

## “Blood engulfs the green earth”: An Ecocritical Reading of Rasha

### Fadhlil’s *Ishtar in Baghdad* and Amy Merrill’s *In the Reeds*

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Date of Article</p> <p>Received : 2023/7/31</p> <p>Received in revised form: 2023/8/15</p> <p>Accepted: 2023/8/16</p> <p>Available online: 2023/12/30</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b></p> <p>Eco-criticism; Iraq war; <i>Ishtar in Baghdad</i>; <i>In the Reeds</i>; Mesopotamian mythology; Southern Iraqi marshes</p>	<p>In recent times, ecological studies have increasingly been employed to promote environmental awareness across various disciplines and regions worldwide. This paper specifically focuses on the repercussions of war and political violence on Iraq's ecology, which has been greatly impacted by conflict. Two noteworthy plays, <i>Ishtar in Baghdad</i> by Iraqi writer Rasha Fadhlil and <i>In the Reeds</i> by American writer Amy Merrill, shed light on this subject. Both plays, which primarily center on Iraq, underscore that those who fail to appreciate and value human life cannot possibly regard nonhuman entities with reverence. Fadhlil effectively employs elements from Mesopotamian mythology to draw attention to the impending environmental disaster that looms over the region. On the other hand, Merrill's concise play delves into the devastating destruction and subsequent attempts at rebuilding the marshes in Southern Iraq. The play also highlights how the Iraqi regime has historically disregarded the crucial role these marshes play in sustaining the Iraqi ecological system. Essentially, both plays serve as compelling mediums to address the pressing ecological issues in Iraq caused by warfare and political upheaval. By bringing these concerns to the forefront, they contribute to increasing public awareness about the importance of preserving and protecting the environment in a region deeply affected by conflict.</p>

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## Introduction

Beyond any doubt, the human race stands at the precipice of a global catastrophe, ushering in the era of an unprecedented environmental crisis. The lamentable reality unfolds as the relentless tide of damaging human actions relentlessly decimates the essence of nature's beauty, leaving a trail of countless fellow species extinguished by our

headlong rush towards an apocalyptic abyss. In his book, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination*, the historian Donald Worster (1993, p.27) explains that:

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 systems and using that understanding to reform them.

In response to this ominous juncture, a formidable alliance of scientists, writers, and academicians has emerged, embarking on a shared mission to awaken the world to the stark dilemma that humanity confronts. Their collective effort is one of profound significance - to ignite a resolute awareness of the potential calamities that await us should we fail to take earnest and decisive measures to seek viable solutions. The canvas of their attempts is vast, spanning scientific research that unravels the complexities of ecological interdependence, literary narratives that give voice to the plight of our imperilled planet, and scholarly investigations that delve into the heart of environmental challenges. United in purpose, these advocates endeavor to stir a collective awakening, compelling society to confront its actions' consequences and embrace the urgent need for change. In the mid of the cacophony of warnings, their voices emerge as beacons of hope, inspiring a deeper reverence for the tangled web of life that envelops us. Their messages echo across continents, inviting us to confront our responsibility in charting a new course that produces a harmonious coexistence with the natural world rather than recklessly sowing the seeds of destruction. (Timothy, 2010)

In the vast realm of literature, the traditional focus on Man and his entangled narratives has engendered a profound evolution in literary theories, research, and criticism. No longer

solely confined to appreciating literature's aesthetic value, scholars and critics embark on a transformative exploration, explaining the interplay between writers, texts, and the encompassing world. What was once regarded as the domain of society or the social sphere now expands beyond these boundaries, encompassing the entire ecosphere under the auspices of a revolutionary theory known as 'eco-criticism.' (Glottfelty, 1996)

At the core of eco-criticism lies a profound recognition of our inherent 'biohistorical' nature as humans, indelibly intertwined with the natural environment. Since "everything is connected to everything else," (Glottfelty, 1996, p.xix), we, as sentient beings, carve the essence of our identity through our profound connectedness with the world around. By embracing our coexistence with nature, we discover profound meaning and significance in the fabric of life. Moreover, within the boundless interrelation that transcends every boundary, we realize that we are both impacted by and impacting the environment we inhabit; we cannot exist apart from this symbiotic relationship, for every action and reaction are delicately interwoven into the grand symphony of existence. Crucial to the heart of eco-criticism is its unwavering focus on the special rapport between humans and nonhumans within literary studies. Eco-criticism meticulously examines the complex negotiations between humanity and nature through its theoretical discourse, exploring the myriad ways we cohabit and influence each other's destinies. (Garrard, 2004)

Eco-criticism offers an all-encompassing lens, perceiving the interplay between literature as a human creation and the vast terrain of the land

or ecosystem. These seemingly distinct entities are no longer isolated but entwined, forming an inseparable unity. The essence of life, symbolized by sunlight, water, and air, weaves a convoluted tapestry, uniting literature and the environment in an indivisible harmony of existence. In the grand scheme of things, no literary theory can stand on its own if the foundational elements of the natural world falter, underscoring the intimate relationship between our artistic pursuits and the delicate balance of the ecosystem.

Literature becomes an intimate reflection of the ecological landscape, mirroring the environment's intricacies that both inspire and shape human thought, emotion, and expression. Within the embrace of eco-criticism, literature and the ecosystem converge, forming an indissoluble union, evoking a profound realization of our place within the vast web of life's interconnections. In this regard, nature is not only "the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama" (Glotfelty, 1996, xxi). In eco-criticism, the gaze extends beyond merely elucidating nature's portrayal in literary texts. These texts, seen as profound reflections of society, serve as a potent platform for critical analysis. Through them, ecocritics look into the ideology, practices, and activities of our culture in relation to the environment. With a discerning eye, they unveil how society undervalues and degrades the natural world, urging us to confront the consequences of our collective actions and reforge a harmonious relationship with nature.

What sets eco-criticism apart from other literary theories is its profound global significance, transcending the boundaries of

nations and cultures. It addresses a universal issue that unites humanity in its responsibility to address pressing environmental challenges. The perils of global warming, climate change, human health risks, the scars inflicted by warfare, and the degradation of the natural environment resonate across the globe, demanding a collective international effort to safeguard life and secure the future. (Dobie, 2009).

Embracing the clarion call of eco-criticism, the theorist Thomas K. Dean (1994) emphasizes the need for a humanistic understanding of our complicated relationships with the natural world. Environmental crises bear witness to humanity's disconnection from nature, a chasm that deepens not merely due to technological advances but also through the narrowing focus of our pursuits. In this profound discourse, eco-criticism emerges as a guiding light, summoning us to bridge the divide and rekindle our kinship with the earth. Through its lens, we gain an enlightened perspective that transcends the myopic view of self and embraces a holistic vision of interdependence with all living beings. With unwavering conviction, eco-criticism beckons us to navigate the realm of human expression, literature, and culture, intertwining it seamlessly with the fabric of the natural world as we embark on a journey towards ecological awakening and preserving life's delicate balance. In this transformational discourse, the boundaries between disciplines blur as scholars, writers, and activists unite in the shared vision of preserving the sanctity of the earth. Once confined to the realm of art, the power of storytelling converges with the urgency of ecological advocacy, creating a

harmonious thought and action that resounds with a profound impact.

