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Natural Objects in Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel*: An Environmental Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a new reading of Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel* by examining natural objects (trees, seas, rocks, predators, birds, and landscapes respectively) and applying ecocriticism and Freudian as well as Jungian insights. The study of natural objects yields interesting results: For instance, in *Azazeel*, trees symbolize peace, security, natural home [oikos], surrogate good mother, and immortality. The sea, in contrast, pretends to be a good mother generating a sense of security and tranquility but is a terrible mother, deceptive, cunning, and fatal. The article explains the murders of Hypatia and Octavia, the actions of Cyril and his followers, Hypa's reflections and actions from an environmental/ecocritical perspective. The final analysis reveals the way culture tries to separate the human from the non-human although they are supposed to be part of one harmonious ecological system and the need to stop seeing nature as dead/passive if we want to save planet earth from an environmental apocalyptic catastrophe.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, natural objects, natural selection, biological determinism, Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel*.

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1.0 Introduction

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Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel*, a winner of the International Prize for Arabic fiction in 2009, reveals the journey of self-discovery and the secret confessions of Hypa, an Egyptian monk, written in the year 431 on scrolls, placed in a box, and buried under a "loose marble slab at the monastery gate" (8). Hypa is traumatized by the murders of his father (29), Octavia and Hypatia (127-8) by Christian fanatic monks. Hypa's confessions also reveal his sexual affairs with Octavia and Martha and their effect upon his uncertain and instable religious identity. As a result of these traumatic experiences, Hypa goes on a soul-searching journey through which he decides to escape all limitations of identity.

To the best of my knowledge, there are so far only three published critical articles about this masterpiece: a) Saba Mahmoud's "Azazeel and the Politics of Historical Fiction in Egypt" published in *Comparative Literature Journal* Vol. 65/3 in the Summer of 2013 which highlights the role of religious controversies in causing religious violence (Mahmoud, 2013). b) An article of mine entitled "The Problematics of Identity & Identity Erasure in Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel*" published in the *Journal of Arts and Humanities* (JAH) Vol. 4 No.12 (2015) which observes identity as dynamic, undergoing constant modification, rethinking, and reshaping, as well as Hypa's desire for erasing his identity (religious, sexual, and human) depicted as limiting, suffocating and always clashing with individual happiness – a matter that makes Hypa suffer from a guilt complex due to his overactive Christian monk's super-ego which causes a clash between his we-identity (as a monk) and his sinful self (AbuBaker, 2015). c) A recent publication by Mohammad Al Mostafa entitled "The Representation of Women in Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel*: A Feminist Perspective" that examines "the limitations faced by women because of the male gaze, women's othering stereotypes, and the societal codes that define women's roles in the Arab world" in addition to "unmasking the patriarchal ideology" and "disturbing the patriarchal dominant certainties" of Egyptian society (AlMostafa, 2016, 38).

The remaining literature concerning this novel is in the form of book reviews, which can be found in my aforementioned article, and which are covered briefly here to avoid repetition. For instance, Maya Jaggi (Jaggi, 2012), Ben East (East, 2012), and Tom Little (Little) all discuss Hypa's painful journey of self-discovery in which he suffers from doubt, temptation, and torment. George Care draws attention to *Azazeel*, a supernatural embodiment of Satan who motivates Hypa to write his confessions (Care). In addition, Andreas Pflitsch Highlights Hypa's internal conflicts as he fluctuates between faith and doubt in his "arduous search for truth" (Pflitsch, 2012). Peter Clark, on the other hand, notes "the absurdity of religious beliefs" that cause "violence" (Clark, 2013) and C. Jeynes observes the significant questions raised by the novel regarding "fanaticism, and the struggle between truth and one's own false beliefs" (Jeynes, 2012, 1). In light of the aforementioned review of literature, this article offers the first in-depth ecocritical analysis of the novel since it discusses natural objects and provides a different reading of *Azazeel* from aforementioned articles and book reviews.

As for the methodology used in analyzing this novel, the researcher examines the representation of natural objects using the lens of ecocriticism which Glotfelty defines as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" that "takes an earth-centred approach to literature" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, xviii) i.e. it examines environmental issues reflected in the literary text by focusing on the physical environment or natural objects as in this article. Richard Kerridge claims that "ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis." He asserts, "[t]he ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear" (Kerridge, 1998, 5 in Garrard 2007, 4). The "environmental crisis" reflects the serious environmental conditions that planet earth suffers from because of human industry that causes pollution. Further, the murders of Hypatia and Octavia, the actions of Cyril and his followers, Hypa's reflections and actions are explained from an environmental/ecocritical perspective. In addition to ecocriticism, Freudian and Jungian (Archetypal) insights are used for interpretations of symbols. The final analysis reveals the way culture tries to separate the human from the non-human although they are supposed to be part of one harmonious ecological system and the need to stop seeing nature as dead/passive if we want to save planet earth from an environmental apocalyptic catastrophe – a significant message that can only be revealed through the careful study of natural

objects (trees, seas, rocks, predators, birds, and landscapes) which are respectively discussed in the following sections.

2.0 Trees

Hypa is fascinated with trees; he imagines “trees filling the universe”, himself “walking through forests” (289), and has a vision of “the hills ... in [his] native country, its arid stones adorned in greenery, grasses and trees, beautiful where once they were dreary” (191). Trees generate a sense of peace, unity, and home which Hypa lacks, and hence, his vision is a form of wishful thinking that transforms the “dreary” into the “beautiful. Hypa’s view of nature as home invokes the definition of ‘ecology’ which is “derived from the Greek *oikos* and *logos*” (Garrard 2007, 42). Robert Harrison asserts that “*logos* [language] is that which opens the human abode [*oikos*] on the earth” (Harrison, 1992, 200; Garrard 2007, 47). In other words, it is through language that humans realize, grasp the concept of ‘nature’, interact with and see it as home.

