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Deformed Relationship between Human/ Nature in Oswald's Poem "Fox"

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العلاقة المشوهة بين الإنسان والطبيعة في قصيدة اوزولد "الثعلب"

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Abstract

Since the beginning of creation, the relationship between human/ nature is an organic and vital one, manifested in enormous health and psychological benefits like reducing depression, improving mood through interaction with green spaces, and providing basic resources for life, but now it is a troubled relationship due to environmental degradation that threatens human himself. Nature, as a manifestation of God's creation and order, represents a vigorous resource that directly impacts human life and development. Being part of this nature, human is responsible for maintaining a balance between his life and the environment also forms a dynamic and effective component in its processes. He must realize that he is not above nature, but rather one of its elements; he owes allegiance to it, preserves and never isolates himself from it. Many scientists have been preoccupied with human/ environment relationship and confirm the idea that human interacts with environment, influencing it and being influenced in a circle that reflects his subjection to it. Therefore, human cannot live apart from the environment, as long as it provides him with the essential elements of life such as energy, food, clothing, air, water, and so on. Modern manufacturing and technology have negative impacts on the environment. The release of fumes and gases has affected human whose environment has been damaged by industry and sometimes rendered unsuitable for human life. Despite of that, human life is nothing but a continuous interaction with the environment, for the relationship between them is rooted since the beginning of the universe.

Keywords: environment, interaction, technology, elements, impacts

المستخلص:

منذ بداية الخلق، كانت العلاقة بين الإنسان والطبيعة علاقة عضوية وحيوية، تتجلى في فوائد صحية ونفسية هائلة مثل الحد من الاكتئاب، وتحسين المزاج من خلال التفاعل مع المساحات الخضراء، وتوفير الموارد الأساسية للحياة، ولكنها الآن علاقة مضطربة بسبب التدهور البيئي الذي يهدد الإنسان نفسه. تمثل الطبيعة، بوصفها تجلياً لخلق الله ونظامه، مورداً حيوياً يؤثر بشكل مباشر على حياة الإنسان وتطوره. وباعتباره جزءاً من هذه الطبيعة، فإن الإنسان مسؤول عن الحفاظ على التوازن بين حياته وبيئته، كما أنه يشكل عنصراً ديناميكياً وفعالاً في عملياتها. عليه أن يدرك أنه ليس فوق الطبيعة، بل هو أحد عناصرها؛ فهو يدين لها بالولاء، ويحافظ عليها، ولا ينعزل عنها أبداً. انشغل العديد من العلماء بالعلاقة بين الإنسان والبيئة، ويؤكدون فكرة أن الإنسان يتفاعل مع البيئة، ويؤثر فيها ويتأثر بها في دائرة تعكس خضوعه لها. لذلك، لا يستطيع الإنسان أن يعيش بمعزل عن البيئة، طالما أنها توفر له العناصر الأساسية للحياة مثل الطاقة والغذاء والملابس والهواء والماء وما إلى ذلك. تخلف الصناعات والتكنولوجيا الحديثة أثراً سلبياً على البيئة. فقد أثر انبعاث الأبخرة والغازات على الإنسان الذي تضررت بيئته بفعل الصناعة، وأصبحت في بعض الأحيان غير صالحة للحياة البشرية. على الرغم من ذلك، فإن حياة الإنسان ليست سوى تفاعل مستمر مع البيئة لأن العلاقة بينهما متصلة منذ بداية الكون. الكلمات المفتاحية: البيئة، التفاعل، التكنولوجيا، العناصر، التأثيرات

1.Introduction

The human/nonhuman relationship is influenced and influences philosophical, literary, and ethical aspects across history. The transformation in the relationship's dynamic happened due to industrial, technological, and scientific advancement, often characterized by mastery, alienation, and ecological degradation. The emergence of modern literary theories, among them was eco-criticism, emphasized the way literary canon responds to environmental crisis by challenging the dominant idealistic, anthropocentric worldviews and reconstructing human/nonhuman relation from more than a singular point of view. Alice Oswald's poetry (1966–) falls under the umbrella of this critical context. She offers a unique ecological vision rooted in thoughtfulness to real animals, their autonomy, and environmental vulnerability.

Oswald's collection *Falling Awake* (2016), particularly the poem "Fox," mirrors the poet's attentiveness to these animals. The poem is built on the unexpected nonhuman entrance and movement in a human-assigned space. The poetic technique employed by Oswald preserves the animal autonomy achieved in the fox depiction and the careful maintenance of boundaries between human observation and interpretation concerning the fox's existence. The fox stays as she is wild, and ethically demanding, resisting any type of domestication and absorption in the human world.