Environmental studies have more commonly found companionship with political movements and scientific research, relegating literature to a peripheral role in the discourse. Although rare, the union of environmental studies and literature bears the potential for profound insights. In the early 1990s, a step was taken with the establishment of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE). During this epoch, American scholars from diverse professions harnessed the power of literary expression to confront environmental issues head-on. In this uncharted territory, contributors from various fields converged, coalescing their knowledge to forge a new path that illuminated environmental justice concerns and emphasized the potency of ecological writing. With a spirit of interdisciplinarity, they set about a novel quest - to unite the realms of environment and literature in a seamless tapestry, harnessing the collective power of both to mitigate environmental degeneration and ensure the continuity of life on our beloved planet. (Glotfelty, 1996)

The realm of eco-literature transcends mere descriptions of nature, reaching far beyond romantic odes to scenic landscapes. It surpasses idyllic portrayals of forest dwellers or mountain denizens. Instead, it beckons us to embark on a profound exploration, delving into the intricate mosaic of environmental degradation and its indelible impact on human existence. Eco-literature unveils the distressing reality of how environmental decline engenders human suffering and displacement. It elucidates the unsettling metamorphosis of

citizens into societal outcasts within their very homelands.

Moreover, eco-literature scrutinizes the perilous repercussions of economic and political exploitation, which ravage human lives and imperil the foundation of the natural world, rendering it inhospitable for future generations. In essence, eco-literature emerges as a resolute call for an introspective reckoning, urging us to confront the profound consequences of human actions upon the environment and to embrace a collective responsibility, safeguarding the delicate balance of life for future generations. (Subramanian, 2017). Eco-criticism fosters an integrative perspective, intertwining literary works with ecological consciousness and paving the way for a symbiotic relationship between art and science. Thus, this distinctive brand of literature compels the discerning critic to recalibrate their focus towards the vast reservoirs of scientific knowledge in its all-encompassing essence. Embarking on this intellectual odyssey, the astute critic is invited to embrace a comprehensive understanding that transcends disciplinary boundaries. It impels us to relinquish the narrow confines of an ego-conscious perspective, where humanity's concerns alone reign supreme. Instead, the shift towards an eco-conscious approach places the ecosphere at the heart of our scrutiny. (Glotfelty, 1996)

The researcher of this current paper believes that eco-criticism can offer a unique perspective on how the natural world is represented on stage and how this representation can reflect the environmental issues facing Iraq and the broader Middle East region. Iraqi theatre has a rich history, dating

back thousands of years to ancient Mesopotamia. While the country has faced significant political and social turmoil in recent decades, theatre has remained an important cultural expression. However, Iraqi theatre has not always focused on environmental themes. Instead, it has tended to reflect the social and political issues that have shaped the country's history. From an ecocritical perspective, Iraqi theatre can reflect the complex relationship between human beings and the natural world. Iraqi playwrights have explored themes such as urbanization, industrialization, and the impact of war on the environment.

## 2- Iraqi Ecosystem in Context: General Overview

Since this paper aims to study the ecological reading of the Iraqi play and its counterpart set in Iraq, this section illuminates the captivating ecosystem, geography, and landscape that define this remarkable nation. Geographically endowed with unique natural attributes, Iraq exemplifies the tapestry woven by nature. Its awe-inspiring terrain comprises a mesmerizing blend of mountains, plains, valleys, deserts, plateaus, water fountains, rivers, marshes, and lakes, promoting an unparalleled diversity that captivates the senses.

Yet, this bountiful land has not been immune to the relentless currents of history. Positioned strategically as a centre of world trading, Iraq has become a coveted gem, inviting the covetous glances of other nations that sought to colonize its rich resources. Tragically, this covetousness has rendered Iraq a crucible of conflict, a stage for prolonged and arduous wars that have endured through the annals of time and continue to cast a shadow on the nation's present. Indeed, the history of Iraq is a

testament to resilience in the face of adversity, as it has navigated the tempestuous conflicts while holding steadfast to its ecological wealth. Iraq's landscape has witnessed the passing tides of human ambitions and conflicts that seek to alter its course from the ancient rivers of Mesopotamia to the verdant marshlands that cradle rich ecosystems.

In antiquity, Iraq was renowned as the "Sawad" land, a verdant expanse where two rivers flowed incessantly, transforming it into an emerald paradise. Yet, the present reality of Mesopotamia tells a sombre tale of a land grappling with vast desert expanses and the profound deterioration of its environmental resources and social well-being. Once a lush haven, the landscape of Iraq now bears the scars of neglect, with its capital city, Baghdad, and other urban centers reeling under the weight of environmental challenges (Schaefer, 1997)

In scrutinizing the ecological essence of these plays, the paper attempts to reflect on the delicate harmony that intertwines humanity with the natural world. The tumultuous history of Iraq beckons us to embrace a deeper understanding of the profound interdependence between human actions and the ecological fabric that sustains life. The researcher treads the path of ecological inquiry to unveil a poignant narrative that transcends mere theatrics - a narrative of coexistence, stewardship, and reverence for the ecosphere that calls Iraq its home.

In Iraq, environmental change has emerged as a haunting spectre, resulting from years of neglect and disregard for the nation's pressing environmental issues. The unfortunate aftermath of burning oil wells casts a sinister



shadow, releasing copious amounts of toxic residue into the air, inflicting untold suffering upon human and nonhuman inhabitants alike. Many other pollutants further exacerbate the crisis, stemming from the remnants of former Iraqi weapons factories, the haunting legacies of the Atomic Energy Agency sites, and the deployment of various weapons and ammunition during wars. (Higginbotham, 2018)

The devastation befalling both human lives and the delicate ecological system of Iraq came into stark focus during the 1990s. Specific weapons used against the Iraqi populace resulted in critical environmental and air pollution, posing a severe threat to the very biodiversity that sustains the region. Unfortunately, the woes of the environment and its ecosystem spiraled further into despair after the American forces and coalition invasion in 2003.

Today, Iraq stands at a precipice, struggling with the haunting repercussions of a fragmented environment and a beleaguered ecosystem. The once-fertile land of Mesopotamia, with its storied history and rich cultural heritage, is now a poignant reminder of the urgent need for ecological preservation and environmental stewardship. The legacy of Iraq's past and the impact of subsequent conflicts loom large, urging us to contemplate the profound interplay between human actions and the fragile web of life that sustains us all. As we witness the plight of Iraq's environment, we are summoned to confront our collective responsibility to safeguard the natural world and nurture a sustainable future for future generations.

