



Adab Al-Rafidayn Journal

Refereed Scientific Journal

**Issued by
The College of Arts**

**Issue No : seventy nine
Year: Forty Nine**

**Mosul
2019 A.D. / 1441 A.H.**

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الرمز الدولي : ISSN 0378- 2867

Adab Al-Rafidayn Journal



A refereed journal concerned with the publishing of
scientific researches in the field of arts and humanities
both in Arabic and English

Vol. Seventy Nine

Year: Forty Nine

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***Toxic Consciousness in Ann Pancake's novel
"Strange as This Weather Has Been"***

Asst. Lect. Ahmad Jasim Mohammad Alazzawi *

تأريخ القبول: ٢٠١٩/٦/٣٠

تأريخ التقديم: ٢٠١٩/٦/١١

Abstract

This research paper provides an eco-analysis on Ann Pancake's novel "*Strange as this Weather Has Been*" in order to study the way in which the toxic landscape functions in the selected novel as a metaphor for the pollution of the natural world, and tries to show how that pollution certainly transmogrifies one's experience of the earth itself. It also considers a transform from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste. The American novelists raise their attention to the universal issue of toxic waste, a concern that is reflected in what it proposes to be "toxic consciousness" in the American literary works. The selected novel shows various representations of a culture's shifting from a culture defined by its production and keeping the environment safe to a culture defined by its waste and destruction. It also portrays how nature has been changed from spiritual healer to economic resources and how nature changes from standing reserve into already used up. Ann Pancake is an American novelist who mainly describes the people and environment of Appalachia. In her famous novel, "*Strange as this Weather Has Been*", Pancake shows the impact of pollution on the nature. Pancake's main characters are threatened into one of the most dangerous regions of the country, where mining has destroyed the landscape and ecosystem. It is interesting to see how Ann Pancake encodes her ecological thoughts in her writing.

Dept. of English / College of Arts / University of Mosul .

Introduction

Like other schools of criticism such as Marxism, and literary response theory, Eco-criticism is a group of critics and authors who focus on nature and environment, showing that there is a connection between human and nature. Cheryll Glotfelty considered to be the first who define the term Eco-criticism in her essay "The Eco-criticism Reader; Landmakers in literary Ecology (1995)". In her essay, "she defines Eco-criticism as a study of the relationship between literature and environment. Eco-criticism mainly takes an earth- centred approach to literary studies when they examine language and literature"¹. Eco-criticism has become an essential field of study in literary criticism, with its recognized status from 1993. Cheryll admits that she did not coin the term by herself, but the term Eco-criticism coined by William H. Rueckert in his article "Literature and Ecology; an Experiment in Eco-criticism" (1978) Cheryll and those who have the same interest in Eco-criticism have challenged the scientific community to reanalysis what we used to call it "nature writing". As Lawrence Buell states in his essay, That Eco-criticism is a "study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis"². Eco-critics try to participate in doing something about our nature through analysing and examining texts that focus on nature and environment. By doing this, eco-critics try to participate in doing something that can change the environment and encourage us to become guardians of the plant for the future generation and to raise the hygiene promotion on how to rethinking of our plant, green our plant with less waste and pollution.

Eco-criticism has historic roots in 1960s; in her essay 'Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism' Cheryll uses the same model of Elaine Showalter when she described the waves of feminism. Eco-criticism can be divided into three phases of environmental criticism. The first phase is to show how nature is represented in literature, Arcadia, virgin land, animals, geographical regions, mountains, rivers. Cheryll suggest that in the first wave the image of nature in literature raises the consciousness of nature in literature. The second phase of Eco-criticism is recover the neglected genre of nature writing, a tradition of nature-oriented

