When Diab saw this, he had burst into tears. (203)

Muhammad Effendi does not show any sympathy towards the destruction of the land, but Diab's emotional reaction further confirms his deep identification with the natural world.

Sheikh Yusif:

Sheikh Yusif is one of the most complex characters in the novel. He is introduced as a hesitant fluctuating man. Badr believes that his character can only be understood in the light of his strange relationship to the land (133). Sheikh Yusif owns a plot of land but he does not work on it. As the novel shows, his main source of sustenance is his small shop in which he sells town-made groceries to the villagers. Consequently, when the government confiscates half the acre he owns

for the sake of the new road, he mortgages the second half to Muhammad Effendi. Moreover, he refuses to join the *fallaheen* in their collective stance against the government and he even sells his goods to the young men working on the new road, "كان محمد أفندي يقول: إنهم دهسوا الزرع وقطعوا الأعواد الخضراء بلا رحمة، والشيخ يوسف، "Now that يجيبه بأن كل هذا لا يعنيه. . . ما يشغله حقا هو متى يأخذ التعويض عن الأرض. . ." (٤٦٠). the road was under way, with many men working on it, Sheikh Yusif had changed his views. . . . And as for the land he would lose, he did not care a fig; the government would pay him compensation, and he would prefer the cash". When Abdul Hadi rebuked him for accepting the trade of the young men working on the road, he replied coldly: "اسمع يا عبد الهادي. . . يعني لما ما أبيعش لأنفار الزراعية ما هما: "They bring business, they pay. If they don't buy from me, they'll buy from someone else" (234).

What is striking about al-Sharqawi's text, from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, is the tension that exists between the pastoral and the anti-pastoral which, according to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, is a common theme in postcolonial writing. In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Huggan and Tiffin explain that the postcolonial pastoral "affords a useful opportunity to open up the tension between ownership and belonging in a variety of colonial and postcolonial contexts: contexts marked, for the most part, by a direct or indirect engagement with often devastating experiences of dispossession and loss" (85). Al-Sharqawi's novel reflects on this theme through the character of Sheikh Yusif who has lost interest in his land because of the government that favours the privileged class of Pashas and Beys who are ruling the country over the peasants who are the original owners of the land. Accordingly, the continuous confiscation of Sheikh Yusif's land weakens his attachment to it and his opportunism and materialism contrast sharply with the altruism and devotion of

the other peasant characters that are physically and emotionally attached to the land.

Waseefa:

Waseefa is the main female protagonist in the novel. She is the daughter of Abu Suweilim. She is portrayed as a girl with a high sense of dignity; she always says with pride: "ماحدش له ضرب علي أنا بنت شيخ الغفر" (١٠) "No one beats me, I am the daughter of the Chief Guard" (3). Her self-esteem is derived from the fact that her father owns a land; she tells the narrator at the beginning of the novel: "إن الذي لا يملك في القرية أرضا لا يملك فيها شيئا على الإطلاق حتى الشرف" (٥٢) "Those who have no soil, have nothing, not even honour!" (32). In fact, Waseefa subverts the typical characteristics of docility that characterized the female figures in the rural novels of the time. She is portrayed as a young independent woman with an unconventional rebellious character. Although she is beautiful, attractive and elegant, no one in the village dares to speak to her in public (15). Tales of her bravery in the face of those who try to seduce her are part of the village's daily talk.

Waseefa, however, gradually loses her pride concurrently with her father's loss of his land. I believe that the character of Waseefa represents the ecofeminist concept of the overlapping oppression of woman and earth. Mary Mellor in her book *Feminism and Ecology* defines ecofeminism as "a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women" (1). This theory is best illustrated in the connection between the female figure of Waseefa and the land in their shared exposure to harm. The first incident of humiliation directed at Waseefa takes place on the same day the government deprives the land of irrigation water. Waseefa

leads a group of the wives, mothers and daughters of the men, who have been imprisoned for breaking the embankments; she attacks the *Omda* who orders his guards to beat her. One of the guards, Abdul Aati, "ركلها وضربها بالعصا على رأسها" strikes "at her, kicking her with his heavy feet" (168) signaling thus her defeat which corresponds to that of the land.