Hypa finds peace and security under trees where he “often retreated” (142). For instance, he takes refuge under a tree because of his “fear of the wilderness” that he “had chosen”; he remarks, “I spent the night under a friendly tree within sight of the monastery” (136) thus suggesting his preference to stay alone at the edge of the Sinai desert, his “chosen” wilderness despite being close to the monastery; clearly, he rejects religious institutions due to the atrocious murders of Hypatia and Octavia choosing peaceful nature, “friendly tree”, over violent culture. Similarly, he “huddled up under a large tree” whose “branches coiled like the braided hair of girls”; to him, then, a tree is a female concept, a surrogate “warm” loving mother, and an incarnation of the earth mother archetype, or Gaia, that makes him regard sleeping under a tree “safer” and “warmer” than “sleeping in the rocky cave” (106). Nature is a peaceful alternative to the upheavals of the city and its violent religious institutions as implied by Hypa’s hunger “to the grassy smell which diffused from the ground” that he recollects whenever “in places where there was no grass” (106). In effect, he seems to be carrying trees with him wherever he goes to feel at peace/home.

Hypa displays a romantic desire to identify with a tree when he “leant ... against a leafy tree” and “felt as weary as a traveler back from a long journey”. He explains,

I closed my eyes and began to fantasize that the tree and I had become one. I felt my soul slip out of my ribcage and infiltrate the trunk of the tree, then plunge deep into the roots of it and push on up into the high branches. My being swayed with its leaves, and when some of them fell from the branches a part of me fell with them. (31)

Obviously, Hypa and the tree are totally identified. Further, he claims that Pythagoras “remembered ... one life in which his spirit was a tree” (31). The tree is an archetypal symbol that “denotes life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality” (Cirlot, 1962, 328; Guerin & Labor, 1979, 161). Hypa’s identification with the tree reflects his love of nature and his desire for immortality also reflected in his wish to be a tree “forever” (31). He will be like Pythagoras who supposedly experienced many lives and achieved, consequently, immortality.

As a tree, Hypa would provide travelers with “abundant shade” (31) and “be a refuge for the weary” (32) but would not provide them with fruit for fear of being stoned (32). Apparently, he does not wish to be exposed anymore to the violence of humanity which resulted in the murders of his father, Octavia and Hypatia. He “prayed with ... fervour” asking God to rescue him from his “ephemeral body” and to “lodge” his “soul in this beloved tree” to become “closer to perfection” because “[t]rees are purer than mankind, and love God more” (32). Clearly, these references reflect his desire to erase his human identity and escape moral responsibility for his actions on the one hand, and his desire to become one with nature which is pure, incapable of sin which equals pollution as explained later, and, hence, closer to God and free from moral scruples on the other.

Hypa's obsession with trees makes him identify trees with people: "people are like trees and trees are like people" (135) and compare Hypatia's burned body to that of "a tree that is burned and changes into charcoal. Coal kindles fire, while a body buried in the ground is ravaged by worms" (156). Apparently, Hypatia's existence as "coal" will continue to "kindle fire" even after her death. i.e. as a mathematician, her influence and ideas (suggested by "fire" i.e. light/knowledge) will continue to enlighten the world long after her death. The statement seems to invoke the mass/energy preservation law i.e. mass/energy does not go extinct it just changes from one form to another.

Hypa's view of Hypatia is a deviation from the stereotypical image of the female as "emotional", and hence, irrational; eco-feminists observe, "women have been associated with nature, the material, the emotional, and the particular, while men have been associated with culture, the nonmaterial, the rational and the abstract" (Davion 1994, 9; Garrard 2007, 23) thus revealing a "logic of domination" (Warren 1994, 129; Garrard 2007, 23) in which men try to dominate both nature and woman. Hence, a free thinker or a liberalist like Hypatia has to be terminated in a patriarchal society because she poses a threat to its stability. Hypa wonders if it was "fitter that Hypatia was burned after her death, so that worms never feasted on her camphorous body" (156). The divine-like nature of Hypatia makes it proper that the worms of the earth should never feast on her body.

3.0 Seas

The sea is "the mother of all life; spiritual mystery and infinity; death and rebirth; timelessness and eternity; the unconscious" (Guerin & Labor, 1979, 158). Hypa follows "a sandy path which wound between the rocks" (55) leading to the sea. The path's shape is similar to a snake, an archetypal symbol of seduction, temptation and Great Fall which foreshadows the sensual/sexual experience Hypa has while swimming in the sea and his moral fall into sin with Octavia. He explains, "I was enchanted by the sensation of the sea" which is "the great water from which existence begins" (56, my italics) thus highlighting the temptation of the sea and invoking its aforementioned interpretation as "the mother of all life".