nonfiction in England and America classifying fiction writers whose works show ecological awareness, for example; Henry Thoreau, John Muir, Mary Austin, Ursula Le Guin and Alice Walker. Some critics have suggested studying the environmental condition of an author and how it affects his/ her life for a better understanding of the literary works that is the influence of place on the imagination which demonstrate on where the author grew up. For example, by knowing more about Barbara Kingsolver's background, it will be better to understand her literary works and the same with Ann Pancake, since she grows up in Appalachia, West Virginia, her main concerns in writing is to focus on Appalachians and ecosystem there. The third phase of Eco-criticism is to examining the symbolic construction of species. How human has been defined by literary discourse? Such a critical questions the contrast dominant in Western thoughts, contrast that separate meaning from matter, serve mind from body divide men from women and humanity from nature. An attempt has been carried under the hybrid label "ecofeminism" this term was coined by the Francoise d' Eaubonne in 1974. She used it "to call upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet"³. It is also theoretical discourse whose theme is the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature. Eco-critics are considering the philosophy currently known as deep ecology.

Summary of the novel

Strange as this weather has been is a novel, written by Ann Pancake in 2007. The novel mainly talks about a family lives in rural West Virginia, between Cheeryboy and Yellowrot Appalachian mountains. The novel describes the destruction of the mountain and eco-system which caused by an oncoming mountaintop removal (MTR) "is a form of surface mining increasingly being used to replace underground mining to extract coal from the Appalachian Mountain regions of eastern Kentucky, southwest West Virginia, southwest Virginia and eastern Tennessee. The process involves using explosives to remove up to 1,000 vertical feet of rock to reach the coal seams. The resulting debris is often scraped into the adjacent valleys in what is called a valley fill"⁴. The story narrates by four characters from the same family. These characters are; Lace, at the very beginning of the novel, Lace

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is returning home from her freshman year of college at Virginia University. She believes she is above the grim town she grew up in. During her return, she meets with Jimmy Make. Later on, she is impregnated with her first daughter. She works at Dairy Queen to provide for the family. The birth of her children brings her back to her hometown, which she discovers a new-found love and admiration for and often asks, "What is it about this place?"⁵ Jimmy Make has no narrative role, Lace tells his character's feeling, his attitude towards land is poor, and he feels like he has done nothing for the land, causing frequent disputes between him and Lace. He is always into moving away the town. He is also considered as an active one and spending his time on silly things. Bantella is the daughter of Lace. She has a strong passion for the land, and is inspired by her grandmother. Her mother describes her as a "solemn and watchful child"⁶ saying "even as a little baby you could see all that in her, she was born with that age in her".⁷ Corey is the second child of Lace. His older sister makes regular attempts to reveal the destruction of the land to him, but he is too obsessed with the power and noise of the machines. Dane is always silent and living in constant fear of the end of the world, which he believes will be caused by the mountaintop removal. He also struggle with his body image and worries about how his peers feel about him. Tommy is the last child of Lace and Jimmy.

ECO-Critique

Literary critics in the late of twentieth and the beginning of twenty first century have linked literature and the environment as a socio political concern especially after the contamination of ecosystem. One of the famous critic in this filed is Cynthia Deitering, she uses the term of toxic consciousness in American novels. She uses such term to highlight the nuclear accident and contamination of ecosystem. Deitering classifies an environmental politics that has ecological consequences of a society that "has fouled its own nest".⁸

"Strange as this weather has been" is Ann Pancake's critical response to the essentializing and universalizing tendencies in the ecology of postmodernism. There was a tendency to contaminate the eco-system. In "Strange as this weather has been" Pancake

presents a model of contamination and destruction, which is closer in relation to the earlier approach of Cynthia Deitering, who focused on environmental crises. In her *essay of "toxic consciousness in fiction of the 1980s, the postnatural novel"* Deitering says, *"there is a shift in our culture identity, a shift from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste"*⁹

Ann Pancake's novel "Strange as this weather has been" is divided into two parts; the first part mainly describes the characters. It starts with Lace and other characters description to give an accurate sketch to the characters development in the novel. The second part of Ann's novel through the light on local facts which took place in Appalachian mountain. The event first starts when Brant consciousness toward the land, she notices the noise of the machine and immediacy memorised her teacher saying at college, "skin you alive"¹⁰. Here the process of (MTR) has just started. The company begins to involve in the society and recruits people to work in coal mining, some local workers join while some other didn't.