As the novel proceeds, Waseefa's disgrace intensifies and reaches its peak by the end with the confiscation of her father's land. This event is full of details that are significantly relevant to the ecofeminist critic of the novel. While the Overseer orders the destruction of Abu Suweilim's crops, Waseefa starts to weep and wail. Her beauty attracts the attention of the Overseer who comes so close to her "caressing his paunch":

- هه يا قمورة! . ما تيجي تشتغلي يا بت. . باين عليكي جامدة وكويسة. . حاديتها خمسة ساغ مش
تلاتة زي التانيين؟ إيه رأيك؟
وتقدم إالى وصيفة وقد رق صوته، ومازالت يدها في حركات فاضحة تعبت من فوق الجلباب
وقال لها:
- إيه رأيك يا حلوة؟ . إيه رأيك يا عروسة! . .
ودار رأس محمد أبو سويلم واشتعل كل جسمه وتخيلابنته تقف كالأخريات مع رجال غرباء
تضحك لمعاكستهم، وتتمايل بصفيحة ماء على رأسها، وتدخل حقل الذرة في إنتظار رجل!
ولم يحتمل محمد أبو سويلم أفكاره. . . . (٤٧٢)

'[L]et your daughter come and work here with the other girls.' He stood up. . . . His eyes suddenly brightened as he took in Waseefa's beauty. 'Ah, you are lovely, lovely as a moon . . . we'll pay you extra. . . .' There was something obscene, not only in his eyes, but in the way he patted his stomach. He continued to gloat. "Pretty . . . ripe. . . . You come and work with us.'

Abu Suweilim was horrified at the thought of his daughter working like the other girls, meeting men in the fields. . . . The idea was unbearable, the very depths of humiliation. (235-236)

Hence, Waseefa's seduction is an allegory of land destruction and confiscation. The Overseer sexually harasses Waseefa while his men are metaphorically raping

the land of her father using phallic pegs which they thrust into the fertile land reminiscent of the womb.

Waseefa loses her sense of dignity with the destruction of her father's land. Worse still, she accepts to work with the young men working on the road for the sake of 10 P.T. Even worse, the novel ends with the first-person narrator's anxiety that hunger and need might force her to get into the corn with one of those young men for extra money and she might "become corrupted" (247). Throughout the novel, Waseefa's ruin and gradual downfall corresponds to and symbolizes the destruction and exploitation of the natural world.

In this novel, land, and its relationship to men and women, is crucial to the understanding of the characters in the novel. The above environmentally-oriented character analysis reveals one of the essential ethics of the Egyptian agrarian world, i.e. the Egyptian *fallaheen* maintain a balanced relationship between themselves and their land, a relationship "crucial to their understanding of their 'being' as *of* the land rather than merely on it" (Ashcroft 72).

Nature and culture

From the above-mentioned discussion, it could be deduced that *Al-Ard* has "an ecocritical agenda" along its socialist one. Next on the agenda is the idea of the interrelatedness between nature and culture. Remarkably enough, the novel represents rural cultural concepts within the framework of the *fallah*'s natural world. In other words, nature is used as a context for the discussion of the *fallah*'s beliefs, customs and traditions.

Land, for example, is used as a framework for the discussion of the rural cultural code of landlessness as the root for lack of honour and backwardness. For Abu Suweilim, the loss of his land means the loss of his daughter's chastity. For Waseefa, lack of landownership means lack of honour (32). This idea is clearly represented in the character of Khadra, the poor corrupt landless girl who "تتحدث عن العلاقات الجنسية بلا تحرج وتبيع نفسها في الموالد والأفراح ومواسم الذرة والقصب والأعياد والقطن" (٦١) "would openly discuss sexual relations, on whatever occasion, and who would sell herself cheaply on a feast day, or a harvest celebration" (39).

Furthermore, lack of landownership represents for Abdul Hadi lack of political awareness. Earlier in the novel, Abdul Hadi criticizes Sheikh Shinawi's inability to understand why he wants to rise up against the government and refers it to his lack of landownership:

لو أن للشيخ أرضا يختلط عرقه بترابها. ولو أنه رآها تتشقق من الجفاف تحت عينيه بعد أن شقي فيها. ورأى أعواد الذرة الصغيرة الغضة تذوي كأطفال يموتون.. لو عرف الشيخ الشناوي كل هذا. . . (١٠٤)

Perhaps if the Sheikh himself owned some land, perhaps if he had mixed his sweat with the earth and perhaps if he had seen the tender maize shoots wilting like dying children, perhaps then he would have understood. (65)

Thus, the problem of landlessness is coded as the root cause of depravity and backwardness in the village. Accordingly, the novel breaks the duality between nature and culture by representing the cultural logic underpinning landownership in the village from an environmental perspective.

Correspondingly, the cultural concept of collectivity is discussed within another environmental framework. The novel emphasizes group conformity over individual autonomy in the face of external forces that endanger natural life. This is clearly illustrated whenever nature is threatened. For example, the *fallaheen* group together to save the land from drought and confiscation; they jointly defy the

government, they break the water banks and throw the iron pegs of the new road in the river. When they are imprisoned, the women of the village unite together against the *Omda* to free their men. Significantly, even a threatened animal can make them forget their differences in a moment and act cooperatively to save it: "ولكنهم الآن أمام ضياع جاموسة مسعود. . . يحسون فجأة أنه عندما تنزل الكارثة برجل أو امرأة فكأنما "The loss of Massoud's buffalo had united them all; a calamity like this fell on them all equally, and they must all confront it standing side by side" (123). Finally, men and women collectively stand in the face of the Overseer to save Abu Suweilim's cotton before the destruction of his land:

