


*"Exploring Identity, Displacement, and Palestinian Experience in 'A Curious Land: Stories from Home' by Susan Muaddi Darraj"*

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”استكشاف الهوية والتهجير والتجربة الفلسطينية في ”أرض غريبة: قصص من الوطن  
”لسوزان معدي درّاج“

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## Abstract

Darraaj, through her collection of stories, *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*, probes through the ecocritical lens into Palestinian identity, memory, and resilience. This thus points to a gap in the literature with a focus on the deep connection of Palestinians to their natural environment, a subject that is much less often discussed. Through ecocritical analysis, one can see that the landscape of Darraj's work is intricately woven into cultural and personal identities. This natural environment symbolizes resilience amidst displacement, a storehouse of history and memory. This relationship underlines the emotional and cultural significance of the land, making it an integral part of the Palestinian experience. Further, analysis evidences that storytelling and cultural practices serve as acts of resistance, which preserve identity despite environmental and political turmoil. The ecocritical analysis thus enriches understanding of Palestinian narratives, insisting on the inseparability of people and their environment against displacement and exile.

**Kew words:** Ecocriticism, Palestinian identity, Cultural resilience, Environmental symbolism

### المستخلص

من خلال مجموعتها القصصية "أرض غريبة: قصص من الوطن"، تستكشف داراج الهوية الفلسطينية، والذاكرة، والصمود من خلال عدسة النقد البيئي. يشير هذا إلى فجوة في الأدب تركز على الارتباط العميق للفلسطينيين ببيئتهم الطبيعية، وهو موضوع أقل مناقشة بكثير. من خلال التحليل البيئي، يمكن رؤية أن المناظر الطبيعية في أعمال داراج متشابهة بشكل معقد مع الهويات الثقافية والشخصية. ترمز هذه البيئة الطبيعية إلى الصمود وسط التهجير، وتعتبر مستودعاً للتاريخ والذاكرة. يبرز هذا العلاقة الأهمية العاطفية والثقافية للأرض، مما يجعلها جزءاً لا يتجزأ من التجربة الفلسطينية. علاوة على ذلك، يوضح التحليل أن السرد القصصي والممارسات الثقافية تعتبر أعمال مقاومة، تحافظ على الهوية بالرغم من الاضطرابات البيئية والسياسية. يعزز التحليل البيئي بذلك الفهم للروايات الفلسطينية، ويصر على عدم إمكانية فصل الناس عن بيئتهم في مواجهة التهجير والنفي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقد الإيكولوجي، الهوية الفلسطينية، الصمود الثقافي، الرمزية البيئية.

## INTRODUCTION:

Susan Muaddi Darraj's *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* elaborately integrates natural landscapes into Palestinian identity and profoundly explores how the environment and heritage are intrinsically linked. Moreover, the collection reveals the environment and the activities and identities of the characters' lives through ecological reflections. Darraj's depiction of the Palestinian landscape transcends its physicality and reflects the complexities of the history and experience of Palestine with emotions and cultural meaning (Awad and Zuhair, 2017).

By examining Darraj's story through ecological criticism, I discovered that her story's environment is a repository of memories, traditions, and identity. The land is a silent testimony to personal and community history, reflecting its people's struggles, resilience, and hopes. Relationships, Pal (2021) highlights the deep connection between Palestinians and their homelands and how the natural world influences human experience. Darraj's subtle narrative shows how the Palestinian cultural and emotional landscape shapes the environment. Through its vivid descriptions and powerful narratives, the collection invites readers to consider the land an essential component of forming identity and cultural continuity. *A Curious Land* offers a rich and ecological perspective that accentuates our understanding of the interaction between places, memory, and identity in Palestinian literature by emphasizing the interaction between characters and their environment.

Darraj's work thus proves the power of literature to capture the essence of place and its role in shaping human experiences. *Curious Land* provides a window into Palestinian experiences and invites a broader reflection on how our environment shapes our identity. Through this ecological approach, I recognize the lasting relationship between people and the landscapes in which they live, and I remind ourselves of this place's profound influence on our identity and lives.

## UNDERSTANDING PALESTINIAN IDENTITY

In *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*, Susan Muaddi Darraj's anthology examines the intricate fabric of Palestinian identity and its significance in discussing Palestinian culture and history. Readers can study in-depth the various factors—such as heritage, geography, and historical experiences—that contribute to Palestinian identity through Darraj's stories. Moreover, the topic revolves around the significant importance of identity in Palestinian culture and history. According to historian Rashid Khalidi (2017), Palestinian identity is firmly based on a collective understanding of history, cultural inheritance, and connection to the land (Marey-Sarwan, 2020). Darraj's works evoke this feeling, depicting persons who struggle with the intricacies of their identity amid historical and political turmoil.