On the international stage, impassioned debates have raged concerning the profound environmental crisis wrought by the wars against Iraq and the callous indifference of the former regime. Indeed, the aftermath of the Iraq War faced a sinister toll on the ecosystem, overshadowing the immediate woes of conflict. The scars left by internal and external wars, coupled with the haunting specter of terrorist operations, have etched their heavy marks on Iraq's ecological fabric, propelling the nation into a perilous dance with climate and environmental crises. From "drought, sandstorm, heatwaves, floods, desertification and epidemics", these man-made calamities have besieged Iraq, thrusting the country into a relentless struggle for ecological survival. (Al-Shamsi, 2019)

These adversities, air pollution, casts a relentless shadow, its noxious tendrils encroaching upon the air sustaining life. Initiatives to mitigate the escalating levels of environmental pollutants remain wanting as the nation grapples with the urgent imperative to heal its wounded atmosphere. In the face of such multifaceted environmental deterioration, Iraq emerges as a "uniquely dystopian tableau", where human activity has deteriorated virtually all ecosystems, and the grim wraith of "ecocide" holds a disquieting significance. (Lynzy Billing, 2021)

Wim Zwijnenburg, an earnest advocate for the Dutch peace organization PAX, has immersed himself in studying and investigating pollution in post-conflict Iraq. His belief is resolute - the harm inflicted by war upon Iraq will resonate for generations to come, necessitating a fervent commitment to cleanse the hazardous pollutants that continue to imperil the health

and well-being of Iraqi citizens. The path to healing is arduous and fraught with challenges, demanding dead sincere steps towards environmental remediation and alleviating health risks that persist as grim legacies of conflict. (Lynzy Billing, 2021)

### 2.1- Iraqi Ecosystem in Literary Context:

Evident in the landscape of Iraqi literature and scholarship is a conspicuous dearth of eco-literary works and literary studies, emblematic of a society tussling with a notable absence of environmental consciousness. The pervasive disconnect between the public and nature and a lack of ecological knowledge impedes embracing environmental themes within literary discourse. Moreover, the deficiency of institutional and educational endeavours to cultivate environmental awareness exacerbates the critical ecological crises that besiege Iraq. (Lynzy Billing, 2021)

Against this backdrop, the present paper sets forth a compelling proposition: by infusing literary texts with environmental crises, a transformative power can be harnessed, kindling a positive disposition towards resolving environmental challenges and inciting heightened interest in ecological matters. The creative works of Iraqi and Western writers alike, who dared to confront the stark realities of environmental decline in Iraq, emerge as invaluable instruments in addressing the intricate web of environmental issues and their profound ramifications on human existence and the future.

Integrating environmental concerns into literary expression presents a potent avenue for fostering a collective awakening, beckoning society to grapple with its responsibility towards the environment. The works of

visionary writers, who artfully weave the ecological story of Iraq's challenges, resonate as a clarion call for greater engagement with environmental preservation and restoration. Thus, literature emerges as an indispensable ally in the quest for ecological enlightenment, propelling society towards a more profound understanding of its intimate connection to the natural world. As the words of these writers echo, they possess the capacity to ignite a spark of environmental consciousness, nurturing a profound sense of stewardship for the irreplaceable treasures of the natural world. By interlacing ecological themes throughout their literary expressions, Iraqi writers and scholars have the power to make an everlasting legacy, leaving behind a trail of insight, empathy, and action that extends far beyond the confines of the written page. In doing so, literature becomes an agent of change, mobilizing hearts and minds towards a shared commitment to safeguarding the sanctity of our planet and securing a thriving future for generations yet to come.

The scarcity of plays addressing environmental issues penned by Iraqi writers remains an apparent aspect of the theatrical landscape. Yet, amid this dearth, a rare treasure emerges, comprising two plays that bravely grappled with ecological themes. The first jewel, *Anthem of the Earth* (1971) by the visionary Badri Hassoun Farid (1927-2017), delves into the poignant issue of rural-to-urban migration, which surged during a critical phase in Iraq's history. As farmers abandoned their ancestral fields and sought refuge in Baghdad's sprawling metropolis, the verdant green expanses began to wane, eclipsed by the relentless encroachment of urbanization. The

burgeoning population density in the capital precipitated a surge of negative environmental consequences, casting a looming shadow upon the ecosystem's delicate balance.

The second play, *A Tale of Thirst, Land and People* (1981), authored and directed by the gifted Qassem Muhammad (1936-2009), sheds light on the far-reaching impact of diverting water from vital rivers in neighbouring lands. This fateful act of water diversion caused a grievous wound to Iraq's green spaces and biodiversity, robbing the land of its precious lifeblood. The once-thriving ecosystems, teeming with vibrant biodiversity, were now left withered and parched, bearing witness to the devastating consequences of tampering with the natural water flow. These theatrical masterpieces exist as elusive enigmas, and their scripts are lost to the ravages of time. The echoes of their narratives whisper through scattered fragments, sparingly scattered across the vast expanse of the internet.

The scarcity of documentation has rendered these plays ethereal echoes, leaving an indelible yearning for a comprehensive understanding of their profound messages. Nonetheless, even in their elusive state, these plays linger as poignant testaments to the power of art to address ecological quandaries and shed light on the performance between humanity and the environment. Their very existence serves as a resolute call for recognition and preservation, urging us to unveil the hidden treasures of these plays and weave them into the tapestry of literary and ecological heritage. In the quest to unearth these theatrical treasures, the hope endures that future generations shall bear witness to their wisdom, drawing inspiration from the artistic

voices that dared to mirror the ecological challenges faced by Iraq. As we unravel the mysteries of these plays, we honor their authors' vision, embracing the profound impact of their messages as they echo across the aeons, resounding with timeless relevance in our collective quest for ecological harmony and environmental stewardship.

3- "Everything began in the wetlands of Iraq": Rasha Fadhil's *Ishtar in Baghdad*

Rasha Fadhil's play *Ishtar in Baghdad* (2003) reinterprets the Mesopotamian myth of Ishtar and Tammuz by bringing the godly figures to contemporary Iraq. The gods, Ishtar and Tammuz, were deeply disturbed by what they learned from their faraway abode and thus decided to descend to earth to aid their children, the people of Iraq, and rejuvenate the barren land. " Fadhil's attempt to appeal to Iraqi audiences was related to her employment of a common technique in Iraqi drama: discussing the political present by invoking characters from history or Iraqi mythology". (Midhin and David, 2022) Nevertheless, the playwright, Fadhil, weaves a compelling narrative that resonates deeply with ecocritical themes. Therefore, the play delves into the profound ecological and cultural consequences of war and foreign invasion on the land and its people through the dialogue of the ancient Mesopotamian deities. :

.....Ishtar looks at the earth from her balcony and cries out in horror.

Ishtar The rising tide of blood engulfs the green earth!

Tammuz ( desperately) The lambs have died and the shepherds fled.



Ishtar They are destroying my tower, the bridge between heaven and earth!

Tammuz The umbilical cord is cut! The land you once made fertile cries out in thirst.

Ishtar ( pacing angrily) I will not abandon my land to the ravenous mouth of the desert.

Tammuz The desert has swallowed everything. Ishtar studies the earth.

Ishtar Who are those strangers bristling with heavy arms? Their colors are foreign! Their words cannot be found in the dictionary of my people!

Tammuz Those are the ones who scorched the earth and spilled the blood of your people across the valleys, laying a swelling carpet of anemones.

Ishtar ( crying out in anger and sadness) The country that gave birth to civilization will never die! I will go down to bless them again . . . to charm them from death . . . to grace them with the plant of life.

Tammuz ( protesting) But the cup of your hand is smaller than their thirst! (Fadhil, 2003, p.39)

In this powerful exchange, Ishtar and Tammuz stand amid a desolate landscape, lamenting the state of the once-fertile land now plagued by thirst. Ishtar determined not to abandon her homeland to the encroaching desert, expresses her defiance and commitment to restoring life to the land. Her passionate cry embodies a deep connection to the natural world, exemplifying the central tenets of ecocriticism, emphasising the interdependence between humans and the environment. Tammuz's statement, "The umbilical cord is cut! The land you once made fertile cries out in thirst," indicates the severance of the connection between the Iraqi people and their land due to war and environmental destruction.