She came as a visitor and kept her identity throughout the poem. Additionally, she doesn't fall into human symbolic narratives or frameworks. Oswald is known for her resistance to idealistic pastoral poetic tradition, yet less attention has been given to the way she presents animals, like the fox, as a mirror for border philosophical deformation of nature rooted in early modern scientific thought. The poet animals are not illustrated for poetic and symbolic purposes; rather, they are witnesses and victims of a larger accumulated ecological crisis and philosophies that altered nature eventually.

Building on Harry Eyres's argument concerning the modern deformation of the natural world, Oswald's creature suffering results from a landscape characterized by chemical intrusion, ecological destabilization, and a mechanized worldview of Earth as a "dead machine" (Eyres 47–48). This view can be traced back to the early modern philosophy associated with thinkers like Francis Bacon and René Descartes, who reconstructed nature into a passive world that can be mastered, extracted, and used. The fox in the poem carries the consequences of this history in her fractured movement, hostile habitat and fragmented existence.

Edenic notions of nature are rejected in the poem. It focuses on suffering, hardships, instability, and the consequences of anthropocentric mastery. Oswald's blending of the contradictory organic/mechanical language exposes the way nonhuman bodies and behaviors are reshaped. "Fox" is a site of an encounter of two worlds rather than just a mere illustration, highlighting literature's ability to address contemporary issues and perception, calling for ethical reawakening.

2.Dark Ecology's Theory

Timothy Morton (1968–), a British-American philosopher, introduced the theory of dark ecology, a branch of contemporary eco-criticism that approaches nature uncomfortably through challenging its idealized representations. This theory doesn't view nature as pure or harmonious; rather, it advocates for ecological intimacy, embracing decay and interconnectedness. Traditional approaches to nature are distant and nostalgic, placing human/nonhuman as separate entities. Oswald's poem doesn't carry such separation within it as the blurred boundaries between human/nonhuman in presenting a dynamic landscape shaped by larger forces such as distress, growth, and disorder.

A prominent and significant figure of eco-criticism, Cheryll Glotfelty, in *Introduction to The Eco-criticism Reader* (1996) defines it as "... the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xix). Glotfelty explains that just like other critical approaches like feminism and Marxism are based on gender and class, ecocriticism approaches literary text from earth centered point of view.

Modern environmentalism and awareness are usually associated with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), especially the work's introductory section "A Fable for Tomorrow". In this section, she draws a pastoral image where humans live peacefully with the environment. Carson described "a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings" (21). Nature, in her representation of "green fields," "countless birds," and "clear, cold streams," echoes long traditions of pastoral writings where everything is balanced and cherished. This section is crucial in the emotional and ethical modeling of modern environmental consciousness concerning damaged landscapes and deformed harmony. Eco-critics are targeting "environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear," and texts are evaluated "in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (Kerridge 5). This approach goes beyond natural

writing, placing ecocriticism as an active field that engages with various genres, historical periods, and symbolic forms.

Eco-criticism is considered a premature social, political, and philosophical movement, yet it has produced numerous eco-philosophies that have different points of view in interpreting ecological crisis and the suggested solutions (Garrard 18). In this context, newer theories like dark ecology reject earlier proposed models of harmony, constructing ecocriticism as a developing field rather than a fixed dogma. Dark ecological thinking includes acknowledging humans' relation to pollution, extinction, disease, and death (Morton, 2016: 14). Nature is not just out there, away from humans; rather, it exists within and around them. This perception aligns with Fletcher's illustration of the human body as vulnerable and exposed.

Dark ecology can be defined as an "ecological awareness, dark-depressing that rejects the separation of human/nonhuman worlds and enhances the interconnectedness between them". In his book *Ecology without Nature* (2007), Morton concentrates on the strong relationship between humans and nature. Later in his book, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016), he expanded his theory by rejecting the traditional views about nature as separate and an "outside" of human life, indicating that such idealized representations hide the ugly reality that humans must accept and embrace, since both are interconnected in the environmental process.

3.The Changing Views of Nature

Nature in English theology and literature went through several transformations due to the dominating religious, philosophical, and scientific doctrines of the time. The leap in viewing nature took place during the 17th century, where, before the emergence of early modern philosophies, it was seen as a divine system that is meaningful and structured perfectly; highly influenced by classical philosophy, particularly Aristotle and Plato. Medieval and Elizabethan works echo an inherited view about the universe's division into fixed hierarchies, known as the Great Chain of Being, where God is connected to his creation, such as angels, humans, animals, and plants (Tillyard 24).