In the following quote, *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*, Darraj reveals the intimate relationship between Palestinians and their land. The land here is not seen just as a small quantity of land, soil, or physical location but as a repository of memory and identity for its people. Knowing "every tree, every

stone" projects a personal relation with the land, which is heavy with historical and emotional connotations:

"In our village, we knew every tree, every stone, and every corner of the old houses. The land was not just soil to us; it was our history, memory, and future. When we were forced to leave, it felt like we were leaving a part of ourselves behind." (Darraj, p. 45)

The bond with the land is also a recurring theme within the Palestinian culture, meaning heritage, identity, and continuity. What is vividly captured is the idea of loss and displacement during the Nakba—loss and displacement that does not cease to carry on as an active element of Palestinian identity.

In addition, Darraj's narratives also thoroughly analyze the various elements that influence Palestinian identity. Her stories illuminate the multiple essence of Palestinian identity by showcasing the diverse aspects of Palestinian culture, including its rich heritage, intricate geography, and the experiences of its diaspora. Darraj sheds light on how Palestinian identity is influenced by personal encounters and shared recollections, using people in various geographical areas and periods (Al Areqi 2018). In addition, Darraj's stories offer a persuasive examination of how Palestinian identity incorporates personal and shared encounters. Darraj skillfully conveys the profound and individual aspects of Palestinian identity by depicting characters who grapple with displacement, exile, and a yearning for a home. Simultaneously, her stories emphasize the common challenges and ambitions that

unite Palestinians as a nation, emphasizing the collective strength and resolve developed throughout decades of opposition.

It points out storytelling's place in preserving Palestinian culture and identity. Stories are here termed as "treasures" that keep the connection to the past and keep hope for the future:

"We carried our stories, like treasures, wherever we went. They were our link to the past and our hope for the future. In telling them, we kept our culture alive, even in the face of exile and separation." (Darraj, p. 102)

Storytelling is a crucial cultural activity that sustains community and continuity among Palestinians, particularly those of the diaspora. By keeping their stories alive, Palestinians can preserve a type of cultural heritage to be passed on to future generations despite the challenges of exile and displacement.

According to Yousef Awad (2015), Darraj's meticulous portrayal of different interactions between immigrant Palestinian women and their daughters prompts a more profound contemplation on exile. Awad proposes that the concept of home is conveyed through the characters' stories, serving as both a symbolic concept and a physical location. Home represents a storehouse of memories waiting to be uncovered, restored, and recounted.

It emphasizes the theme of Palestinian identity: resilience and resistance. Palestinians are "scattered," yet with acts of kindness and cultural celebrations, they maintain strength and hold together:

"Our resilience is our greatest weapon. We may be scattered, but we are not broken. Each act of kindness, each celebration of our heritage, is an act of defiance against those who wish to erase us." (Darraj, p. 168)

The acts are a declaration of defiance against attempts to erase their identity and existence. Emphasis on resilience underscores the eternal spirit of the Palestinian people, who continue to assert their identity and heritage despite adversity. Resilience is one of the aspects of Palestinian identity that reflects survival and the preservation of culture.

It further underlines the importance of family and community in Palestinian identity. The family here is portrayed as a shelter and a background of acceptance. It gives a feeling of belonging and stability when there is hostility and displacement outside.

"Family was everything to us. In a world that often seemed hostile, our family provided a refuge, a place where we belonged and were accepted for who we were. It was in these close-knit bonds that we found strength and solace." (Darraj, p. 213)

These close bonds between the members of Palestinian families and communities mean a lot in preserving cultural values and traditions, providing emotional support, and building a strong sense of identity. The emphasis on family and community in Palestinian identity depicts a social domain through which they sustain their culture and emotional survival.

Furthermore, the collection examines the dynamic concept of identity and belonging in a globalized society, questioning fixed classifications such as 'migrant' and 'mobility.' It promotes the concept of home as dynamic and fluid, supporting individuals' rights to determine their sense of belonging. This concept has political ramifications and highlights individual autonomy in establishing one's identity and sense of belonging. Homing is widely recognized as a global behaviour and a fundamental human right in modern countries (Rapport and Dawson, 2023).

Essentially, *A Curious Land* offers the reader insight into the subtleties and nuances of the Palestinian experience through Darraj's exploration of Palestinian identity. By pulling the reader into an in-depth understanding of the rich tapestry that Palestinian identity is and the search for belongingness in the face of adversities, Darraj does this by exploring the significance of identity within Palestinian culture and history, looking at the various factors that shape Palestinian identity, and shining light on the multifaceted nature of Palestinian identity through her stories.