In Ann Pancake's novel, the mining process, the pollution of river, destruction of mountain and floods are crises in both culture and nature. In her novels, she reflects the destruction of the land through mountaintop removal, and the pollution of the world. She attempts to raise the environmental consciousness of the society through reflecting the society in literature. Ann has reflected the transformation in historical consciousness, Americans starts to look at the nature and eco system differently. They began to see the people as residents of a culture defined by its pollution and waste. This transformation as mentioned earlier a shift from a culture defined by its production and keeping the environment safe to a culture defined by its waste and destruction.

"I sidled along the pond to the back of the bowl, climbed through the dead trees there, and crawled up the smaller fill to the mine. I hadn't seen the site in daylight since the day of the snake ditches with Corey, over three months ago. Now Yellowroot was completely gone. I'd figured that's how it would be. But for some reason, I hadn't let myself think how if Yellowroot was finished, they'd be taking Cherryboy next. And they were. They'd made their first big blast into Cherryboy. They'd sheared part of it away to

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*leave a tall flat naked face. I looked at it. I looked at the dead man-made cliff and at first I felt nothing for that cut on Cherryboy"*¹¹

At this point, it has become clear what Cynthia Deitering states in her essay of "toxic consciousness in post-natural novel" the transformation from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste and destruction¹⁰. Lace the main character in the novel starts to compare how the town was at the time of her grandmother and how it has become at her time. Here, her grandmother's thought of the new generation will give a proper meaning of carless, toxic conciseness towards nature and environment. Ann Pancake has also touched the term of eco-feminism in her novel when she states that men's carless towards nature.

*"Then Corey, he didn't care about anything he couldn't run a tire over. And Dane. Well. He couldn't help it. My grandma would always say, "Now you young people. It's up to you." She knew where things were getting to. But then she started saying how it seemed the young people just didn't care anymore, "except for you, Bant," she'd say".*¹²

The term of "mother earth" has been reflected in Ann's novel, as Vandana Shiva describes in her book *"Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India"* that "Nature as the feminine principle, nature and women as producers of life, Gender ideology vs. the recovery of the feminine principle"¹³. There is a strong connection between Lace and the land. After the company's announcement to mine the land, Lace starts to protest against it, she takes part in secret meeting at her job to gain more information and learn how to fight the mining operations. The woman love for nature is endless, Lace devotes a lot of her time to save the land, she rejects all the offers of mining companies just because her loyalty for nature. "Sometimes I think you're more married to that mountain than you are to me."¹⁴

Ann Pancake's novel is based on a real situation that happened in her city West Virginia, the use of characters such as Lace and Jimmy and all the family members have been used

professionally to describe the real people of the city. The people of Appalachians have suffered a lot during the mountaintop removal strip mining (MTR). In one of his statement in New York Times, Jack Pendrvis says, "People aren't dirt, but they know when they're being treated like dirt, whether in the Lower Ninth Ward or the hills of West Virginia"¹⁵. The dead consciousness of those who run the mining companies has an impact on the society. During the economic crisis and lack of employment, those companies come to seduce the workers to get involved in such business without knowing the negative reaction of doing this. In Ann's novel, the people has been divided into two groups, some they sell their consciousness while others not. Lace the main character in the novel starts to protest against those companies.

*"This is a disaster less spectacular, more invisible, than Buffalo Creek. This disaster is cumulative, is governed by a different scale of time. Chronic, pressing, insistent, insidious. Kill the ground and trees by blasting out the coal, kill all the trees you don't kill the first time through acid rain, kill the water with the waste you have to dump, and then, by burning the coal—Avery smirks, he's on a roll—heat up the climate and kill everything left. Because Avery has come to understand (not learn, but understand, confirming) that the end times his mother obsesses about won't arrive with a trumpet and Jesus come back all of a sudden and everybody jump out of their graves."*¹⁶