The fixed thought about it began to weaken as a consequence of what Van Ruler terms the "crisis of causality" (Ruler 27). Nature was slowly seen as capable of functioning away from divine intrusion. The epistemological break that happened during this period was associated with the rise of early modern sciences and philosophies represented by Francis Bacon and René Descartes (Eyres 65), who were not interested in literary presentation, but their ideas influenced the way nature was depicted, viewed, imagined, and valued. They contributed to the symbolic nature erasure (Tillyard 24) as Bacon advocated for knowledge seeking in the "womb of nature," situating it for practical use, whereas Descartes stripped nature from the soul, reducing its value to a mere machine, resulting in nature perception as mechanized and governed by laws rather than a living entity (Eyres 65). The mechanization of nature is especially grounded in Cartesian philosophy. As discussed earlier, Descartes radically separated reason from emotion and mind from body, claiming that animals were effectively complex machines. His Cartesian rationalism encouraged early scientific physiologists to dismiss the cries of animals during vivisection as mere mechanical responses, comparable to the ringing of an alarm clock (148). In *Treatise on Man* (1667), Descartes explicitly argues that animal bodies function like mechanical structures, whose movements result from organic systems rather than consciousness; animals, for him, are soulless and operate through purely mechanical processes (Descartes 108–10). This position was already articulated in *Discourse on Method* (1637), where animals are described as automata that act "by the disposition of their organs" rather than through thought or intention (Descartes 33–35). Harmony and natural order were disturbed due to social and economic aspects like the rise of commercialism and early capitalism, which destabilized the medieval ideas of balance and religious fragmentation that happened after the reformation, decreasing the belief in a unified divine order, and creating uncertainty about Providence and God's direct control over the natural world. This resulted in nature portrayal as indifferent to human values, and change came to be understood as a purely natural process rather than a theological event. There is no doubt that this transition shaped literary presentations of nature; it was portrayed as darker and more troubling, neglecting the older symbolic associations with harmony, and mirrored the anxieties towards disorder. This transition was captured in poetry even before philosophy fully expressed it, making early 17th-century literary texts crucial for tracing ecological unease. Nature was no longer a fixed order but a problem and a space where raw materials were accessible to exploitation (Eyres 65). The inherited mechanization of animals from Cartesian philosophy was challenged increasingly from ethical and equality-concerned opinions. Noting that animal-related ideas were articulated in ancient philosophical traditions like Pythagorean vegetarianism and Aristotelian discussions of animal sensation. These ideas were

revived strongly in the modern period, enabled by utilitarian philosophy. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) called for moral and ethical treatment of animals away from rationalist capacity, stating that judgment should be based on the ability to suffer: “Can they suffer?” in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) (122). Bentham's argument was later radicalized by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (1975), which became a foundational text in modern animal ethics, where he introduced the concept of “speciesism” to address the unjustified superiority humans have over animals (Garrard 146). Mary Midgley's *Animals and Why They Matter* (1983) offers a less radical response to Cartesian animal mechanization, where she discussed a position commonly described as animal “welfarism.” Midgley states that animals deserve moral consideration, adding that moral equality is rooted within humans. Adding that prioritizing human interest is sometimes justified, critics and philosophers shouldn't go to the extreme of meaningful biological differences. For instance, she emphasized that removing an animal from its habitat just for anthropocentric entertainment and improvement is “...no privilege, but a misfortune, for a gorilla or a chimpanzee to be removed from its forest and its relatives and brought up alone among humans” (Midgley 99). A profound discussion in contemporary animal studies can be found in the work of Jacques Derrida, particularly in his book *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. He accepts Bentham's question and moves away from utilitarian thinking through questioning “animal” as a concept established and imposed by human beings (28). His discussion exposes the way language itself is anthropocentric and sustains hierarchical divisions among beings, just because animals are denied voice or understandable language. Additionally, he coined the term *l'animot*, derived from the French plural *animaux* (animal) and the singular *mot* (word), to critique the Western philosophical tradition of lumping all non-human living beings into a single, general category (Derrida 32). Donna Haraway's concept of “becoming-with” supports Derrida's discussion, where she rejected hierarchies between humans/animals. Haraway stated that humans and animals shape and influence each other in ongoing processes of co-evolution (Garrard 151). Frans de Waal notes that Darwinism doesn't support hierarchies in the way it relates beings together and doesn't place them above or below: “Every organism fits on the phylogenetic tree without being above or below anything else” (de Waal 675). According to a dark ecological reading, Oswald's fox is not stable; rather, it is restless, portraying a disordered ecosystem that is vulnerable. Dark ecological analysis turns away from external descriptions to expose conflicts and damage that traditional allegorical readings tend to overlook. In such consideration, the poem can be discussed as a recognition of ecological entanglement where human/nature can't be separated from larger forces like life, death, and ecological instability. The treatment of animals' voices as background aesthetics is rejected by the poet because she wants to create a space for them to express themselves. The fox barking in the poem isn't just a sound, but rather its emotionally charged refusal of silencing animals across history.