## THEMES OF DISPLACEMENT AND EXILE

Themes of exile and displacement strike a deep chord in Susan Muaddi Darraj's *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*, mirroring the real-life experiences of Palestinians in the past and today. As Darraj says, "Sometimes I think we carry our homes inside us... even when we are forced to leave them behind" (Darraj, page 78). Al-Shawaf, R. (2023) indicates that Darraj skillfully handles these subjects, giving readers an insight into the turbulent lives of those coping with homelessness and the quest for identity. "Exile is not just a physical state; it is a state of mind, a condition of the soul" (Darraj, page 115).

It shows the deep connection of the Palestinian people with their land. Knowledge about "every tree, every stone" reflects a deep-seated connection beyond mere physical being. The land is described as embodying history, memory, and future, thus pointing to an integral role of the land in the collective and individual identities of the villagers:

"In our village, we knew every tree, every stone, and every corner of the old houses. The land was not just soil to us; it was our history, memory, and future. When we were forced to leave, it felt like we were leaving a part of ourselves behind." (Darraj, p .45)

Forced displacement dislodges this connection, making it feel like the loss of a part of one's existence. This loss is not merely physical but emotional and cultural since the land retains memories of the continuation of their existence. A central theme

in Palestinian identity concerns the lasting impact of such a displacement, reflecting the historical trauma and continuing longing for the homeland (Abu-Lughod, 2023).

Darraj's multi-layered depiction of dislocation is among its most remarkable features. Not only are characters in *A Curious Land* physically uprooted, but they also undergo emotional and cultural uprooting. According to a character, "We carry our homes inside us... even when we are forced to leave them behind" (Darraj, p. 78). The deep sense of loss and desire that permeates the stories is captured in this moving statement. Furthermore, Darraj's stories highlight the complexity of exile and show how it affects people's identities and worldviews, individually and collectively. Characters in *A Curious Land* examine issues of identity and belonging through the prism of exile and the enduring ties to their native country despite being geographically separated. "Exile is not just a physical state; it is a state of mind, a condition of the soul," thinks one character (Darraj, p. 115). In this quote, Edward Said( 2023) highlights the psychological and existential consequences of exile, which undermine an individual's internal sense of identity and belonging, creating a persistent and deeply personal condition.

Furthermore, it epitomizes how complex the loss of displacement is. It is not just the structure of houses; it is the social relationships, too—"friends"—and the "familiar rhythms" of living that add to the essence of one's identity and the sense of belonging.

"When we were forced to leave, it was not just our homes we left behind. We left behind our way of life, our friends, and the familiar rhythms of our days. The exile brought a profound sense of loss beyond physical displacement." (Darraj, p 87)

The "profound sense of loss" bespeaks how profoundly displacements have affected Palestinians on an emotional and psychic level, far beyond physical absence. This overarching loss to the individual and community—that of stability and continuity—demonstrates how displacement broadly and enduringly impacted Palestinian identity. The following excerpt underlines storytelling as a feature of Palestinian displacement. The stories are described metaphorically as "treasures" to underline their value and worth. These stories serve as important links to the past, preserving memories and cultural heritage and providing hope for the future:

"We carried our stories, like treasures, wherever we went. They were our link to the past and our hope for the future. In telling them, we kept our culture alive, even in the face of exile and separation." (Darraj, p. 102)

The action of storytelling is a means of cultural preservation, as it enables the Palestinians who are now dispersed to maintain a degree of identity and community. Although they are geographically removed from their homeland, the continuation of these stories, in essence, sustains their cultural and historical legacy. Alasah (2024) argues that the resilience of the Palestinian

people in maintaining their identity through oral traditions is vividly shown.

It foregrounds one of the main themes in displacement: resilience. The Palestinian people are considered unbroken and robust despite being "scattered." Acts of kindness and heritage are framed as acts of defiance to identify who they are and where they come from:

"Our resilience is our greatest weapon. We may be scattered, but we are not broken. Each act of kindness, each celebration of our heritage, is an act of defiance against those who wish to erase us." (Darraj, p .168)

Such resilience is identified as a "weapon," resistance to the forces that would obliterate their existence and history. Resilience is, therefore, a hallmark of the strength and bonding of the Palestinian people and demonstrates their ability to adapt to adversity. This is all part of their identity—resilience, preservation of culture, and refusal to be obliterated.

In addition, the themes of exile and displacement shown in *A Curious Land* are still pertinent today, given that millions of Palestinians continue to live under occupation and in exile. The Palestinian people's daily quest for the right of return and self-determination demonstrates that it is imperative to continue raising these issues in literature and discourse (Singh, 2023). The recent events, which have been marked by escalating violence in Gaza and the Palestinian families forcibly evicted in Sheikh Jarrah, are apparent reminders of the continued reality of dispossession and

displacement of Palestinians. When we engage with Darraj's texts, we must recognize the new relevance of these themes and their impact on our understanding of the Palestinian experience.