Since she is from Virginia, she has observed the destruction of the land, killing the trees, and wasting the atmosphere. Pancake's novel attempts to tell the reader that mountaintop removal has damaged the environment, and it affects the ecosystem of the city. She has reflected the damage of the land in her novel through picturing the effect of the mining process on the people. Appalachians love for land is something precious, Moge, Lace's grandfather shows how the people of Appalachians have a love for their lands, since the mountains of Virginia are horizon, the people live on the mountains. They connect their love to mountain to the church. They thank God for this gift i.e. nature. And their love for nature comes from their love to God. Lace's treasurable love for land and her concern on ecosystem gives her image of mother earth. She devotes a lot of her time promoting people not to engage in

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toxic processes. Due to the absence of press and journalism, this novel directly conveys a message of the Appalachians' love for their land. Jimmy used to call Lace your love and concerns to the mountain more than your love to me. Commenting on the significance of land for Native Americans, Ann states that Native Americans have always depended spiritually on the land and thus have a special relationship with it, which, however, has been destroyed by mining companies. Ann provides an obvious explanation about the essential, life-sustaining connectedness of the people with the land. She states that the land and the people need to serve each other. It is this work, this care-taking, that raises both the land and the people to their highest state of being and sustains life.

"Our love for land not spectacular. Our mountains are not like Western ones, those jagged awesome ones, your eyes always pulled to their tops. But that is the difference, I decided. In the West, the mountains are mostly horizon. We live in our mountains. It's not just the tops, but the sides that hold us. I tried for a long time to pull the two together, what I knew from church and what I knew from mountains. Of course, it would only be right if I could keep the church part ruling the woods part. So when I'd first walk into the woods, I'd say to myself, "Look here what God's give us." ¹⁷

The cruel mistreatment of the land and the people who live in Appalachian mountains by mining agencies are stated in the novel. Ann shows how mining companies recruit people by attracting them with good payment. They start to promote them to engage in such business without caring about their land. Here the toxic consciousness takes a place. They start to destroy their lands and mountains by gaining amount of money. It also clarifies that the nature transfers from a culture defined by its products to culture defined by its waste and destruction. The reflection of what is used to call the global contamination of the ecosystem takes place in literature of the twentieth and twenty first century. Many writers throw the light on this critical issue that affect the environment through literature. They attempt to raise such hygiene promotion that reduces the waste of ecosystem. Ann Pancake has no

exception; she has also shown how the mining companies have contaminated the environment through their cruel action.

*"They started coming in here late in '94 trying to buy people out. They're doing the same thing now in Omar, Four Oaks, Medlay. But us here in Tout, we were the first I know of. They come into your community that they've already started destroying, then they start making little side deals with people Brewing suspicion and pitting neighbors and friends and family members against each other, make it harder for people to stick together and fight, oh, they're great dividers, the industry is, they mastered that way back during the union drives."*¹⁸

By understanding the relation of Lace's family, it seems that Bant and her mom have a kind of concern towards environment while her two sons are disconnectedness to the nature. Here, it might be clear that it is not the matter of mining companies which are contaminating the land, but it is about the individual identities of her sons. Lace and her daughter put all their effort to do something toward their land while the majority have done nothing and some others sell their lands to mining companies. The technology has an impact on the waste management of the environment. When it comes to the humanity, human must be aware on how to interact with nature and ecosystem, and how technology directly or indirectly affects the lives and plants. The effect of technology has an essential role in the waste of landscape, as Martin Heidegger in his essay the essence of technology, this kind of transformation from what is used to called a "standing resources"¹⁹ into the already used up resources. In Ann novel, the mountains, land and all the surrounds used to be a source of pollution and waste.

*But he cannot tell, and you never know what they might be up to now, what new system or "technology." That's part of the reason what he sees doesn't surprise him, even though he's never seen land destroyed in quite this way, on this scale—and quite a few man-made disasters Avery has seen."*²⁰

In her novel, she characterizes some characters who defined their roles as makers of waste and pollutions, the miners try to create toxic waste through their action, they transfer the environment into waste.