The land, which was once fertile and nourished the people, is now crying out in thirst, indicating the impact of human actions on the environment. In response to Ishtar's resolve, Tammuz voices his concern about the strangers armed with heavy weapons who have invaded the land, leaving death and destruction in their wake. The haunting imagery of the land covered in anemones, symbolizing both beauty and suffering, reflects the duality of nature, where life and death coexist in a delicate balance. This imagery underscores the ecological impact of war, where human disrupts the natural cycles and harmony of the land. (Al-Azraki and Al-Shamma, 2019)

Tammuz's reluctance to let Ishtar go down to the earth, fearing her mistreatment by the invaders, further highlights the vulnerability of the land and its inhabitants in the face of external aggression. His realization that the land now belongs to strangers underscores the loss of sovereignty and ecological disruption caused by foreign occupation. The drowning people, children, women, and toys in Wadi al-Salam symbolize the tragic consequences of environmental destruction and warfare. The strangers with heavy arms, who have scorched the earth and spilt the people's blood, represent the destructive impact of warfare and the loss of connection between humans and the environment. Ishtar's cry that "the country that gave birth to civilization will never die" emphasizes the importance of Iraqi culture and its connection to the land and the environment. Despite the transgressions and destruction, the play suggests that the enduring spirit of the Iraqi people, symbolized by the gods, will eventually reclaim their land and restore its greenness, pushing back the "tide of blood."

As Ishtar and Tammuz arrive, they find the land of Sumer in turmoil, marked by ruins and the stench of smoke; they witness an explosion and attempt to assist the victims. The heavy smoke and cries for help evoke a chaotic and devastating atmosphere resulting from the explosion, illustrating the destructive consequences of war on both the environment and human lives. Ishtar's observation that "the weeds have choked your land" symbolizes the ecological degradation caused by collision and serves as a metaphor for how war disrupts the balance of the ecosystem, leading to the proliferation of unwanted and harmful elements that stifle the natural environment's vitality.

In the explosion, Ishtar's interaction with the Child further highlights the human cost of war on the young and vulnerable. The Child's torn school bag and lost books represent the disruption of education and the loss of innocence caused by violence. This portrayal reflects war's broader impact on a nation's cultural and intellectual heritage as education and knowledge suffer havoc.

Tammuz's concern for Ishtar's safety amidst the smoke underscores the vulnerability of humans and gods in the face of destruction. The interplay between Ishtar's determination to protect her people and Tammuz's fear for her well-being symbolizes the connection between humans, nature, and the divine, emphasizing the entwined fates of all life forms on the planet. Through the powerful imagery and emotional depth in this scene, Fadhil effectively conveys the devastating effects of war on the environment, culture, and human lives. The portrayal of Ishtar and Tammuz amid chaos symbolizes the gods' close

association with nature and their empathetic connection to humanity. This connection, rooted in the earth and its inhabitants, highlights the core principles of eco-criticism, underscoring the urgent need to protect and preserve the delicate balance between human civilization and the natural world.

Due to the confusion and turmoil caused by the explosion, Ishtar and Tammuz have been separated, so she starts searching for him and asking people about him:

Have you seen Tammuz? He was with me.

A wounded man Don't worry. He was taken in for interrogation.

Ishtar (crying out) What interrogation?! We're not criminals! He is your god! He is the one for whom you used to perform mourning rituals . . . dream and sing for his return . . . and offer him sacrifices and oblations.

The wounded man I beg forgiveness from Allah the Almighty! May Allah judge the doers! Those who were not physically wounded were driven mad!

Ishtar Where will I find Tammuz?

The wounded man O woman! It's only June, Tammuz is yet to come. What is the connection between the months of the year and the one you seek?

Ishtar (angrily) I am Ishtar! Goddess of Heaven! Your goddess! Is this really the land of Sumer?!

The wounded man Sumer?!

Ishtar walks away from The wounded man, crying. (Fadhil, 2003, p.41)

Ishtar's frustration at the Boys' ignorance of their own history, when they do not recognize Tammuz and Sumer, and wounded man's confusion about the connection between Tammuz and the months of the year highlights

the erosion of traditional knowledge and practices. The Boys' response that Sumer is a cheap cigarette highlights the impact of globalization and the loss of local culture and traditions. Ishtar's anger at this response emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural heritage and the environment from the impact of globalization and cultural homogenization.:

Have you seen Tammuz? He was standing beside me a short while ago.

One of the Boys turns to his friends, and they exclaim together:

Boys Tammuz?!

Ishtar realizes how odd the name sounds, and asks again.

Ishtar Where in Sumer are we?

Boys ( in astonishment) Sumer?!

Ishtar ( angrily) Yes, Sumer! Don't you know what the word means? Don't you know your own history, from where you came?

The Boy turns to his friends for an answer.

Boy, In fact . . . Sumer? Yes, I remember. It's a cheap cigarette.

Ishtar ( angrily) Cheap cigarette?! (Fadhil, 2003, p.41)

The boys' reply demonstrates the young generation's lack of historical awareness caused by the ongoing viciousness and disorder in the region. It portrays the consequences of war on a society's collective memory, leading to a disintegration of their cultural and ecological awareness. Furthermore, this lack of awareness and connection can further exacerbate environmental degradation, as people may not recognize the significance of their actions on the land and its resources. (Al-Azraki and Al-Shamma, 2019)

During her search, Ishtar meets a Woman whose "Indifference catches Ishtar's attention" (Fadhil, p.42). The Woman's indifference to the explosion and her refusal to run away like everyone else demonstrates a sense of resignation and acceptance of the continuing violence, which reflects the desensitization that can occur in conflict zones. This desensitization can also extend to the environment, where repeated brutality and destruction can lead to losing connection and empathy towards nature. The Woman's wait for her loved one, who is taken away and subjected to cruel treatment, symbolizes the prolonged suffering and displacement experienced by individuals affected by war. Her hope and disappointment at her loved one's absence echoes the longing for a sense of normalcy and stability, paralleled by the longing for a healthy and intact environmental degradation.

The Woman's lament about her loved one's belongings, like the smell of his pencil, eraser, and math notebooks, illustrates the human attachment to material possessions and personal belongings. This attachment to the material world can also reflect humanity's reliance on natural resources. The Woman tells Ishtar not to worry:

Perhaps they'll teach him the Lion of Babylon exercise.

Ishtar What exercise?! What does the Lion of Babylon have to do with it?

Woman ( angrily) As if you were from a different planet! The Lion of Babylon exercise! (Fadhil, 2003, p.42)

The reference to the "Lion of Babylon exercise" and the images shown to the world expose the humiliation and abuse faced by

detainees, emphasizing the human rights abuses that occur during wars. This maltreatment of individuals, like the violence imposed on the environment, reflects a disregard for the welfare and dignity of humans and the natural world.

As Ishtar attempts to understand the Woman's perspective and offers sympathy, she realizes the ongoing war's profound impact on ordinary people's lives. The Woman's resentment and bitterness stem from losing her loved one and the disrupted dreams and hopes they once shared. This turmoil echoes the emotional upheaval experienced by nature when it faces destruction due to human activities. Ishtar's plea to know where Tammuz is taken reflects the desperation and desire to protect those we care about from harm, which is analogous to the need to protect and conserve nature's delicate ecosystems. The Woman's warning to Ishtar about the dangers of seeking those responsible for Tammuz's disappearance mirrors the threats faced by activists and advocates who try to defend the environment and challenge destructive practices.