While the following state underlines the importance of family in dealing with displacement, family is perceived as a refuge from the atrocities and hostilities of the world and a source of unconditional acceptance and support. The idea of family as a "refuge" underlines its significance for a sense of belonging and stability. The "close-knit bonds" within the family strengthen and console one another to negotiate the rigors of displacement:

"Family was everything to us. In a world that often seemed hostile, our family provided a refuge, a place where we belonged and were accepted for who we were. It was in these close-knit bonds that we found strength and solace."  
(Darraj, p .213)

Such an emphasis on family reflects the social dimensions of Palestinian identity, whereby familial and group relations play a pivotal role in emotional sustenance and cultural continuity. The strongly bonded family acts as a bulwark against the fragmentation of identity due to pressures around.

These analyses show how Darraj's anthology uses personal and touching stories to explore displacement's profound impacts on Palestinian identity and culture. The themes of loss, resilience, and preservation of culture are central to understanding the Palestinian experience, as demonstrated in *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*.

In addition, Darraj's examination of displacement and exile provides a subtle analysis of power relations and the lasting effects of colonialism. Darraj's focus on Palestinian voices and experiences serves as a direct challenge to prevailing narratives that aim to marginalize or obliterate Palestinian history and identity. As readers, we must acknowledge our involvement in maintaining systems of oppression and consciously promote justice and unity (Chakravorty, 2022).

Ultimately, *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* is a compelling witness to the lasting influence of relocation and exile on the Palestinian narrative (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2023). Darraj's outstanding writing and intricate character portrayals push us to confront the intricacies of dislocation, exile, and the yearning for home. As we traverse the intricacies of the modern world, Darraj's stories remind us of the strength and compassion of individuals who persist and resist despite being displaced and dispossessed.

## **THE PALESTINIAN EXPERIENCE IN *A CURIOUS LAND***

Darraj illustrates in her characters' lives how Palestinian identity is complex and how occupation and diaspora create a quagmire of problems. Mokadi and Yousef (2020) argue that each story is a window into the many lives of Palestinians, highlighting moments of happiness, challenges faced by the Palestinian population, and steadfastness. Darraj's *A Curious Land* showcases various individuals with obstacles and ambitions. Darraj skillfully portrays the wide range of the Palestinian experience, from a little girl grappling with the intricacies of family and tradition in "The Haunting of 199" to an elderly man contemplating his migration

from Palestine to America in "The Splinter." These personalities allow readers to see the subtleties of Palestinian life, ranging from ordinary to exceptional, and to sympathize with the pleasure and sorrow that come with it.

Moreover, the next quotation emphasizes Palestinians' deep connection with the land. The land is beyond a physical object; it is their history, memories, and future. Knowing "every tree, every stone" metonymically means deep familiarity with one's environment.

"In our village, we knew every tree, every stone, and every corner of the old houses. The land was not just soil to us; it was our history, memory, and future. When we were forced to leave, it felt like we were leaving a part of ourselves behind." (Darraj, p .45)

Leaving their lands is portrayed as a significant loss, almost tantamount to the loss of self. It, therefore, underscores the severe emotional and cultural dislocation accompanying displacement, a theme that runs through Palestinian discourses of loss and exile (Saloul, 2007).

The narratives in *A Curious Land* emphasize the significance of cultural legacy, tradition, and memory in molding Palestinian identity and resilience. Darraj adeptly integrates aspects of Palestinian culture and history into her works, emphasizing the diverse range of customs that unite Palestinians throughout different periods and locations.

In addition, this statement means the importance of storytelling in keeping Palestinian identity alive. Stories are metaphorically called "treasures," which translates to something very invaluable for cultural heritage:

"We carried our stories, like treasures, wherever we went. They were our link to the past and our hope for the future. In telling them, we kept our culture alive, even in the face of exile and separation." (Darraj, p .102)

They are links to the past and beacons of hope for the future, sustaining identity and continuity despite physical displacement. Storytelling becomes an act of resistance to cultural erasure, whereby Palestinians help keep traditions and history alive. It manifests the resilience of the Palestinian people in using cultural practices to cope with the challenges of exile.

The importance of cultural legacy and memory in the lives of Darraj's characters is poignantly brought to light by quotes from the book. In Darraj's novel "The Haunting of 199," the protagonist muses over the relevance of her grandmother's stories, saying, "I carry her stories with me, like talismans against the world" (p. 42). Similarly, the protagonist of "The Splinter" finds comfort and strength in his recollections of Palestine, which helps him ground himself in the face of assimilation and displacement.