Before starting to swim, Hypa feels "stiff as an ancient statue" (56) or a "stiff palm" (64), "as rigid and brittle as a piece of old wood" (108), "like the stones of the Pyramids" (110), "the oval rocks" (111) and "a dry leaf" (111) thus indicating his death-in-life situation; he is similar to Faulkner's Emily in "A Rose for Emily" depicted as a "fallen monument" (26), an "idol" (28) with a "face like a strained flag" (Kennedy & Gioia, 2009, 29). The sea, however, liberates him momentarily from his death-in-life situation by reminding him of his "childhood": He felt "like a baby emerging from an enormous womb" and is filled with "[s]trange sensations" (57) – thus representing the sea as a female womb causing "death and rebirth". With childhood happiness, he is free from all worries, conflicts and moral scruples. Consequently, he "laughed out loud in a way [he] had not heard ... for many years, and would not hear for many years to come" (56). The sea temporarily washes his worries and cares away and brings him to a state of childhood innocence.

Furthermore, Hypa initially considers the sea a "playful woman who gives pleasure to men who swim in her, *without making them answerable for any sin*" (57, my italics) .i.e. a guilt-free experience. He "had an urge to touch and be touched and ... felt the tingle of desire" and considers the sea "a mercy from God to the deprived" (57). The sea, an archetypal symbol of the unconscious and the realm of libido or sexual energy, provides fulfillment to those who are sexually "deprived" like Hypa. He, further, observes the way "[t]he light bounced off [his] naked body as the rays crisscrossed over [his] brown skin and bathed it in a strange radiance" – an experience that makes him feel that his body is "beautiful" and his "brownness pleasing" (57-8). Hypa feels embarrassed of his brown body especially when he contrasts himself with the priests and deacons from the north who have "faultless pale complexions and ... beards [that] were bright white or blond" and is "embarrassed" about being "so brown and sallow" (17). However, in the sea, Hypa feels beautiful because he acquires the happiness of childhood which has no recognition of any kind of inferiority.

To Hypa, “the sea reveals the wonders of divine creation”(58) and is safe since its waters are clear and “has no dangers to threaten swimmers”, unlike the dangerous Nile whose “bottom is muddy” and “could hide crocodiles” (57). Such a naïve childish perception of the sea is soon shattered when, alarmingly, he discovers the currents of the sea are pulling him far away from the beach into “the open sea” thus making him realize that “the sea is treacherous” (58) and vow to “never go close to the sea again” (59). This terrifying experience causes him to compare his “Alexandrian memories” to “the waves of the sea” that “swept” him “away” (41) and claim that nothing “could help [him] escape the eddies and currents of Alexandria” (210); the cruelty of the Lovers of the Passion group who brutally murdered Octavia and Hypatia is simply unforgettable. Hypa refers to “the rivers of violence which had swept the land of God” and is alarmed “at the terrible killing which was happening in the name of Christ” (149, my italics).

In effect, the sea is treacherous like Hypa’s mother who betrayed his father by marrying one of his murderers (50) – an action that makes him regard all women as “fickle by nature” (87) and “by nature false” (94). This view is an embodiment of a “biological determinism” which promotes the notion that women cannot help being treacherous due to their biology thus invoking Hamlet’s famous phrase “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (*Shakespeare’s Hamlet: Act I, Scene II, L.146*). This view prevents him from living happily with Octavia. He describes the way Octavia “encircled” him “as the Great Sea surrounds the whole world” (89)– an image that suggests entrapment also suggested by his claim that he was “drowning completely in the torrential river that she was” (89). Octavia even sheds a “flood of tears” (94). It is quite proper, therefore, that Octavia’s meeting with Hypa comes as a fulfillment of a pagan priestess’ prophecy: “Poseidon will send you from the sea a man for you to love and who will love you” (72) thus emphasizing Octavia’s association with the sea.

Yaşar Kemal, in the 1997 Peace Prize Acceptance Speech claims:

People have always created their own worlds of myths and dreams, perpetuating their lives in those imaginary worlds ... In their transition from one darkness to another, having acquired the consciousness of death, they have realized their lives and the joy of living in the world of myths and dreams they have created. (*Kemal, 1997*)

Hence, the romantic world of myths and dreams seems superior to the world of harsh cruel reality. Octavia believes in myths and prophecies since she is a pagan who “acquired the consciousness of death” following the death of her husband (73). Similarly, the story of the Bird Mountain (49) fascinates Hypa who has “acquired” the same “consciousness” by witnessing the brutal murder of his father as a young boy on the hands of Christian fanatics with “rusty knives” (28) and the murders of Hypatia and Octavia as an adult.

The sea is also negatively represented in Hypa’s comparison of the murder of Hypatia to being in the sea. He reflects, her “screams ... mixed with the sounds of the sea” and compares the hands of the mob to a “sea of hands [that] attacked like weapons” (126). He also compares the hostile Alexandrian Church of St. Mark to a sea: “Two days passed as I swam in the seas of the church, which have no shores”(114).In effect, the sea becomes a deceiving element pretending to be a good mother generating a sense of security and tranquility but is actually a terrible mother deceptive, cunning, and fatal; being with Octavia, depicted as a sea, makes Hypa live for a short while a peaceful paradise-like experience that ends up with him falling from her paradise like Adam did. Being in the “sea of churches” brings Hypa a false sense of brotherhood with Alexandrian priests only to annul this feeling following their brutal murder of Hypatia: “they are not my brothers, and I am not one of them” (131).His inability to help her suggests that he is, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, incapable of action because of his Oedipal complex.

The sea’s deceptive image is also evident in Hypa’s assertion that the sea he regarded “once” as the source from which “life began” turned out to be “the end of everything” since he “learnt that a time will come when the salty sea will cover the whole world and the colour green will die and life will

disappear” (131). This image is quite different from the naïve aforementioned image of the sea as a loving earth mother offering an apocalyptic environmental image of the end of the world, life and vegetation on earth due to the sins of humanity, as explained later. Hence, the image of the sea is highly negative and is in sharp contrast to the highly positive image of the tree.