In Scene One, Act Two, the playwright depicts war's extreme brutality and the impact of conflict on humans and the environment. The American Officer's interrogation of Tammuz represents the dominant power's control and oppression over the land and its resources, symbolized by Tammuz as a representative of the Iraqi people and their connection to their homeland. The use of violence, torture, and humiliation, such as spitting in Tammuz's face and forcing him to bark like a dog, underscores the brutality of the occupying forces and the dehumanization of the Iraqi people. This dehumanization also extends to the natural

environment, as it is treated as a commodity to be exploited rather than a living, interconnected ecosystem. The Officer's sarcastic comment about leaving nothing for them - "Heaven, earth, and oil!" - reflects the colonial mindset that seeks to exploit and extract resources without regard for the land's ecological integrity or the well-being of the people who call it home.

Rasha Fadhil's play addresses "the gruesome events that took place at Abu Ghraib and the crimes committed by American soldiers that have left a black mark on the history of Iraq" (Midhin and Hussein, 2022), yet the play is seen as a manifesto to show the destructive effects of wars on nature and its people nature and ecological issues in the play, as well as the interconnection of human and natural systems. However, Ishtar's desperate search for Tammuz amid the indifference and fear of the people passing by reflects the struggle of local communities to protect their land and culture from the chaos and destruction of war. The disappearance of the people, as if pursued by ghosts, symbolizes the loss of connection with the land and the erasure of cultural and ecological knowledge in times of conflict.

Scene Two, Act Two, illustrates the violent encounter between the soldiers and Ishtar, representing the land, nature, and its people. The soldiers view her merely as a beautiful woman and label her a terrorist without understanding the deeper significance of her identity as Ishtar, "the Queen of the Earth". This reduction of her identity to a superficial level reflects the devaluation of the land and its ecological importance in the face of militarization. Ishtar's cry for recognition of her true identity echoes the plea for

acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of the natural world. The soldiers' ignorance and indifference to her true nature highlight the disconnect between human society and the environment, leading to disregarding ecological well-being in the pursuit of power and control.

The second part of the scene takes place in a big room with naked prisoners, where the prisoners are treated like animals and made to bark like dogs, representing the dehumanization of individuals and nature alike. The soldiers' treatment of the prisoners reflects how humans often exploit and mistreat the environment, subjecting it to savagery and abasement for their gain. The image of Tammuz sitting naked under a spotlight, expressing defeat, mirrors the vulnerability and helplessness of the human prisoners and the natural environment in the face of oppressive forces. The prisoners' demonstration and plea for death to escape their suffering might reflect the despair and hopelessness experienced by communities impacted by ecological violence. The parallel between the prisoners' cries and the damage wreaked havoc upon the environment emphasizes the deep emotional and physical trauma that both human and nonhuman beings endure in the face of environmental degradation.

As the goddess of fertility, growth, and the heavens, Ishtar is deeply connected to the land and its people. The soldiers' violent treatment of her reflects how human beings often disregard and abuse nature, seeing it merely as a resource to be exploited for their gain. Ishtar's spitting at the soldier can be interpreted as resistance against the forces that seek to oppress and dominate the natural world.

The soldiers' admiration of Ishtar's beauty while inflicting harm upon her signifies humanity's paradoxical relationship with nature. On the one hand, humans may appreciate the beauty and wonders of the natural world, but on the other hand, they may contribute to its destruction through their actions.

The Officer's dismissive attitude towards Ishtar's mission shows the prevailing disregard for environmental concerns in many human societies, where short-term gains often take precedence over long-term sustainability and ecological well-being.

Ishtar angrily responds to their violence, saying.

I know this land. The history of every grain of its sand is in my blood. I almost hear its sands boiling with hatred and desire for revenge on you. Put your hand on its soil to feel the heat of its furious craving to swallow you. (Fadhil, 2003, p.45)

Her statement about the land's history and her blood being intertwined emphasizes the deep ecological connection between humans and their environment. It mirrors the idea that humans are not separate from nature but rather intimately connected to it, and any harm caused to the environment will ultimately affect humanity.

In Act Three, the playwright portrays a grim, painful image of naked and tortured women in prison. Their nakedness signifies their exposure to the brutality of war, where innocence and dignity are stripped away by the horrors they endure. The room is a microcosm of the larger world affected by war, where people and the environment are subjected to the destructive forces of violence. The harsh



reality of war disrupts the natural order and harmony, leaving individuals like Ishtar disoriented and searching for answers amid the mayhem.

The women's conversations about death and suicide express the desperation and hopelessness war often instills in its victims. They speak of death as a form of escape from their relentless suffering, believing death may bring liberation from their tormentors and traumatic experiences. This dialogue highlights the profound psychological toll of war on individuals and communities, leading some to see death as the only relief from their pain. Desperate, they see death as a form of freedom and redemption, wishing one rocket would fall on them. The mention of rockets and mortar shells symbolizes the destructive weaponry used in warfare, which affects not only the immediate victims but also the land and ecosystem surrounding the conflict zones.

In a dark room, Tammuz is lying bruised and bloody. Tammuz's abuse represents the great suffering of individuals and a rupture in the natural harmony of the environment, as the Earth bears witness to the destruction caused by human actions. This dehumanization is not limited to the individuals involved but extends to the environment, as the soldiers disregard the sanctity of the Earth and its interconnectedness with all living beings.

Tammuz's claim to have planted the soil with fertility and love underscores the importance of preserving cultural heritage and the environment for human well-being:

Tammuz, We didn't know that the Earth would reject us even though it was us who planted its soil with fertility and love. We didn't know that Wadi al-Salam had turned into a cemetery

whose gate is open only for death and that you brought down the Ziggurat and cut the umbilical cord, which connects the Earth with Heaven. (Fadhil, 2003, p.47)

The mention of Wadi al-Salam, known as the "Valley of Peace," transformed into a cemetery, symbolizes the perversion of places of tranquillity and natural harmony by the destructive forces of war. The cutting of the umbilical cord connecting Earth with Heaven signifies the severing of the sacred bond between human beings and the natural world, disrupting the balance that sustains life. Tammuz's lack of identification, family, and address exemplifies the erasure of personal histories and the loss of connections to one's homeland, disrupting the deep-rooted relationships between human beings and their environment. During this degrading act, the chaotic music and the soldiers' laughter underline the disconnect between human actions and the natural world. The Earth witnesses the cruelty brought upon its inhabitants, and the dissonance between the music and the suffering reflects the disruption of harmony in the environment caused by human violence.

Tammuz's statement that "this is not our land" speaks to the disconnection and alienation individuals may feel from their homeland and the environment due to the wildness and conflict imposed upon them. This sense of displacement disrupts the natural harmony between humans and their surroundings, causing a rupture in the ecological balance. Ishtar's longing for death to "blossom once more" and her desire to die with her people to ensure their rebirth highlights the ecological significance of the cycle of life and death. In

eco-criticism, death is seen as an essential part of the natural process, where life emerges from the decay of organic matter. Ishtar's willingness to embrace death to be part of this regenerative process demonstrates an understanding of the analogy of all life forms within the environment.

Tammuz's notion of returning to the womb of the Earth, where life perpetually arises from death, aligns with ecocritical perspectives on the cyclic nature of life. The idea of humans sharing in this natural cycle emphasizes the interdependence between humans and the natural world. It also underscores the ecological consequences of warfare, which disrupt this cycle and cause immeasurable harm to individuals and the environment.

The sound of explosions and the Americans' confusion further highlight the destructive impact of barbarity on the environment. The celebration of the Prisoners and the voices of joy and howling in response to the attack reveal a complex relationship between human beings and their environment. While this may be seen as a means of resistance against oppression, it also reflects the negative impact on the natural world, as violence begets more violence and disrupts the ecological balance.