Furthermore, Darraj's stories highlight how resilient Palestinian culture is in the face of hardship. Palestinians celebrate their cultural traditions, protect their legacy, and pass down their stories from one generation to the next despite the difficulties



posed by occupation and relocation. Darraj emphasizes in her stories the ability of Palestinian culture to endure and strengthen communities during difficult times.

The following quote goes deep into the multifaceted nature of the loss that Palestinians go through during displacement. Not only were the physical homes abandoned, but also all the social connections, daily rituals, and an entire way of life.

"When we were forced to leave, it was not just our homes we left behind. We left behind our way of life, our friends, and the familiar rhythms of our days. The exile brought a profound sense of loss beyond physical displacement."  
(Darraj, p 87)

The sense of loss is profound, not only physically but also affecting their lives' emotional and cultural attributes. This wholesale disruption underlines the profound impact that displacement has on the Palestinian community, altering their social fabric and everyday experiences. The enduring sense of loss and dislocation is an indelible part of the experience of Palestinians as it defines their identity and resilience.

The central theme of *A Curious Land* thoroughly examines Palestinian fortitude and bravery in the face of hardship. Darraj's characters are the epitome of fortitude; they face difficulties head-on with bravery, grace, and tenacity. From the little girl in "The Haunting of 199" boldly claiming her identity to the elderly man in "The Splinter," who finds comfort in his recollections, Darraj

depicts Palestinians as strong survivors who can find happiness and hope even in the most dire circumstances.

It puts forward the resilience and defiance of Palestinians as they face the brink of adversity. Being "scattered," Palestinians are not broken; instead, they use their resilience as a weapon against people trying to erase their identity. Acts of kindness and celebrating culture are forms of resistance because they are determined to keep their heritage:

"Our resilience is our greatest weapon. We may be scattered, but we are not broken. Each act of kindness, each celebration of our heritage, is an act of defiance against those who wish to erase us." (Darraj, p .168)

This resilience is essential in upholding their community and identity, hence their ability to adapt and thrive under the displacements they face. The quote highlights the strength and unity of the Palestinian community, a spirit that will never die away and is committed to cultural preservation.

Furthermore, Darraj's stories highlight how resilient Palestinian culture is in the face of hardship. Palestinians celebrate their cultural traditions, protect their legacy, and pass down their stories from one generation to the next despite the difficulties posed by occupation and relocation. Darraj emphasizes in her stories the ability of Palestinian culture to endure and strengthen communities during difficult times.

The central theme of *A Curious Land* thoroughly examines Palestinian fortitude and bravery in the face of hardship. Darraj's characters are the epitome of fortitude; they face difficulties head-on with bravery, grace, and tenacity. From the little girl in "The Haunting of 199" boldly claiming her identity to the elderly man in "The Splinter," who finds comfort in his recollections, Darraj depicts Palestinians as strong survivors who can find happiness and hope even in the most dire circumstances.

This quote underlines the importance of family and community in the Palestinian experience. Set against a hostile world, a family is a place one takes refuge in, giving one a sense of belonging and acceptance. The "close-knit bonds" within the family are a source of emotional support and stability as one navigates the challenge of displacement:

"Family was everything to us. In a world that often seemed hostile, our family provided a refuge, a place where we belonged and were accepted for who we were. It was in these close-knit bonds that we found strength and solace."  
(Darraj, p .213)

This emphasis on family reflects the social dimensions of Palestinian identity, whereby familial and communal relationships form the core of maintaining cultural values and traditions. The powerlessness arising from these bonds demonstrates the resilience and solidarity of the Palestinian community, putting into perspective the role that family plays in sustaining their identity amidst external pressure.

Such quotes and analyses demonstrate how Susan Muaddi Darraj's *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* relates to the Palestinian experience by highlighting themes of loss, resilience, and cultural preservation. The stories capture the emotional and cultural complexities of displacement, deeply portraying the indomitable spirit of the Palestinian people.

Overall, *A Curious Land* demonstrates the Palestinian people's tenacity, fortitude, and enduring humanism. Darraj's compelling narrative and nuanced portrayals allow readers to observe the intricacies of Palestinian existence and honor the resilient determination of a population striving to endure and prosper against all obstacles.

## **NUANCED PORTRAYAL AND CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES**

*A Curious Land: Stories from Home* by Susan Muaddi Darraj is notable for its intricate depiction of Palestinian identity and the lived reality of Palestinians. Darraj's work skillfully avoids oversimplified characterizations and portrays many characters whose lives challenge prejudices.