وتقدم عبد الهادي يهز عصاه واندفع دياب بالفأس ومن ورائه محمد أفندي. . ووقف الأولاد الصغار الذين جمعهم محمد أبو سويلم لجمع القطن. . وقفوا يترقبون وفي أيديهم الطوب. (٤٧٣)

Before anyone knew what had happened, Abdul Hadi, Diab and Abu Suweilim had raised their sticks against the Overseer and his men. . . . Suddenly the atmosphere changed. . . .The young men and the young women began with all speed to gather the cotton. . . . (236)

Thus, nature is used to illustrate the cultural collectivism of the Egyptian rural society. When nature is threatened, every *fallah*, and every *fallaha*, feels that s/he is one of a community: men, women, children and even animals all group together into a single force: "Absorbed in the soil and oppressed by those above him, [the *fallah*] lives collectively but not socially" (Ayrou 113).

Finally, the interaction between nature and culture is also demonstrated in the villagers' inherent tradition of re-acting and re-narrating the heroism of the *fallaheen* in protecting the natural world. For instance, one day Abdul Hadi meets the Engineers from the Irrigation Department who have come to inform the village about the government's decision of cutting the irrigation days. Abdul Hadi shouts at them, makes fun of the government's orders and threatens the two men

thwacking the earth with his stick (47- 48). Later, when he arrives at Abu Suweilim's house, he hears the women of the village narrate his encounter with the engineers: "وما زال وسط الدار يعج بالنساء. وتهامست النساء باسم عبد الهادي، وارتفع صوت خضرة: "Inside the house the women crowded round, repeating the name of Abdul Hadi, and with a louder voice Khadra could be heard telling the story of his encounter with the engineers" (53). Similarly, the villagers' heroic actions of opening up the water banks and rescuing Massoud's buffalo are re-narrated in the village's daily rural chat and the children invent a new game, the "imitation of Abdul Hadi", in which they mimetically re-act his heroic deeds. Remarkably, this tradition of re-narration and the re-representation demonstrates the role played by nature in shaping the cultural world of rural life and vice versa. Thus, the Egyptian rural life is an embodiment of effective cultural-natural interactions.

Conclusion:

Al-Ard establishes its environmental voice through the detailed description of the Egyptian rural society. The daily practices of the *fallaheen*, their problems, their differences, their traditions, their culture and their personal traits all are represented as being environmentally shaped and ecologically driven. The political theme of the *fallah* versus the government is also tackled within the framework of the ecocritical viewpoint of the *fallah*'s relationship to the land. The theme of land destruction is also discussed from the eco-feminist perspective through which the oppression of both woman and earth overlaps. The novel closes with the *fallaheen* forced to come to terms with dominant practices. From an anthropocentric point of view, the end of the novel seems to be too inclusive and revealing a sense of passivity. Ecocentrically, the end is in conformity with the environmental line of thought that runs all through the novel. The end shows that the stability and

changelessness of the Egyptian soil is incarnated in the *fallah* who has become as enduring and submissive. It could also be suggested that the end reveals an essential environmental ethic; the idea that self-realization is achieved through the protection of the land and not through struggle. This explains why the characters who lose their lands are doomed to failure and destruction and why the village's struggle with the government is left unresolved.

In conclusion, this ecocritical reading of *Al-Ard* draws the attention of Egyptian environmentalists to the role played by the *fallaheen* in preserving the natural world. Environmental awareness, as displayed in the novel, is integrated into the daily activities of the Egyptian peasants. The text also cautions against disregarding the rights and the responsibilities of the *fallaheen* for the sake of a wider and privileged community. The importance of this study is that it contributes to a deeper comprehension of the relationship between Egyptian culture and the environment. An ecocritical reading of the novel constructs a set of locally-based environmental ethics. One of the findings of this study is that Egyptian environmentalism is a mode of existence. Egyptian rural societies live in a great harmony with their surroundings. The inhabitants show a high sense of respect and even communion with the environment, as seen in the man-animal symbiosis in the novel. Moreover, this study reveals that ecological awareness in the Egyptian countryside is expressed in cultural terms, in the deep-rooted customs and traditions that enmesh the *fallah* within the natural world. Finally, the novel ends with what I believe to be one of the most significant environmental ethics expressed in the text: the idea that self-realization in Egyptian rural communities is achieved through the preservation of nature. At the end, the paper encourages more studies of the texts that were written about the Egyptian peasantry during the 1950s and 1960s. Modern Egyptian rural novels help to enlarge the Egyptian

environmental literary canon and represent significant contributions to the World's ecocritical project.

End Notes

¹ All the quotations are taken from *Egyptian Earth*, Desmond Stewart's translation of al-Sharqawi's *Al-Ard*, with modifications of my own.

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