4.0 Rocks

According to Avia Venefica, “rocks deal with solidity, stability and being grounded”. She claims, “In Christianity... both the church, Christ and God are associated with rocks” – a matter that “implies the never-changing, always-present strength of God, and underscores the concept of security, protection.” Further, rocks are “absorbers” that “take in the heat of the sun”, “the coolness of the earth” and “are like little batteries, storing up memory and energy over long periods of time” (Venefica). Hypa compares the “rough and ragged” Alexandrian rocks “with sharp edges” to the “smooth oval rocks which the Nile brings rolling down from heaven” in his “native country” (55). Hypa is “grounded” and rooted in his native village Naga Hammadi, and his feeling of exile in Alexandria will never change and will, consequently, cause him feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Further, Hypa suffers from and remains trapped in/tormented by the web of his Alexandrian memories – a matter that reflects the ability of the rocks to store “memory and energy for long periods of time”, energy generated from the painful memories of the murders of Octavia and Hypatia that simulates Hypa to write down his confessions and break free from religious institutions afterwards.

Alexandrian rocks are threatening and hostile as Alexandrians; Hypa notes, “The church of Alexandria by all reports is strong and decisive. Most of its men are cruel” (94) especially Bishop Cyril who appears as a blood thirsty fanatic driven by his lust for power and domination. Hypatia’s death proves Theodore Watts’ claim: “in the struggle for life, the surviving organism is not necessarily that which is absolutely best in an ideal sense, though it must be that which is most in harmony with the surrounding conditions” (Watts-Dunton, 1985, I, 40 in Bradshaw, 2003, 16). Followers of the church of Alexandria are cruel like their surroundings and, hence, are most in harmony, whereas Hypatia is gentle and ideal, almost heavenly, and hence, is not in harmony with her surroundings. Even Octavia, an Alexandrian, has a double nature, she is “gentle and cruel” (106). Her gentleness causes her death as it makes her weak and not in harmony with her surroundings.

5.0 Predators

The murder of Hypatia happens in a Darwinian context that is to be compared with the scene of the wolves feeding on Hypa’s donkey on his way to the Dead Sea. Hypa reflects, “desert wolves attacked me just before dawn my donkey ... threw me from his back and bolted off in terror, with the wolves in pursuit. The heart of the wilderness shuddered at the death rattle of the donkey and the snarling of the wolves as they pulled it to pieces”. This incident reflects the idea of a divine ecological system since “God had sent the donkey here to be a hot delicious meal for animals which He had created as predators” (139). God provides sustenance for all creatures no matter where they are, just like God sent a young man or “one of the angels of heaven” (43) who collected dates from a palm tree using a monkey and gave Hypa some thus becoming the only food that sustains him on his voyage to Alexandria.

The wolves’ feeding scene is strikingly similar to the description of the murder of Hypatia that is abundant with animal imagery; Hypa compares an old monk’s voice to “the hissing of a viper”, and “his tone” to a “sharp ... scorpion’s sting” (120). He compares the driver of Hypatia’s carriage to “a rat” (125) and Peter’s face (one of the priests of St. Mark Church) to that “of an enormous hyena” (126). Further, he claims that other priests “were gathering around their prey” i.e. Hypatia “like wolves around a baby gazelle” (126), and that “the soldiers of the Lord were raving with that fever that possesses wolves when they bring down a quarry” (127). Hypatia’s screams “reverberated in the skies The wolves grabbed the rope ... and pulled Hypatia off” (129). The description invokes Barry

Lopez's *Of Wolves and Men* in which "Lopez offers readings of human societies and their condition through the test of their attitude to wolves" (Clark, 2014, 36) and in which he discusses the unfair demonizing representation of wolves in literature. In *Azazeel*, wolves are not demonized, but the human wolves are.

In both scenes, the wolves are bringing down a prey. However, the human wolves are killing Hypatia, a revolting and utterly unnatural action, whereas the real wolves are killing a donkey out of sheer necessity, a question of survival which Hypa totally understands and finds justifiable as an act of God to bring food to these animals in the middle of the desert. Despite "associating all our 'lowlier' characteristics and bodily functions with animality" and associating "spiritual attributes" to humans thus promoting our "sovereignty over the beast" (Soper, 1998, 86), one feels that, in *Azazeel*, the beasts/wolves are superior to human wolves whose murder of Hypatia reveals "the animal that lurks beneath the surface" (Fudge, 2000, 15; Garrard, 2007, 142).

The Darwinian context of Hypatia's death in which the strong dominate/eat the weak and in which survival is only for the strongest/fittest reflects the way Bishop Cyril terminates his opponents using sheer force and intimidation. Ynestra King argues: "A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain diversity" and resist "all forms of domination and violence" (King, 1989, 20; Garrard, 2007, 27). Hypatia's murder ruins the "balanced ecosystem" since it terminates diversity, in this case, religious or political ideology. Further, Wilson claims, "Biodiversity literally 'holds the world steady' in that the sheer variety of species allows equilibrium to be restored in the event of a national disaster, although this equilibrium is increasingly being threatened by human interventions" (Wilson, 1994, 303, 13; Moran, 2007, 174). The followers of the Church of St. Mark in Alexandria are disrupting the biodiversity in the Alexandrian society by terminating a woman like Hypatia, a free thinker, and hence, different from the average uneducated ignorant woman in her society thus exemplifying biodiversity that is killed by human intervention.