Darraj's emphasis on the complexities of Palestinian identity is among her approach's most persuasive features. Darraj's characters represent Palestinians as fully realized persons with their ambitions, dreams, and shortcomings instead of portraying them as one-dimensional aggressors or victims. "We are not defined by our suffering alone; our resilience and humanity also define us," muses one character (Darraj, page 102).

Representations of the Palestinian people have long been marred by dehumanizing stereotypes, which are challenged by this emphasis on Palestinian humanity( Soylukan, 2019).

In addition, by providing stories about various subjects, people, and locales, "A Curious Land" dispels the myths and preconceptions of Palestinians. In Darraj's narratives, various subjects are covered, including family dynamics, personal relationships, cultural traditions, and the political aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Darraj gives readers a more complex picture of Palestinian life outside the news while also humanizing Palestinians.

Remarks from the book are potent reminders of how important it is to dispel myths and preconceptions. For example, the protagonist of "The Splinter" refutes the idea that Palestinians are hapless victims, saying, "We are not helpless." We are creators, fighters, and survivors "(Darraj, p. 79). Comparably, by expressing her agency and autonomy in the face of social expectations, the protagonist of "The Haunting of 199" rejects clichés about Palestinian women.

It is crucial now more than ever to present Palestinian narratives in a complex and multidimensional manner, given the divisive political environment of today. By portraying Palestinians as multifaceted people with agency and dignity, Darraj's art subverts the stereotypes that frequently rule popular discourse (Asghar et al., 2020). In addition to encouraging readers' empathy and understanding, this nuanced picture creates the framework for insightful conversation and involvement.

Ultimately, "A Curious Land: Stories from Home" proves literature's ability to confront prejudices and provide a more intricate comprehension of the Palestinian encounter. With her contemplative and compassionate narrative, Darraj encourages readers to perceive Palestinians not as theoretical representations of strife but as tangible individuals with their desires, anxieties, and ambitions. She creates opportunities for discussions beyond fixed storylines and towards increased compassion, comprehension, and unity.

## **ECOCRITICISM THEORY**

Ecocriticism is a branch of literary and cultural studies that critiques the representation of nature and the environment in literature. This approach reviews and critiques how literary works reflect, engage with, and often challenge human interactions with the natural world. The approach encourages attention to and respect for the web of connections between all life forms and underlines human effects on ecosystems. It addresses the problems of ecological degradation, environmental justice, and cultural valuations of nature, urging a reevaluation of human roles and responsibilities towards the environment( Ramazani and Bazregarzadeh,2014).

Moreover, Ecocriticism is a comparatively new critical discipline that stands out in the line of modern-day literary and cultural theories. It studies the relationship between nature and literature, elaborating on how life, including life as represented by human beings, influences art and the products of literature. This theory redefines our relationship with the environment and

literature in that the societal relationships with nature and the internal societal structures contribute to ecological crises. It also explores problems of social and economic justice. (Kumari, & Ray,2024)

The environmental damages we face are such that future generations will bear the consequences. Air, water, soil, and biodiversity are essential attributes of health. They must be a prime priority. The environment is essential in people's lives, and the natural environment determines their living standards. Cultural survival depends upon the sustainability of the environment. The global crisis today is not due to the malfunctioning of ecosystems but due to the malfunctioning of our moral systems(Hasan and Muhamad, 2020).

It investigates how texts represent ecological themes, questions of human-nature relations, and environmental issues. An ecocritical literature analysis identifies the purposes of deepening an understanding of humanity's connection to the natural world, raising environmental consciousness, and promoting ecological justice and sustainability( Ray et al., 2023). Ecocritics borrow from various theoretical frameworks ranging from environmental movements through ecological sciences to literary theory. These include deep ecology, ecofeminism, bioregionalism, and environmental justice. It is such a worldview that deeply posits the intrinsic value of all living beings and promotes ecological interconnectedness. Furthermore, ecofeminism investigates the interconnection between gender, ecology, and social justice in order to formulate arguments that demonstrate the link between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature.

Contemporary research in Ecocriticism has broadened to encompass diverse issues and viewpoints. Scholars (Clark, 2015; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014) stress the immediate necessity of a literary reaction to climate change and ecological crises, highlighting that literature can alter public perception and increase awareness of environmental issues. Rob Nixon and other experts analyze the concept of "slow violence," which pertains to the gradual and sometimes unnoticed degradation of the environment. Degradation has a more significant impact on the most vulnerable individuals who are deprived of their rights (Nixon, 2011).