Ishtar and Tammuz, the divine characters, bear witness not only to the wanton destruction of the city and the brutal assault on its inhabitants but also find themselves ensnared in the clutches of American troops, subjected to unspeakable acts of torture. In a bold departure from merely depicting the annihilation of artefacts, symbols of her country's cultural heritage, Fadhl breathes life into this heritage, allowing it to breathe, pulsate, and interact with the tumultuous

present. Barbara Rose Johnston confirms that "human environmental crises emerge as a result of the culture and structure of power as well as the biophysical implications of political, economic action" (Johnston, 1997, p.19). Therefore, the playwright is seen as potentially conveying war's devastating effects on the environment, culture, and human lives.

4- "Redeeming a swamp ... comes pretty near to making a world.": Amy Merrill's *In the Reeds*

Amy Merrill's semi-documentary play, *In the Reeds* (2015), stands as a poignant collaboration titled the "Basra Boston Project" between scholars, students, and artists from the University of Basra and the United States. Within its core, the play addresses the harrowing environmental crisis that befell the marshes of Southern Iraq during the 1990s, a crisis orchestrated by the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein. This insidious scheme involved the deliberate ditching, diking, and draining of the once-thriving Iraqi marshlands, often called the Garden of Eden. (Altaai, 2018) These marshes were once brimming with life, earning the distinction of being the largest wetlands on Earth. They nurtured a delicate and precious ecosystem, serving as a haven for countless species of biodiversity. In addition, they provided sustenance to communities through rice cultivation and supplied the essential swamp reeds used in building traditional homes. With its diverse collection of flora and fauna, the area was also home to a human population of over 500,000 individuals and served as a vital rest stop for migratory birds. The ecological catastrophe initiated by the draining of the marshes was nothing short of cataclysmic. Curtis J. Richardson (2006), in

his profound article "Restoring the Garden of Eden: An Ecological Assessment of the Marshes of Iraq," unequivocally states that by the year 2000, a mere fraction of around 10% remained as functional marshland due to Saddam Hussein's systematic and merciless plan. This orchestrated devastation rendered the Marsh Arabs, known as 'Ma'dan,' homeless and bereft of their natural haven, forcing them to seek refuge in neighbouring Iran, where they endured the hardships of life in refugee camps.

The plight of the Marsh Arabs cast adrift from their ancestral home stands as a stark testament to the grave consequences of unfair decisions imposed by a tyrannical regime. Beyond the staggering violation of human rights, this ecological tragedy wreaked havoc on the delicate balance of wildlife and climate in the region, perpetuating a vicious cycle of pollution in the surrounding areas. (Adriansen, 2004)

Within the compelling narrative of *In The Reeds*, Amy Merrill masterfully crafts a charged and impassioned meeting of realistic characters. Among them stand figures of great historical significance: Saddam Hussein, the former president of Iraq's oppressive regime from 1979 to 2003; Wilfred Thesiger, a British military officer, intrepid traveller, and prolific writer who immortalized his exploration of the Iraqi marshes in his renowned work *The Marsh Arabs* (1964); and the tenacious Azzam Alwash, an Iraqi environmentalist lauded with the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2013 for his relentless dedication to restoring the devastated salt marshes of southern Iraq, victims of Saddam Hussein's ruthless reign.

Despite existing in "different times," these three characters converge in a fervent exploration of the destruction and reconstruction of the Iraqi marshlands. The stage of this short but evocative play is set in two distinct parts. In the first, we find ourselves amidst the marshes during the tumultuous 1990s, where Alwash engages in a weighty confrontation with Saddam Hussein, challenging the dictator's fateful decision to drain the precious marshlands. Saddam, with his characteristic authoritarian demeanour, offers drastic justifications for this calamitous act, citing a vengeful retaliation against the Marsh Arabs who dared to rise against him in 1990. Furthermore, he points to the devastation wrought by the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s, when these once-idyllic marshes transformed into a blood-soaked battleground, with Iranian troops exploiting the marshes to infiltrate Iraq. Yet, Saddam's cold justifications lie in an audacious vision of progress, as he envisions the marshes' transformation into a network of modern highways and canals, oblivious to the profound loss of irreplaceable natural beauty and ecological significance.

The play's second part catapults us forward, introducing the indomitable spirit of Azzam Alwash, whose unwavering commitment to his homeland led to significant strides in restoring the ravaged salt marshes. Recognized globally for his environmental stewardship, Alwash's tireless efforts breathed hope into the wounded heart of Iraq's marshlands. The play is a riveting exploration of human endeavours, reflecting upon the intertwining fates of nations, ecosystems, and the people bound to them. As the characters clash, their fervour and emotions mirror the complexities of history,

the price of progress, and the relentless pursuit of redemption. Merrill's play is a powerful reminder that even amidst the darkest chapters of human history, some rise to the challenge, dedicating their lives to healing and restoration.

The deeply charged atmosphere in *In The Reeds* takes a dramatic twist as Saddam Hussein unleashes a scathing accusation upon Azzam Alwash, branding him an immigrant traitor conspiring with America against Iraq. In this tense encounter, a new figure enters the scene - the indignant British baroness, Lady Emma Nicholson. Her NGO, committed to assisting the displaced Iraqi Marsh Arabs, witnessed the heart-wrenching destruction of their once-beloved home, shattered habitats, and shattered lives. Fueled by fury, she directs an accusatory finger at Saddam, denouncing his actions as a "modern-day genocide" driven by the draining of the marshes and the merciless gassing of the Kurds, executed in brutal collaboration with his cousin, Ali Chemical. In the face of such environmental devastation, scholars Damien Short and Martin Crook (2014) postulate that "ecocide can be a method of genocide if... environmental destruction results in conditions of life that fundamentally threaten a social group's cultural and/or physical existence."

The BARONESS passionately addresses the audience, her words ringing with historical significance:

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you The Butcher of Iraq. He lined them up in rows and killed them. No one was spared. Men, women, children. Gassing them. Executing them. A modern-day genocide, ladies and gentlemen. We had the Holocaust, the killing fields of

Cambodia. Now, I bring you the very latest genocide: Saddam Hussein's extermination of the Kurds...( Merrill, 2015, p. 7)

The entrance of the BARONESS suggests that international concerns and reactions to environmental issues can shape the fate of natural landscapes like the marshes. Political dynamics and foreign interests can influence decisions about environmental preservation and restoration. However, in the face of such callous cruelty, Saddam dismissively denies the humanity of the Kurds, saying, "Kurds aren't people", revealing the depth of his inhumanity.

The play's second part ushers in a new era, set after 2003 in the reclaimed marshes. Merrill introduces us to Caroline and Sami, who find solace in the awe-inspiring beauty of the revitalized marshlands, teeming with life as waterbirds like pelicans, moorhens, and flycatchers gracefully soar and glide. Here, in the natural wonders reborn from the ashes, hope emerges. As the story nears its conclusion, the focus shifts to a session by characters - Caroline, Brain, Sami, the Baroness, and Alwash - coming together to deliberate on "The Eden Project." This ambitious initiative aims to restore the drained marshes to their former glory, breathing life back into the heart of the land and its diverse biodiversity. Azzam's Eden Project proposes an ecotourism-based approach to attract tourists to the marshes while preserving its natural environment. In the play, Azzam represents a perspective that appreciates the natural beauty of the wetlands and marshes of Southern Iraq. He views the marshes as historically significant, the birthplace of civilization (Uruk) and the Sumerian

civilization. Azzam sees value in the harmony between humans and nature, emphasizing the importance of birds, their flights, and the overall ecological balance.