Hypatia's death is a form of natural selection since she is physically weak as a woman in comparison to the powerful men who attack her and is targeted like an animal that wandered away from the herd thus becoming an easy prey for predators. She also dies because she is not in harmony with her "surrounding conditions" as explained before. According to Garrard, "A 'weed' is not a kind of plant, only the wrong kind in the wrong place defining weeds in the first place requires a cultural, not horticultural, analysis" (Garrard, 2007, 5-6). Hypatia is a beautiful plant that grew in the wrong time in the wrong place and was consequently regarded as a "weed" through "cultural analysis".

When Hypatia mentioned the Pythagorean claim that "[t]he world is number and harmony", Hypa "realized that all beings emanate from the rhythms of a single system" (110). Hypatia's ideal world, ideal nature, even ideal Pythagorean theories reflect a balanced harmonious ecosystem making Hypa feel that harmony and that sense of belonging to *oikos* (natural home). However, the ideal is different from the real. As T. S. Eliot puts it: "Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act/Falls the Shadow" (Kermode & Hollander, 1973, 2001, "The Hollow Men", ll. 72-76). The 'shadow' being, in this case, the aggressive followers of the Alexandrian Church of St. Mark who corrupt the natural home and disrupt its biodiversity.

Hypatia's death is also probably caused by sexual selection, not to be confused with "natural selection (the survival of favored individuals in the struggle for life)". Sexual selection is "centered on successful breeding" and "explained physical and mental differences between the sexes as advantageous in finding mates; Darwin also believed it to be the key cause of racial differentiation in humans" (Bradshaw, 2003, 17). Indeed, Hypatia is different from other women in her society not only because of her remarkable beauty: "perhaps the most beautiful woman in creation" (108), but also because of her superior mental ability as a mathematician. Hence, she attracts many men – a fact that makes Bishop Cyril and his followers accuse her of using "magic" (121) to control men. Her ability to attract many men by her mental and physical charms multiply her chances of finding a mate and having through heredity

off-springs that share her genes and her intelligence who might, consequently, cause a revolution/evolution in her society by producing other liberalist females.

Bradshaw maintains that “sexual selection, highlighting the importance of sexual choice in the process of evolution, invested agency, and agency for change, in individuals” (Bradshaw, 2003, 17). Hypatia’s potential marriage and future children will be the “agency for change” in her society, an evolution which Bishop Cyril is afraid of and which obliges him to terminate her. Indeed, as Wilson asserts, “Cultural evolution is ... biologically determined” (Wilson, 1978, 139; Moran, 2007, 178) i.e. “the genes hold culture on a leash” (Wilson, 1978, 167; Moran, 2007, 178). Bishop Cyril is, in effect, trying to prevent a futuristic cultural evolution through heredity. The murder of Octavia, in contrast, falls under “chance”, since she was not the marked target, and her identity was unknown to the mob; “chance” plays a key role in natural selection according to Darwin’s theory of evolution. In addition, Octavia is naturally selected to be killed since, like Hypatia, she is a weak link being a woman, a free thinker like her since she is educated by the Sicilian master (82), isolated from the herd and thus an easy prey.

6.0 Birds

There are several references to birds in *Azazeel*. For instance, following his narrow escape from drowning in the sea, Hypa notices “seagulls ... flying” (57), which connotes sexual pleasure according to Freudian psychology, and foreshadows Hypa’s sexual encounter with Octavia. In addition, there is a reference to the Bird Mountain to which “birds come Then they suddenly leave after one of the birds sacrifices itself by putting its head in a hole at the foot of the mountain, and something unknown inside the hole wraps itself around the bird’s head and does not let go until the bird’s body has dried up and its feathers have fallen out.” When the sacrificial bird loses its feathers, it is “a sign for the rest of the birds to dive into the Nile and fly away at night, only to come back next year at the same time and repeat the cycle” (49). Apparently just like the Nile requests a maiden according to Egyptian mythology, it requests a sacrifice from the birds.

The sacrificial bird myth invokes Christ who sacrifices himself to give mankind a chance of being saved from Hellfire by sealing with his own blood the Covenant of Grace. Hypa reflects, “the Lord ... sent His only son Jesus Christ in perfect human form to redeem mankind, save the world from the sin of Adam” (18). He adds, “Christ’s incarnation, suffering, dying and resurrection from the dead are a victory over Satan” (19). Likewise, Hypatia is a sacrificial heroine who is brutally skinned alive with shells (128) then burnt to death (129). Hypa regards her as “the sister of Jesus” and “the Savante of the Age, the pure and holy, the lady who suffered the torments of martyrdom and in her agony transcended all agonies” (127). Hypatia’s sacrifice/martyrdom for the sake of enlightening her society with her liberal ideas equates her with Jesus Christ and becomes the gateway through which Hypa becomes free from the intimidation of St. Mark Church in Alexandria.

The reference to the doves that appear in the monastery, the sexual freedom that they enjoy, and their freedom in travelling (220) reveals Hypa’s envy of birds who have the freedom to cross boundaries and to be free from social/cultural limitations. “[A] bioregion is a self-sustaining area which cannot be contained within the normal political boundaries established by local or national governments, and within which a whole diversity of species coexist and depend upon each other for survival” (Wilson, 1978, 303, 139; Moran, 2007, 174). The birds are free to enjoy the “bioregion” whereas Hypa remains trapped in culturally shaped boundaries and an identity which causes him to feel like a racial other, as explained later.