4. “Fox” as Dark Ecological Expression

Dark ecology embraces and confronts interdependence, ugliness, and vulnerability rather than overlooking them. Dark ecology emphasizes the openness to the surrounding changing reality since nature, a dynamic state controlled by larger forces, can't be fixed by any means and can't offer humans comfort. The instability and disordered dimension of life in general and nature in particular, forces humans to leave Edenic views of the natural world, at the same time accepting ecological intimacy with its disturbance. For Morton, nature is a human-constructed concept that becomes unrealistic to the point that it's compared to a ghost that floats over things. Being imaginative yet imposed on the world (Morton, 2007: 14), this ghostly presence of nature prevents any attempt at sincere ecological thinking since it shows nature as distant, separated, and indifferent. It's something to admire, fear, protect, violate, and mourn, yet not something to feel connected to and entangled with. It can't be located or limited to a certain area and single space, “we cannot point to it” (Morton, 2007: 18). Even the term ‘Nature’ allows humans to divide the world since they imagine themselves as outside and superior to ecological systems. Dark ecology, therefore, begins by abolishing the illusion of a pristine, external nature and replacing it with an understanding of ecology as something intimate, invasive, and unavoidable. It is evident that ecology is based on coexistence; no one is separated or autonomous (Morton, 2010: 4) as humans are caught in a chain of relations with other humans/nonhumans. Alice Oswald “Fox”, under a dark ecological lens, challenges traditional views about nature as harmonious and therapeutic by rejecting the human-imagined and constructed boundaries that separate the two species. Nature, as discussed earlier, is not harmonious, nor stable; it doesn't just exist out there away from the human world. Dark ecology explains and understands nature as a mesh of interrelated beings and ecological processes that can't be separated (Morton 29). Oswald's interest and engagement with environmental concerns and the natural world echo this framework perfectly. The animal