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*"Charlie asking Loretta how she could still stand it with so many preachers preaching, "God gave man dominion over the earth" and "The good Lord put this coal under the ground for us to use." "Bullcrap and foolishness!" Loretta snapped back. "Them preachers are the ones have always spoke for the companies, you know that you were raised in a coal camp. Anybody with a grain of sense can see we're destroying what God made. 'The Earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,' Psalm 24. He wants us to fight for it, and I pray every day for God's help in this fight." As she said that, I knew she was right, I heard Grandma's voice deeper under hers. But I still couldn't go myself. In the middle of all this, Jimmy Make came back. "*²¹

People use to change the way in understanding the nature, they start to look at nature like a form of waste or the source of pollution. Here, as Martin Heidegger explained in his essay "The question concerning technology". He debates the essence of technology whereby what we call the Real is shown as what Martin called the "standing reserve" of industry. "He states in his essay "the question concerning technology" resisted that the western culture of nature was that of "standing reserve" whereby a territory of land was represented as a coal mining area, or a river was represented as a supplier of water power; or an airplane standing on the runway was represented as a machine poised to insure the possibility of transportation."²² Recently, in American novels, Ann Pancake, changes Martin Heidegger's essence of technology in which was presented as the standing reserve of nature has been almost used up. Therefore, what Martin call the Real isn't regard as the standing reserve but as the already used up. The mountain is represented as sources of contamination and the river is regarded as a source of waste and floods, the transportation is also regarded as source of flame and smoke. The whole world has become a source of waste and pollution. Ann Pancake's novel, "strange as this weather has been" shows a suitable example of what Martin called the Real as "already used up". Ann portrays the mountaintop removal and the floods that take a part in the novel, as well as the mining process as already used up resources. The land has

represented as a potential site of contaminated waste, and mining processes.

"To the coal company, trees were nothing but in the way, they just bulldozed them over the side, and there they dangled, their roots spooky, hairy and dirt-clotted. Waiting to wash down on top of somebody, and Corey, nodding at the trees, called at me, "You could make you a good fort out of them there" ²³

In her novel, Jimmy Make suffers a lot of having a breath difficulty, he used to breath clean breath outdoor which is not "standing reserve" he breath the gas and the contaminated air which that makes him suffering from healthy problem. When Lace observes the landscape of her city, she knows how the weather has been affected by the waste and pollution, she also sees how the trees are dying from drought and sees an atmospheric smoke that makes it difficult to breathe.

"Usually in July, this time of morning, the sky'd be taking on a haze, and by noon, the whole thing would be milky. Come August, the sky would whiten up by nine AM, sometimes with a tinge of poison yellow, but this year it seemed the seasons were running backwards. The summer strangely cool and wet following a warm snowless winter, that winter following the worst drought summer in sixty years. Anymore, seemed there was either too much water or too little, the temperature too high or too low. "Strange as this weather has been," people would say, or, "With this crazy weather we've been having." And I knew Lace believed the weather was linked to the rest of this mess, but I wasn't sure how." ²⁴

Strange as this weather has been and the modern eco-novels highlights what Cynthia Deterring has called a "toxic consciousness" portrays a society that has contaminated its own place, therefore, the pollution of the natural world, as characterized in these novels, certainly change entirely one's experience of the earth as primal home. For example, in Iraq, Mosul, the main parts of the city have been contaminated with waste and pollution due to the military operations which took place during the war. The nature and the beautiful landscape have changed from what Martin called a "standing reserve" into already used up. In Ann's novel, some characters express the strange displacement movement of a generation composed on the risk of what cause human knowledge

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between knowing the earth as "the landforms, flora and fauna which are the home in which life is set" and knowing the earth as toxic home. Such characters could be either "dreamers of nests" or even at the same time contaminated their lands.