To Hypa, doves are “simple” and “pure in spirit” (220). They are not complicated and hard to figure out like humans and are free from sin. In addition, they are “peaceful” as they have “no claws” (221) unlike the violent followers St. Mark Church whose symbol is the lion: Hypa refers to “the fangs and claws of the lion of St. Mark!” (204). He claims that humans should learn to be peaceful like doves and “renounce the weapons and military equipment”(221). Even in their intimate relationships, humans

should learn from doves since they “live a life of perfect love: the males do not distinguish between a beautiful female and an ugly female, as people do” (221). In the community of the doves, if a dove becomes capable of flying, it “no longer recognizes any father or mother but joins the other doves in a perfect community where selfishness and individualism are unknown” (221). Having witnessed the disastrous consequences of individualism in what happened to Hypatia, Octavia, and what happened to Nestorius who “was defeated” by the selfishness of Bishop Cyril (301) who was “intent on imposing his will on the heavens and the earth” (117), Hypa wishes to live in a society in which identity/individualism and selfishness are totally erased. The statement also reflects an Oedipal complex, a fixation that Hypa has over his mother who betrayed his father and married one of the murderers, thus ruining his chances of being with another woman and maintaining a healthy relationship with her since he regards all women treacherous.

Hypa wishes people live like doves “reproducing in peaceful groups as was the case with humans in the beginning”. Consequently, “All would live as one”. If people do that, “Men and women would choose partners to suit them, to live together lovingly for a time, then part if they wished and join up with someone else if they wanted” (221). If people lead such a life as that of the doves, there won’t be any laws determining who should love whom. Hypa’s wish invokes Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* in which Velutha and Ammu, Estha and Rahel protest against “the Love Laws [that] lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” (177) and reveals that if his mother had not betrayed him by re-marrying, Hypa might have married his mother, due to his Oedipal complex, since its acceptable in the doves’ world.

More to the point, Hypa’s statement betrays his regret that his affair with Octavia was destroyed because of his religious identity. His claim that people “would live as one” suggests the removal of all grounds for discrimination be it racial, religious, ideological, even physical (beautiful/ugly) etc. It also invokes Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* since it promotes a shared primitive human origin, suggested by “as was the case with humans in the beginning” (221), that transcends all aforementioned artificial causes for discrimination. Best of all, it would be a life free from any commitment since “[e]veryone would treat the young as the offspring of all, and women would be like doves, asking the males only for courtship and brief encounters” (221). Such a relationship would free Hypa from his parental responsibility towards any potential offspring and from his duties as a potential husband for any woman, also hinting at his Oedipal complex. All aforementioned references to birds indicate the desire for freedom as well as Hypa’s torn identity since he suffers from the pressure of his sexual needs in his relationships with Octavia and Martha and from a guilt complex, as stated earlier.

Hypa notices that doves “do not take fright when people move”. Such a harmonious relation between people and doves invokes one of Barry Commoner’s laws of ecology: “Everything is connected to everything else” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, xix). However, “only Pharisee was keen to frighten the doves and drive them as far as possible” (219) as he believes they “aroused the passions and induced people to commit sins” (220). His view of emotions is similar to that of Plato who claimed “poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up” (Daiches, 1969, 19). To Plato, emotions are harmful as they block reason by arousing passions that make people commit sins. On the other hand, Pharisee’s act of disturbing the doves is a sign of the way society breaks the harmony with nature that once existed between the human and the non-human or the way “culture effects a separation from nature, producing hierarchical distinctions between the human and non-human” (Moran, 2007, 171). Garrard explains that “the evolution of human culture, or ‘second nature’, from ‘first nature’” happens “in an ongoing process in which each defines and transforms the other” (Garrard, 2007, 29).

Further, Marx recognized a “‘first’ nature that gave birth to humankind. But humans then worked on this ‘first’ nature to produce a ‘second’ nature: the material creations of society plus its institutions, ideas and values” (Pepper, 1993, 108). Not only did humans develop a second nature, but they also viewed Nature, an “interdisciplinary space”, “as something that is *culturally* produced, lived and represented in various ways” (Moran, 2007, 165, *my italics*). The harmony between doves and humans arises from their ‘first’ nature which makes them feel connected. Moran maintains that the

“fundamental premise” of ecocriticism is that “human culture is inextricably connected to nature” (Moran, 2007, 148). Moran’s perspective contradicts the view that regards nature/culture as a binary opposition or as Richardson, for instance, claims, “Human civilization and nature were at odds” (Bradshaw, 2003, 27). Moran’s view, in contrast, removes the slash between nature and culture. The Pharisee’s action of scaring the doves away since they arouse sexual emotions in humans reflects the ‘second’ nature that is shaped by society and its institutions, religious and philosophical in this case.