In addition, the ecological perspective of any literary work requires one to situate those works within their socio-political and historical frameworks. For instance, Arundhati Roy's (2017) *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is an excellent example of intermingling social justice with environmental degradation and Indigenous rights. Roy's novel details human-nature relationships and environmental activism, demonstrating how ecological and social justice issues connect in contemporary literature.

To be sure, Ecocriticism takes in many themes and analytical angles. Critics can explore literature for its representations of landscapes, animals, ecosystems, or environmental crises. Equally, they can analyze how authors represent human relationships with the environment, such as pollution, deforestation, or climate change. Furthermore, ecocritics look at environmental narratives' cultural, historical, and political aspects, including how literature constructs an understanding of nature, shapes attitudes and behaviours toward the environment, and reflects more significant social-cultural attitudes.



As a dynamic and interdisciplinary field, Ecocriticism grows in importance, shedding critical insights into literature, culture, and the environment. Through representations of nature, human-nature relationships, and environmental issues in literature, ecocritics have made a deeper understanding of ecological complexities and advanced advocacy for ecological stewardship and sustainability. Ecocritical analysis positions literary works as sites of artistic expression and platforms for exploring and addressing pressing environmental concerns.

### **ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A *CURIOUS LAND*: *STORIES FROM HOME***

Susan Muaddi Darraj's (2016) *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* provides a poignant exploration of Palestinian identity, memory, and resilience, deeply intertwined with the landscape of their homeland. By applying Ecocriticism, I can examine how the text represents the natural environment and its significance in shaping cultural and personal identities. Highlighting Susan Muaddi Darraj's *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* is a deep investigation of Palestinian identity, memory, and resilience, inextricably tied to the landscape of their homeland. Applying Ecocriticism allows us to examine representations of the natural environment in the text and their meaning in shaping cultural and personal identities:

"In our village, we knew every tree, every stone, and every corner of the old houses. The land was not just soil to us; it was our history, memory, and future. When we were forced

to leave, it felt like we were leaving a part of ourselves behind." (Darraj, p .45)

This quotation describes the deep connection between the Palestinian people and their environment. An intimate knowledge of "every tree, every stone" symbolizes a symbiotic relationship between the people and the landscape, exemplifying an ecocritical perspective where the environment is integral to cultural and individual identity. The land is not just a physical space but a repository of history, memory, and future aspirations. This relationship with the land is not merely utilitarian but also of deep emotion and culture. The trauma of environmental displacement is well described here in the forced dislocation that results in a profound loss, almost similar to losing a part of oneself. It underlies the critical role of the natural environment in constructing and maintaining cultural identity.

Additionally, stories are "treasures" that summarize the community's cultural heritage and environmental life. Storytelling is one way of maintaining a relationship to the lost landscape, holding onto a memory of the natural environment even where physically distanced from it:

"We carried our stories, like treasures, wherever we went. They were our link to the past and our hope for the future. In telling them, we kept our culture alive, even in the face of exile and separation." (Darraj, p .102)

Storytelling in this context is a kind of resistance to cultural and environmental erasure whereby exiled people can retain their

cultural practices and history. The environment provides a backdrop for the construction of cultural identity; the Palestinian people, in turn, use narrative to handle the disintegration of their ties to the land and to resist its impact.

From an ecocritical perspective, the whole idea of resilience is couched within the frame of the environment. Celebrations of heritage would also entail many practices that connect the community to their natural surroundings, including agricultural traditions, rituals, and festivals;

"Our resilience is our greatest weapon. We may be scattered, but we are not broken. Each act of kindness, each celebration of our heritage, is an act of defiance against those who wish to erase us." (Darraj, p .168)

By extension, these acts of cultural resilience are tied to environmental knowledge and practices essential to perpetuating identity. This defiance against erasure might be argued regarding environmental degradation and displacement as a way of asserting their relationship with the land against external threats. This quote perfectly captures how resilience and cultural practices strengthen the community's ties to the environment, showing that their identity and strength are deeply rooted in the natural landscape.

This statement underlines that family and community are the most essential things for Palestinian life. Concerning Ecocriticism, the family metaphor may extend to include the natural environment. The family as a source of refuge and

belonging parallels that of the land as a source of home and identity.

"Family was everything to us. In a world that often seemed hostile, our family provided a refuge, a place where we belonged and were accepted for who we were. It was in these close-knit bonds that we found strength and solace." (Darraj, p. 213)

The "hostile" world outside contrasts with the refuge found within the family, much like the nurturing environment of the homeland contrasts with the dislocation of exile. The tight bonds within the family and community are secured through their shared relation to the land, which gives strength and solace. This relationship underlines that human communities and their environments are constantly inseparable; cultural and familial stability is achieved through their relationship with the natural world.