*Eventually the dimwit governor condemned the Methodist Church for condemning the mining practice—that even made the Cleveland papers—and the article carried the first clear description Avery had read of what his mother had been calling "some new kind of crazy strip mining." But none of it surprises him. He came down this trip to find the hollow freshly wrecked, a wreck that begins with the plugged-up creek and the flood-trashed yards before you even get near the devastation on company land, and then there is the damage that you can't see from outside: the ruined wells and dropped foundations and cracks in walls and ceilings falling.*²⁵

The concept of nature of nineteenth century (Victorian Age) reflected a society which used nature as spiritual healer while the twentieth and twenty first century reflected nature as an economic resource. At this point, Bill Mckibben has named a "post-natural world" and whose conscious need for nature is just superficial as Bill has proposed in his book "the end of nature"²⁶. American fiction of the late of twentieth century to present represents the post-natural world. Mary McCathy claimed that "the nineteenth century novel breathed"²⁷, the presence of nature has declined in modern literature, to compare literature of William Wordsworth to today's literature, we see a clear difference. Nature has no essence in recent literature, and what Martin called the Real of standing reverse of nature has declined and become already used up and the "life sustaining air" is no longer. Nature has considered something inessential to the Real, it suggests homesickness for the planet and it is no longer home or countryside to the people, what we used to see in the Age of William Shakespeare and William Wordsworth has gone, what we see today is a nature fouled by its people. Ann Pancake in her novel tries an attempt to raise the awareness about mountaintop removal mining and the lives affected by it. As Lace says in the novel: "Stay in their way—that's the only language they can hear. We are from here, it says. This is our place, it says. Listen here, it says. We exist."²⁸ Since the current

environmental problems are so critical, as literary critics and researchers, we try to contribute to environmental restoration through literature. As Donald Worster states,

*"We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more' it requires understanding those ethical system and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding."*²⁹

Conclusion

Ann Pancake's novel "Strange as this weather has been" manages to focus on several aspects of future earth in terms of ecology. It is informed by what Cynthia Deterring called a "toxic consciousness". It represents a post-natural world, and a culture defined by its waste and contamination, and people who fouled their won lands. Since literature enhances our knowledge with various lessons. Eco-critics and novelists try an attempt to raise the environmental consciousness and to raise the hygiene promotion to promote communities on how to keep their environment clean. It also suggests that to set the manufactories and industrial areas out of the city and to reduce the waste by using some other materials that has no impact on the society and human health.

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الوعي المميت في رواية أنا بانكيك "غريب كغربة الطقس"

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مستخلص

تقدم هذه الورقة البحثية تحليلاً بيئياً لرواية أنا بانكيك بعنوان غريب كغربة الطقس من أجل دراسة الطريقة التي يعمل بها المشهد السام في الرواية المختارة كإشارة مجازية لتلوث العالم الطبيعي ، ويحاول أظهار كيف أن التلوث ينقل بالتأكيد تجربة المرء للأرض نفسها. كما ينظر في التحول من ثقافة معروفة بإنتاجها إلى ثقافة منتجة للتلوث. يثير الروائيون الأمريكيون انتباههم إلى القضية العالمية الخاصة بالنفايات السامة ، وهو ما ينعكس في ما يقترحه ليكون "وعياً ساماً" في الأعمال الأدبية الأمريكية. تُظهر الرواية المختارة تمثيلات مختلفة لتحول ثقافة ما من ثقافة محددة بإنتاجها والحفاظ على البيئة آمنة إلى ثقافة محددة بهدارها وتدميرها. كما يصور كيف تم تغيير الطبيعة من المعالج الروحي إلى الموارد الاقتصادية وكيف تتحول الطبيعة من احتياطي دائم إلى مستخدم بالفعل. أن بانكيك هي روائية أمريكية تصف بشكل أساسي شعب وبيئة أبالاشيا. في روايتها الشهيرة غريب كغربة الطقس قد تم يظهر تأثير التلوث على الطبيعة. تتعرض شخصيات بانكيك الرئيسة للتهديد في واحدة من أخطر المناطق في البلاد ، حيث دمر التعدين المناظر الطبيعية والنظام الإيكولوجي. من المثير للاهتمام أن نرى كيف تقوم أن بانكيك بتشفير أفكارها البيئية في كتاباتها.