It is this ‘second’ nature that makes Hypa decide to castrate himself after losing Octavia so as “not [to] fall for the enticements of women” (103). The word “fall” suggests a moral fall into sin, i.e. sexual intercourse, which is a kind of pollution. ‘Pollution’ is derived “from the Latin ‘polluere’ meaning ‘to defile’, and its early English usage reflects ... moral contamination of a person, or acts (such as masturbation) thought to promote such contamination” (Garrard, 2007, 8). Hypa’s desire for castration can also be caused by his Oedipal complex and his feelings of inferiority due to his skin colour. According to Darwin’s ideas on “artificial selection”, “Both sexes ought to refrain from marriage if in any marked degree inferior in body or mind” (Darwin, 1871, II, 403, 169, Bradshaw, 2003, 13). This idea also sheds light on Hypa’s reason for refusing to marry Martha instead of his lame excuse that as a monk, he is “forbidden to marry” and that “[a]nyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (279). Hypa’s real reason is probably related either to his Oedipal complex, to his feeling of racial inferiority and unworthiness of survival through breeding, or to artificial selection which further explains his desire to live in a society like that of doves in which “[e]veryone would treat the young as the offspring of all” (221). In such a society, he would not pass his ‘inferior’ genes to his child, but would experience the feeling of being a parent since the children of others will be like his. According to Darwin, “excepting in the case of man himself, hardly anyone is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed” (Darwin, 1871, I, 168, 169, Bradshaw, 2003, 13). Hypa does not wish to breed since he feels he is among the worst animals.

7.0 Landscapes

In *Azazeel*, landscape is depicted mostly in two colours: Green & Yellow. Hypa comments, “the green receded ... and more patches of rock and sandy ground appeared, separating the fields one from another.” Colours “separate” fields just in the same way they separate white people like Octavia from brown people like Hypa. Hypa hates the brown colour as it is “the colour of death, sterility, and the temples of dying gods”. It is also “the colour of autumn and of sin” (46). Since Arabic is my mother tongue, I could not help noticing certain problems with Jonathan Wright’s translation of *Azazeel*. For instance, in the Arabic version, Ziedan uses the word “أصفر” (79) /əsfʌr/ meaning ‘yellow’ which Wright translates as “brown” though in other places he translates it as “yellow” as in “the green fields became fewer ... the colour yellow prevailed” (137). Yellow is a symbol of “death and decay” (Guerin & Labor, 1979, 158). Hence, it is the proper reflection of “sterility”, “death”, “autumn” and “sin”.

As a child, Hypa notices a “dead duck lying between the rocks with worms teeming in its gut.” Now as an adult, he remembers this scene with “distress” and states that “if we dug ... up” the “bowels of the earth” then “we would see worms.” He wonders, “Has the earth died and are the worms burrowing into it without us knowing, so that this world fades away into nothingness while we pay no heed?” (157) “Ecological catastrophe in the Old Testament descends for a whole range of transgressions, on innocent and guilty, humanity and nature alike” (Garrard, 2007, 109). Such an environmental apocalyptic prophecy of the death of earth is in total harmony with the prevailing yellow colour, the colour of decay and corruption leading to death, which seems to dominate the areas Hypa travels through due to the moral corruption of humanity.

This apocalyptic prophecy is similar to Bacon’s “environmentally destructive world view where ‘the image of an organic cosmos with a living female earth at its center gave way to a mechanistic world view in which nature was reconstituted as *dead* and *passive*, to be *dominated* and controlled by humans” (Merchant, 1990, xvi; Garrard 2007, 8, my italics). Further, “ecocriticism also analyses the

appropriation of nature by culture” (Moran, 2007, 172) like trying to control the weather, for instance, or in *Azazeel*, when a young man sends a monkey on top of a palm tree to make sure it “was free of snakes and scorpions” and then “a shower of dates” fell (43). This incident reveals the way the human dominates the non-human (i.e. the monkey) and exploits/endangers it for his own advantage. Such a view of nature is in line with “the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (White 1996, 10, 14; Garrard, 2007, 38).

Moreover, the parish servant informs Hypa “that the soil on these plains was originally yellow and sandy, and that it turned brown from the blood of the martyrs” (157). The soil, then, interacts with the actions of people and the people also interact with the soil and it influences them since the “faces of the monks” in the monastery in Aleppo “are friendly, unlike those of Egyptian monks, which are hard and sickly from excessive fasting and from the predominant colour of the silt which the Nile flood brings every summer” (162). This interaction between earth and humans changes the colour of landscape and means the sins of humans will cause the ecological catastrophe upon earth.

Green, the colour of hope and fertility, growth and life, represents home here whereas yellow stands for exile; Hypa nostalgically remembers the Nile, his native green country: “I felt a sudden longing for the Nile ... how green were the fields that stretched as far as the eye could see” (269). In Alexandria, however, the colour yellow of the desert dominates and is followed by Hypa’s exile into the desert after the death of Hypatia and Octavia. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains that “the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically ‘different’ inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture or racial essence proper to that geographical space” reveal that “racial otherness is founded on geographical essentialism” (Said [1978] 2003, 322). Hence, Hypa feels exiled and a “racial other” because he moved from one geographical area (his native village, Naga Hammadi, in Upper Egypt) to another (City of Alexandria) and the feeling of exile is emphasized by the colour yellow.

The idea of exile is intensified when Hypa notices that his donkey seems happy to return home. He observes, “[t]he tapping of its hoofs showed its elation and delight at heading back to its home ... Donkeys long for their roots and take pleasure in returning home, while I am terrified of the idea of going back to my country” (209). He confesses, “I felt a sudden longing for the Nile ... I almost shed a tear of nostalgia” (269). Fear of facing his mother prevents him from returning home. To Neil Evernden, “there is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, 103). Evernden’s claim explains why Hypa feels exiled because he is far away from “the component of place” by which he is “defined”.