The following quote describes the olive trees as something that endures and tells more about Palestinian heritage and resilience. The trees are described as ancient and enduring; the historical roots of the Palestinian people are deep, and their steadfastness is vital.

"The olive trees had stood for centuries, their gnarled branches a testament to time and endurance. They were not just trees but living symbols of our roots and resilience. When they were cut down, it was as if our veins were severed." (Darraj, p 67)

From an ecocritical point of view, trees symbolize cultural and environmental continuity in the connection between the living and the past. Cutting down these trees is compared to cutting veins; severe damage to the community is inflicted. Such a metaphor emphasizes the intrinsic relation of people and their environment, where nature is destroyed and an attack on their identity and heritage.

The drying up of the river becomes a great, powerful symbol of environmental and social transformation. Ecocriticism looks at how such changes in the natural landscape reflect broader themes of displacement and cultural erosion.

"The river that once flowed through our village had dried up, a stark reminder of the changes that had swept through our land. Like our village, it was a ghost of its former self, a shadow of the life that once thrived here." (Darraj, p .112)

The river, once a pristine source of life and nourishment, is now reduced to a "ghost," paralleling the decline of the village and the upheaval of traditional ways of life. This imagery evidences the entwined relationship of environmental health with community well-being. The disintegration of the community mirrors the degradation of the natural environment in an act that shows how ecological changes have profound, tremendous effects on cultural and social structures.

This quote portrays the relief and strength derived from the natural world during turbulence. The beauty of morning dew brings peace and continuity, contrasted with the uncertainty and

dislocation of the characters' lives. Ecocriticism highlights how nature has been used as a refuge and a source of stability during times of turmoil in human experiences.

"In the early mornings, the dew on the grass sparkled like diamonds, a fleeting moment of beauty in a world filled with uncertainty. We clung to these small wonders, finding solace in nature's persistent rhythms, even as our own lives were uprooted." (Darraj, p .145)

The persistence of natural rhythms provides comfort and grounding for the dislocated characters. It brings out the natural environment's therapeutic and restorative functions, stressing the environment's role as a source of emotional and psychological support in the face of disruption.

The following quotation brilliantly shows how multifunctional and profoundly personal the significance of the fields was in the lives of these characters. The fields represent agriculture, play, festivity, and reflection. The ecocritical perspective points out that it is in landscapes that cultural and emotional meanings are embedded and even act as loci for personal and communal experiences:

"Our fields were more than just places to grow crops. They were where we played as children, celebrated harvests, and found peace under the stars. Losing them was losing the backdrop to all our memories." (Darraj, p .191)

The loss of such fields is much more than an economic deprivation; it is a loss of the "backdrop" to the memory of a culture and its practices. This stresses the holistic relationship between the community and their environment, where the landscape is integral to their social and cultural identity.

Susan Muaddi Darraj's *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* is rich in how the people of Palestine and their environment are connected. Using Ecocriticism, we found that the natural topography acts as a deep cultural, emotional, and symbolic landscape to form identity and resilience. The additional quotes show how environmental changes and dislocations have heavily impacted the community and how the environment plays a crucial role in people's lives. Through this lens, we come to appreciate how the emphasis of the stories given to the environment is a necessary part of Palestinian heritage and continuity.

Susan Muaddi Darraj's *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* offers a rich exploration of the Palestinian experience through its deep connection with the natural environment. Applying Ecocriticism, I will see how landscape and environmental relations shape cultural identity, memory, and resilience. The stories in the anthology reveal the profound impact of displacement on the relationship with the land and show just how important stories and cultural practices are for sustaining this connection. Looking through the ecocritical lens, it will see how the environment is not just a background but an actively participating and indispensable element in the construction and perpetuation of Palestinian identity.

## CONCLUSION

Susan Muaddi Darraj's *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* is a touching exploration of Palestinian identity, memory, and resilience through the prism of their homeland landscape. Applying an ecocritical lens allows us to develop how the natural environment in the text is more than a setting; it is a crucial component of the formation of cultural and personal identities. The characters' close associations with their land are symbolized through elements like trees, rivers, and fields to show the engraving of the environment into their life fabric as a form of history, memory, and continuation. The collection, *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*, describes the loss of the land as a deeply felt loss, tantamount to the loss of a part of their selves, showing how emotionally and culturally valuable their surroundings are to them. The Palestinians' relationship with their lost landscape is maintained through storytelling, with stories fighting against cultural and environmental erasure. This ecocritical analysis shows that Darraj's work does not simply underline the environmental aspects of Palestinian life but rather shows the survival of a culture and heritage in the face of displacement and environmental degradation. The anthology exhibits the role of the natural environment as an active, integral part of forming and perpetuating Palestinian identity.



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