Through the play's tumultuous journey, a profound message echoes through its emotional overview - the stark contrast between the destructive forces of human cruelty and the resilient power of human compassion. As the characters bond with the sins of the past, they form a path toward redemption, seeking to heal both the land and the human spirit. The play is a powerful testament to the enduring importance of environmental and cultural preservation and the pursuit of justice. *In In the Reeds*, Amy Merrill presents a factual and dramatic portrayal of the tragic demise of the marshes in southern Iraq, highlighting the ecological disaster that befell this once-pristine environment.

This catastrophe unfolding is meticulously depicted through caustic verbal conflicts between Saddam Hussein and Azzam Alwash, each defending their contrasting views on the "great feat" of the marshes. A key ecological aspect of Azzam's vision is the idea of restoration. He believes that nature works in cycles and that what was destroyed can be revived. This aligns with ecological principles of ecological succession, where ecosystems can recover and regenerate over time if given a chance. Azzam's plan to bring back the marshes as an ecotourism destination indicates his desire to promote conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

On the other hand, Saddam represents a contrasting perspective that prioritizes his will and desire for control over nature. He

dismisses Azzam's ecological insights and is determined to eliminate the marshes. This reflects a more anthropocentric view, where nature is seen as subservient to human interests and desires. Saddam's approach neglects the ecological value of wetlands and demonstrates a lack of consideration for the potential environmental consequences of their destruction.

In sarcastic political banter, Saddam boasts of modern cities and new canal systems, pointing to maps with names like "Glory River" and "Saddam's River." His arrogance is met with irony as he proudly declares the "Mother of all Battles River" (Merrill, 2015, p.3), an ominous reminder of the suffering he has on his people. As the debate intensifies, Alwash questions the practicalities of the draining project, raising concerns about the responsibility of overseeing the builders and engineers. To his dismay, he learns that Saddam's cousin, the notorious Ali Hassan al-Majid, infamously known as "Chemical Ali" for his role in "gassing the Kurds," is entrusted with draining the marshes. The bitter irony of a man associated with brutal atrocities being in charge of further environmental destruction underscores the regime's callousness.

Through the evocative prose and imagery, the play invokes a deep longing for the lost beauty and harmony that once existed in the marshes. Azzam's nostalgic reminiscence of his childhood days spent with his father, gliding in a small boat amid the reeds, and observing the birds, emphasizes the profound connection between humans and nature that the dictator's actions have cruelly severed.

AZZAM



Nasiriyah. When I was a kid, my father used to take me on boat trips through the marshes. We'd glide through the reeds, looking at birds.

SADDAM

Birds! Unsanitary. Dirty. Their droppings, ugh.

AZZAM

Birds fly. They soar.

SADDAM

Birds are noisy, and they belong in cages!

By intertwining politics, literature, and science, the play beckons the audience to confront the urgent need for public awareness and action against pesticide pollution and environmental degradation. *In the Reeds* seeks to "ensure that nature is given as much attention within the humanities as is currently given to gender, class and race" (Coupe, 2000, p. 303), recognizing that the preservation of our natural world is inherently tied to the well-being of humanity itself.

Moreover, the play achieves a multifaceted narrative that blends historical accuracy, environmental concern, and social consciousness, inviting the audience to reflect on the consequences of human actions on our planet's fragile ecosystems. Referring to the past glory of the marshlands and the subsequent suffering of the Marsh Arabs, the playwright flames up a passionate call for change, urging all to be stewards of the environment and guardians of the delicate harmony between humans and nature. The playwright aims to increase "public awareness of pesticide pollution, firmer state regulation and development of less persistent agricultural chemicals" (Garrard, 1996, p. 2).

Intriguingly, Merrill utilizes authentic settings that serve her purpose while reflecting the

distinctive culture of the Marsh Arabs and their intimate connection to the environment. One such setting is the traditional "mudhif," a large structure crafted from dried reeds, serving as a communal gathering place for their tribal leaders. This setting enhances the play's authenticity and captures the essence of the Marsh Arabs' lives entwined with the natural world.

When discussing the marsh people, the BARONESS displays a more compassionate and ecological perspective. She describes the marsh people as "Proud fisher/gatherers whose way of life began thousands of years ago" (Merrill, 2015, p. 8). Her view acknowledges the significance of traditional human-nature relationships and the cultural value of indigenous communities living harmoniously with their environment. In contrast, Saddam portrays a highly dismissive and dehumanizing attitude towards the marsh people. He refers to them as primitive vermin, displaying a lack of respect for their way of life and cultural heritage. Saddam's approach represents a negative anthropocentric view, where he sees the marsh people and their reed habitats as obstacles to his plans and power rather than recognizing their intrinsic value and contributions to the ecosystem. (Alkhoury and Shetye, 2021)

By considering ecological crises as not inevitable consequences but as features of society resulting from humanity's interactions with nature, Merrill aligns with John Passmore's perspective, considering the ecological problem as "features of our society, arising out of our dealings with nature, from which we should like to free ourselves, and which we do not regard as inevitable

consequences of what is good in that society". (qtd. Garrard, 2007, p.359). The playwright meticulously portrays the far-reaching effects of marshes drainage, elevating it from a mere political matter to a calamity impacting all forms of life within the marshlands and affecting agriculture, biodiversity, and people's very livelihood. The Marsh Arabs' resilience and resistance against oppression become emblematic of human courage in the face of environmental adversity. The ecological crises portrayed in the play become a wake-up call, urging society to embrace responsible stewardship of the environment. The audience is compelled to reflect on the profound impact of human choices on the fragile ecosystems that sustain us all.

In a mesmerizing departure from the traditional Aristotelian plot structure, *In the Reeds* takes the audience on a gripping journey through time, place, and actions. Azzam emerges as the chosen voice, tasked with revealing the hidden machinations of Saddam Hussein's regime. His resolute declaration, "I'm going to bring them 'Marshes' back," becomes a rallying cry to address the nation and kindle a sense of collective responsibility to salvage their ravaged environment. Merrill, through the character of Azzam, intertwines ecological threats with a profound political dimension, illuminating the correlation of these pressing issues in Iraq.

The recurring word "nemesis" throughout the play assumes a profound symbolic significance: the unyielding struggle between the one who laid waste to the marshes and the one determined to resurrect their glory. Azzam takes on the role of the nemesis, the embodiment of divine justice, much like the

Greek goddess of retribution, who punishes those consumed by excessive pride and hubris.

SADDAM:... Who are you?

AZZAM: Your nemesis. (Merrill, 2015, p.4)

In this portrayal, Azzam stands as a figure of justice, challenging the perception of Saddam as a heroic leader of the Arab nation. The stark contrast is evident when Saddam, consumed by his ego, boasts, "Everyone bows down to me!" offering a poignant glimpse into Saddam Hussein's persuasive political speeches and his dominance and cruelty in imposing unjust decisions on the populace, despite facing widespread opposition to the drainage of the marshes, Saddam endeavours, as depicted by Merrill, to justify his decisions through carefully crafted rhetoric. On the one hand, he presents drainage as a necessary means for agricultural development, peace, and progress. On the other, he manipulates the narrative, claiming that this undertaking aims to modernize the lives of the Marsh Arabs by providing them with essential amenities such as electricity and running water, painting an image of a flourishing Iraq.