Northrup Frye explains, “the goal of art is to ‘recapture, in full consciousness, that original lost sense of identity with our surroundings, where there is nothing outside the mind of man, or something identical with the mind of man” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, 99). By interacting with the physical environment, Hypa tries to “recapture” his “original lost sense of identity” with his former “surroundings” near the Nile to overcome his homesickness and feelings of exile. To Evernden “the establishment of self is impossible without the context of place” – a matter that “casts an entirely different light on the significance of the non-human” (Heise, 2008, 29). Evernden’s claim inserts geographical location into identity formation and indicates their inseparability.

Following Hypatia’s death, Hypa escapes from Alexandria after throwing down his cross and ripping his cassock (131) and runs to “Sinai” (132) to “an open area at the end of the Nile Delta where the land meets the sea in vast marches” (133) which “merges with the water and the sky” (133-34) and in which Hypa decides to “start anew” (134). There, after comparing himself to the “Jews in the years of their great wandering in the Sinai desert” (132), he baptizes himself accordingly with the name Hypa, a derivation from Hypatia’s name (135) thus revealing “the significance of the non-human” and the way identity/self is made within a “context of place”, the wilderness of the Sinai desert in this case. Garrard explains:

The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city. Wilderness has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth, a post-Christian covenant, found in a space of purity, founded in an attitude of reverence and humility. (Garrard, 2007, 59)

Hypa enters Alexandria through the "Moon Gate" (47) and leaves it through the "Sun Gate" (131) thus suggesting that it is a city of darkness, a "city of Man" not a "city of God" (52) and the nature outside it, Sinai desert, is the land of light/sun. Alexandria is corrupted by the violent religious institutions that allow killing people in the name of God and materially as reflected in Cyril's materialistic corruption, his "embroidered robe" covered "with gold thread all over", a "bright gold crown", and "a scepter made of gold" (117).

The Sinai desert becomes the space "uncontaminated by civilisation" in which Hypa can begin a new life and become newly born. "Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives" (Cronon, 1996, 80; Garrard, 2007, 69-70). Hypa attempts to "recover" his "true" self which was suppressed by the "corrupting influences" of his "artificial" life as a monk. The aforementioned comparison with the Jews led by Moses suggests that the desert for them and Hypa is "a more hospitable place than the civilised but enslaving Egypt" (Garrard, 2007, 61), Alexandria in Hypa's case.

8.0 Conclusion

The study of natural objects in Ziedan's *Azazeel* reveals the way natural imagery adds to the total meaning of the text especially when ecocriticism, in addition to Freudian and Jungian insights, are applied. Such a study yields very interesting results which can be summed up as follows: trees are highly positive symbolizing peace, security, natural home [*oikos*], surrogate good mother, and immortality. The sea, in contrast, is highly negative pretending to be a good mother generating a sense of security and tranquility but is actually a terrible mother deceptive, cunning, and fatal – a depiction that matches Hypa's biologically determined view of women as "fickle by nature" (87).

Rocks, on the other hand, represent Hypa's rootedness in his native village Naga Hammadi and reflect the way geographical location becomes an inextricable part of identity thus causing Hypa to feel exiled everywhere he travels especially in yellow landscapes that invoke an environmentally apocalyptic vision of nature as dead and waiting to be dominated by humans. In contrast, green landscapes make Hypa feel at home in nature. Hypa's problem lies in living against his nature since his religious identity as a 'second' self shaped by culture/religion stops him from being himself and being happy.

To Hypa, birds represent (sexual/social/emotional) freedom from which humans should learn. The sacrificial bird invokes the story of Jesus Christ as a martyr which is paralleled to Hypatia's. Birds reflect the harmony between the human and non-human that is ruined by culture, because it generates a 'second' self for humans that disconnects them from nature making them no longer part of the harmonious ecological system. Hypa refuses to get married or to have children but prefers to live like doves due to his Oedipal complex and to "artificial selection" since he sees himself as inferior. Thoreau asserts, "Think of our life in nature ... rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?*" (Thoreau, 1983, 71; Garrard, 2007, 66) The natural objects in *Azazeel* are meant to make both Hypa and us reconnect with nature and establish "contact" with it to realize truly who/where we are by getting in touch with our first self and recognizing nature as our *oikos*.

Further, the article provides a new reading of the murders of Hypatia and Octavia, the actions of Cyril and his followers, Hypa's reflections and actions from an environmental/ecocritical perspective. Hypatia

is murdered because she, although ideal, is not in harmony with her surroundings, a kind of weed/pollution that needs to be terminated by a strong, dominating, predatory, Darwinian and patriarchal society terrified that such a woman will cause a social revolution/evolution. Her murder ruins the biodiversity, disrupts the balanced ecosystem by human intervention and is caused by natural and/or sexual selection; she is targeted for being a female (stereotyped as weak/helpless) who wandered away from the herd thus becoming an easy target for the human wolves who terminate her as a preemptive measure to stop her from procreation which will lead to the creation of other females like her through heredity thus leading to a cultural revolution/evolution. Octavia dies for similar reasons since she shares Hypatia's liberalist views, for being an easy target, and isolated from the herd like her. In addition, her death comes as an example of 'chance' in Darwin's theory of evolution.

Ziedan's *Azazeel* invites us to reconnect with nature by releasing our suppressed 'first' self and restore that lost harmony with nature if we wish to live happily in *oikos*. The message is of vital importance as it comes at a time when planet earth is suffering from gas emissions, toxic/industrial/nuclear wastes, global warming, etc. that will eventually cause an apocalyptic environmental catastrophe. If we manage to retrieve our connection with nature and stop seeing it as dead and awaiting domination, we would be able to save our planet and ourselves in the process.

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