representation in her poem vividly shows the strangeness, uncertainty, and instability of nature and human/nonhuman interaction. "Fox" forces the reader to look into the damaged, restless nature constructed by human interference, to embrace its deformity. Human relationship with the environment is reimagined through abolishing human fantasies of control, superiority, and mastery. Nature is not depicted as a fairylike landscape, and it isn't viewed as a refuge. The fox is demanding and alive, refusing to remain an outcast and outsider. The speaker's sense of comfort and balance was shattered by the animal's refusal, indicating that the environment can't be controlled from a distance; it's already entangled with human existence, capable of interrupting, unsettling, and reshaping perception (Morton 14). The poem stages an encounter between two figures from different worlds, a meeting that resists pastoral calmness and intimacy, instead picturing a realistic moment of ecological disturbance where the unwelcomed nonhuman guest enters not only the human physical world but also the speaker's consciousness. Nature is not distant scenery hung as a picture on the wall as a symbolic background; it is active and scary in its sounds, movements, and bodily vulnerability. The poem open lines "I heard a cough" (Oswald 10), immediately and unexpectedly drawing the reader's attention to the scene. Sound here serves two purposes: the first is creating curiosity about the topic of the poem and the identity of the owner of the coughing, second auditory image here is used to defy human visual mastery and the expected image of the fox to create an ecological uncertainty. The word "cough" is usually associated with humans as indicators of weakness, illness, and bodily failure. When this sound is given to a fox, human/nonhuman boundaries are far forgotten and replaced with the identification of shared vulnerability. The fox entrance isn't announced through roses and beauty but through sound that is uncomfortable to the speaker, situating her as the strange stranger, known and recognized but not fully. The disturbance is intensified in "as if a thief were there" (Oswald 10). This line exposes the speaker's reaction and inner emotional experience about the fox. The speaker imagines the fox as scary and as dangerous as a thief, unconsciously asserting an anthropocentric ideology of ownership over the property and domestic space rather than thinking about it as shared space. This judgement is apparently unstable due to the use of the conditional "as if" emphasizing the speaker's hesitation. Human's illusion of separation in "outside my sleep" (Oswald 10) here sleep is employed as a barrier between the dream world human created and reality; also, metaphorically, it functions as a marker of humans' withdrawal from ecological issues caused by them. The irony lies in the realization that the speaker is resting while the fox, navigating unknown space, is alerted in the darkness; the speaker's rest is built on the fox's stress and instability. "Outside" suggests that humans aren't concerned with nonhuman sufferings it exists beyond their worries. The fox exists alone, and presence refuses this boundary, asserting that it is imagined and unnatural. The fox's life is under pressure, and the animal is struggling to survive through her breath as a marker, "a sharp intake of air" (Oswald 10). The adjective "sharp" shows that the breath is an outcome of a struggle rather than being symbolic as it suggests hunger, cold, and fear. There is no expression in the fox's breath for its involuntary; it indicates the animal's endurance within the unknown environments she is in. The fox asserts her identity, autonomy, and existence by simply breathing, forcing the speaker to recognize her without the need to explain anything. The use of the verb "stepping" in "stepping across / the grass in her black gloves" (Oswald 10) points out that the fox's movement is careful, uncertain, and alert because the world here is dangerous and ambiguous, filled with human rules. The visual imagery of "black gloves" creates a mixture of elegance, beauty, and mystery. Gloves are an item familiar with human beings but unfamiliar to animals, so this part of her body is the strange stranger its part of her identity, but compared to the strange and unknown part of human civilization. Gloves imply both protection and concealment, suggesting that the fox must move carefully through a landscape shaped by human threat. Asserting dominance in the sound of the fox "barked at my house" (Oswald 10) is through the act of barking that breaks the poem's calm atmosphere. The bark isn't similar to the calming birdsong and pastoral animal voice; rather, it's a sound of confrontation and disturbance. Barking isn't decorative to the poem scene; it serves as a metaphorical knife to cut it in half without offering meaning. Strange strangers communicate through signals that resist translation (Morton 44). The fox's bark refuses silence within the human landscape, asserting nonhuman presence through noise rather than language. Gendering and naming as signifiers of fixed identity are rejected in the description of the fox "a woman with a man's voice / but no name" (Oswald 10). Based on Morton's argument, the strange stranger, which is represented in the fox, can't be categorized and classified based on any criteria; the fox's identity is not entirely known, leaving space for uncertainty. The phrase "No name" emphasizes resistance against linguistic mastery created by humans to define beings around them as they view as suitable, echoing the earlier discussion of Derrida, where names are used as an act of control without attention to beings' differences. The final line in the poem "my life / is laid beneath my children

/ like gold leaf" (Oswald 10) situates the fox as similar to humans, for they share instincts like maternal sacrifices. The phrase "Gold leaf" bears dual meaning of fragility and value; it represents life, the way time passes, and is transformed through ecological pressures, yet it's precious. The speaker, imagining the fox as a mother, indicates that she carries later generations within her body, embodying ecological temporality where past, present, and future coexist. This moment acknowledges shared maternal instinct across species without collapsing difference. From ethical prescriptive the poem calls for an ecological thought and attentiveness towards other beings. It's based on recognizing animals' issues and taking into account enhancing their lives because human/nonhuman share the space they live in equally and shape each other's lives directly/indirectly and positively/negatively. Nonhuman beings' intrinsic value is affirmed through Oswald hinting at the fox's maternal vulnerability; her value is measured way beyond utility or symbolic function for humans. Lastly, the meeting's seriousness is apparent in the lack of sentimentality and moral commentary, where the fox isn't treated as an object of pity or an idealized perfect figure.

Conclusion

Humans/nature relationship is a vigorous issue that forms an essential part of humans' daily life. This research analyzed Oswald's poem "Fox" as a rejection of human mastery and a poetic response to the deformed relationship between them. In this poem, Oswald rejects the anthropocentric point of view that reduces nature in general and animals in particular into mere symbols, therapeutic resources, and background elements. Rather, the poem is built on asserting nonhuman autonomy. Moreover, Oswald avoids traditional literary techniques that domesticate and forcefully lessen nature value into idealized pastoral scenery and natural abstraction. Being a starved animal and maternal obligated, the fox is neither used as a metaphor for human emotions or trickiness, nor as a figure of moral instruction as used in the medieval era. Additionally, the separating binaries of human/nonhuman realms are long forgotten through the encounter of the two figures. Oswald's poem can be seen as a space where these beings are equal, for they exist in the same shared space, collapsing the interior safe and comfortable place where the speaker is located and his authority as a 'master' and 'superior' is destabilized and weakened rather than being affirmed.

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