To add further complexity to the ecological predicament, the playwright introduces the character of Ali Hassan Al-Majid, infamously known as Ali Chemical, for using chemical weapons against the Kurdish population in Halabja. Appointed by Saddam to lead the draining of the marshes, Ali-al Majid's inclusion intensifies the threat posed to both humanity and nature, given his bloody track record of atrocities. The draining process, initially intended as a punishment for the Marsh Arabs' support in a prior uprising, tragically transforms fertile lands into barren

deserts, forcing the inhabitants to abandon their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. While Saddam takes pride in his political decisions, proclaiming a shared vision with Ali al-Majid, his blindness to the severity of the environmental issues reveals a profound disconnect between political leaders and the reality of the ecological crisis unfolding.

As the conversation continues, Azzam receives news that farmers and marsh people are breaking the dams and breaching the dikes, signalling the start of "The Eden Project". Saddam, however, refuses to allow it and plans to use chemicals to drain, poison, and gas the marshes and the marsh people until there is nothing left. This conversation intensifies the dispute between economic development and environmental preservation and the impact of human actions on the environment and the people who depend on it.

AZZAM Farmers. Marsh people. The Eden project has started!

AZZAM dances.

SADDAM Never! That sound of rushing water won't be heard again. We'll bring in the bulldozers. Chemicals. Thanks to Cousin Ali, we know how to use chemicals. We'll drain them, poison them, gas them--- the marshes and marsh people--- until there's nothing left and we can begin all over again! (Merrill, 2015, p.10)

However, Sami expresses pessimistic view concerning uncertainty surrounding the success of restoration efforts, saying:

The marshes can't restore themselves. Azzam Alwash can talk all he likes about The Eden Project and his grand dreams for ecotourism in the marshes of Iraq, but nothing can happen

without funds. And will. International will. Iraqi will. (Merrill, 2015, p.17)

He expresses concerns about extremists, dropping oil prices, and lacking funds and international support. His scepticism highlights the challenges faced in environmental conservation, particularly in regions affected by classing and political instability. The play ends with a conversation between Sami and Carole where Wilfred Thesiger's book *The Marsh Arabs* is mentioned. The book provides valuable insights into the marshes and the traditional way of life of the Marsh Arabs. The mention of Thesiger's romanticized portrayal of the region suggests a discussion about the complexities of representation in environmental literature and the importance of recognizing cultural perspectives.

Ultimately, Merrill interweaves two pivotal issues that hold global significance. First, she sheds light on Saddam Hussein's sinister political agenda and the brutal treatment inflicted upon the Marsh Arabs, emphasizing the dangerous impact of his plan on the agricultural environment, biodiversity, and the very existence of these resilient people. Merrill exposes the absurdities and horrors embedded in Saddam's political discourse, consistently labelling the Marsh Arabs as "backwards," revealing the depths of prejudice and ignorance. Secondly, the playwright strives to draw the world's attention to the urgent ecological crisis, presenting it as a matter of public interest.

Merrill weaves a compelling narrative from true incidents and stories, lending the play a documentary-like quality. This authenticity enables the audience to connect deeply with the profound impact of historical events and

the harrowing consequences of human actions on the environment. While historical facts are known, the play goes beyond mere suspense or tension, delving into the characters' raw emotions and ethical dilemmas. The play highlights the tragic realities of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, revealing the extent of his dominance and cruelty in imposing unjust decisions on the populace. Its dramatic nature lays bare the poignant truths that reverberate through history, reflecting the present and a harbinger of the future.

### Conclusion

Throughout history, societies have engaged in wars, but the effects of these conflicts on the environment, humans, and animals in Iraq have been immense and sadly overlooked by the international community. The ongoing battles between nations reveal the risks and ignorance surrounding the undeniable link between the well-being of humans and the fate of the natural world that surrounds us. *Ishtar in Baghdad* and *In the Reeds* prompt us to explore how cultural heritage intertwines with environmental stewardship. The current paper investigates how the plays reflect Iraq's historical reverence for nature and its traditional ecological practices, emphasizing the need to preserve these invaluable cultural connections.

From an ecocritical lens, Rasha Fadhil's play *Ishtar in Baghdad* addresses the aftermath of the Iraq War and the impact of the war on Iraqi society and the environment. The play raises questions about the relationship between war, imperialism, and the environment and the role of literature and culture in addressing environmental issues. The play emphasizes the

need to consider the environmental consequences of war and occupation and calls for greater awareness of the importance of nature in sustaining human life.

Amy Merrill, *In the Reeds*, portrays the ruthlessness of the previous regime, depicting the marshes as adversaries to be conquered and subdued. Through the politicians' offensive language, Amy sheds light on a crucial aspect of understanding the complexities of environmental politics, emphasizing the interplay between society, politics, and the natural environment. This underscores the profound impact political decisions can have on the environment and the lives of vulnerable communities. Through this powerful play, the voices of those who suffered and witnessed the irrevocable damage to their homeland resonate, urging us to cherish, protect, and advocate for preserving our planet's precious ecosystems.

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الدم يغمر الأرض الخضراء": قراءة بيئية نقدية لمسرحية رشى فاضل "عشتار في بغداد" وإيمي ميريل "في القصب البردي"

ميسون طاهر محي

جامعة بغداد/ كلية التربية للبنات

#### ملخص

استُخدمت في الآونة الأخيرة الدراسات البيئية بشكل متزايد لتعزيز الوعي البيئي عبر مختلف التخصصات والمناطق في جميع أنحاء العالم. يركز هذا البحث بشكل خاص على تداعيات الحروب والعنف السياسي على البيئة في العراق، و التي تأثرت بشدة بالنزاعات. كما يسلط الضوء على مسرحيتان بارزتان، وهما "عشتار في بغداد" للكاتبة العراقية رشى فاضل و "في القصب البردي" للكاتبة الأمريكية إيمي ميريل. الموضوع الرئيسي لكلا المسرحيتين هو العراق، مؤكداً أن الذين لا يقدرّون ويقدرّسون حياة الإنسان لا يمكنهم أن يقدرّوا الكائنات غير البشرية. تستخدم الكاتبة رشى فاضل عناصر من ميثولوجيا بلاد ما بين النهرين بفعالية للفت الانتباه إلى الكارثة البيئية المحتملة التي تهدد المنطقة. و من ناحية أخرى، تستكشف المسرحية المختصرة لإيمي ميريل الدمار المدمر والمحاولات لإعادة بناء المستنقعات في جنوب العراق. وتشير المسرحية أيضاً كيف تجاهل النظام العراقي الدور الحيوي الذي تلعبه هذه المستنقعات في النظام البيئي العراقي.

تعتبر كلا المسرحيتين أعمال مقنعة للتعامل مع المسائل البيئية الملحة في العراق التي تسببت فيها الحروب والاضطرابات السياسية. و من خلال إبراز هذه المخاوف، فهما يُساهمان في زيادة الوعي العام بأهمية الحفاظ على البيئة وحمايتها في منطقة تأثرت كثيراً بالنزاعات.

الكلمات المفتاحية : التحليل البيئي؛ حرب العراق؛ عشتار في بغداد؛ في القصب البردي؛ ميثولوجيا بلاد ما بين النهرين؛ مستنقعات جنوب العراق