



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Natural Imagery and Hybrid Identity in Ethnic-American Poetry: A Case Study of the Poetry of Linda Hogan and Lisa Suhair Majaj

Eman K. Mukattash*

Department of English Language and Literature University of Jordan, Jordan

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***Corresponding Author:**

narong@pi.ac.th

Nature is not only a resource. Connection with nature constitutes a part of who we are, especially in the case of individuals with hybrid identities. By analysing the kinesthetic images of plants, animals and natural elements in a selection of poems by the Native American Linda Hogan and the Arab-American Lisa Suhair Majaj, the study proposes to trace the connection between the hybrid identities the two poets have as members of ethnic minorities in the American society and the kinesthetic natural imagery they employ in their poetry. The significance of this study lies in considering the affective aspect of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman worlds in their poetry and the role it plays in spreading a more positive sense of tolerance and acceptance between cultures. Portraying the living creatures and the non-living objects in nature as constantly moving and interacting with each other implies that both poets perceive identity formation as an ongoing process of interaction with one's surroundings. And this process acquires more importance in the case of individuals with mixed cultural origins.

INTRODUCTION

Nature is not only a resource. Connection with nature constitutes a part of who we are. The emotions we feel towards our environmental surroundings and the way we perceive our interactions with natural elements intersect with our behaviors and convictions as members of culturally diverse societies. This emotional connection, as this study attempts to prove through analyzing the natural imagery in selected poems by the Native-American poet Linda Hogan (1947) and the Arab-American poet Lisa Suhair Majaj (1960), has an impact on the formation of identity, especially in the case of individuals with hybrid identities. The aim is to show that connection with nature plays an essential role in honing the individual's ability to balance the two or more cultural sides of their identity.

Most studies conducted on the relationship between nature and identity have given the question of sustainability as a response to the affective relation between the individual and his natural surroundings. This, however, does not fully explain the emotional connection the individual forms with his natural surroundings. Ilana Rito and Daniel Kahneman, for example, explain that our environmental behavior is governed by a need to define ourselves through the commitment we make to a specific cause (1997, 40-42). Thus, calling for recycling, for example, is not only seen as a means to sustain environmental resources, but also as a means to reflect a part of who we are and what we believe in. In a study conducted at the University of York (2021) to determine whether environmental elements affected human tolerance, the researchers observed that when humans were exposed to environmental catastrophes or hardships, they tended to act more tolerantly towards each other by sharing food and available natural resources. This tolerance was noticed to be intergroup in that it extended to "people well outside their own kin or local group".

In the culturally diverse societies of the twenty-first century, this tolerance is expected to extend beyond the physical sustenance needed in cases of natural catastrophes. As individuals see the extent to which the environment is undergoing natural degradation due to the destructive human activities, they cherish the need to limit the spread of such destruction not only through protecting the nonhuman world, but through protecting the human world as well. In an interview with Mary Kenagy Mitchell, Hogan (2006) notes that the connection she feels to nature has built a part of her common

knowledge as an indigenous citizen living in a culturally diverse community: “indigenous thought takes in a continuous knowledge of an ecosystem and its workings, the value of each life in it, the song of the lichen, the stories of the plants, the placement of stars in terms of animal migrations or fish runs”. More cultural acceptance is, therefore, expected from those hybridised individuals for whom nature has always had an integral role in making them the individuals they are today. In a chapter entitled “Hybrid Identities: Theoretical Examinations” (2008), Keri E. Lyall Smith explains that hybrid identity is a result of the interaction between the local and the global. “The identities are not assimilated or altered independently, but instead elements of cultures are incorporated to create a new hybrid culture” (3). On the collective level, the connection of individuals with hybrid identities to nature is expected to help them accept the different lifestyles and conventions of culturally different groups. On the personal level, it is expected to help them balance the different cultural orientations they are exposed to.

Cultural Ecology and Hybrid Identity

Several studies have been conducted on the role nature plays in shaping the individual's personal and collective identities. Susan Clayton and Susan Oporto (2003) employ the term ‘environmental identity’ to highlight the fact that the self is, to a large extent, constructed through interaction with the natural surroundings. Clayton defines ‘environmental identity’ as “a sense of connection to some part of the non-human natural environment, based on history, emotional attachment, and/or similarity, that affects the ways in which we perceive an act toward the world” (45-46). Connection with the non-human world is, therefore, instrumental not only in shaping the conception of one’s self, but the relations we form with those around us. In a more recent chapter she coauthored with Pablo Olivos, Clayton links connectedness with nature with the “development of a positive identity” (107), indicating that the feelings the individual develops towards nature play an integral role in the wellbeing of their “behavioural and attitudinal” (Clayton and Oportow, 2003, 3) stances to their natural surroundings and to the societies they belong to.

Recently, there have been attempts by cultural and ecological theorists to bring together the studies conducted on nature and identity into a theoretical approach under the name of cultural ecology.¹ In his introduction to the book he edited, *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, Hubert Zapf introduces cultural ecology as an interdisciplinary approach which views culture as an “indispensable part of contemporary ecological knowledge landscapes” (2016, 3-4) and explores “cultural ecosystems of language, literature and other art forms” (4). In thinking both systems together, cultural ecology challenges the traditional view which places nature and culture on opposite ends. This point is likewise emphasised by Adrian Ivakhiv who explains in an article titled “Eco-cultural Critical Theory and Eco-cultural Studies: Contexts and Research Directions” that cultural differences lie at the center of studying the relation between the human and the nonhuman worlds.

The emancipatory focus within cultural studies regarding questions of class, race, gender, identity and difference, is extended, within an “ecocultural studies”, to include examination of the power exercised by humans over their extra-human environments, and to encompass questions of “ecocultural identity and difference” – that is, relations between different modes of human interaction or “immersion” with(in) nonhuman nature...and the politics within which these are imposed, resisted, legitimized and/or marginalized. Ecocultural studies see culture as the “battleground” or terrain within which different ideas about nature and the environment, human-environment relations, and environmental politics and action, are articulated and contested. (1997, 2)

Considering culture as the “terrain” within which the relation between the human and the nonhuman worlds is studied emphasizes the connection between the ways the individual perceives his

¹ Cultural ecology is a transdisciplinary approach founded by Julian Steward (1955) who investigates the role the natural environment plays in the evolution of human cultures. Steward’s work was extended by Gregory Bateson who sees culture as an “evolutionary transformation and metamorphosis rather than a binary opposite of nature” (140).

interactions with his natural surroundings and his interactions with his community with all the cultural differences it holds.²

In a chapter titled "Cultural Ecology of Literature – Literature as Cultural Ecology", Zapf highlights the fact that the study of cultural ecology does not "abolish all boundaries" (2016, 139) between its two cornerstones (culture and nature) because it is dependent on the two axioms of relation/connectivity and difference/diversity, which give it a "transnational and global dimension, alongside regional and national varieties" (5). In this sense only does the study of cultural ecology help analyse the relation holding humans with their natural surroundings, but it helps establish "counter-hegemonic modes of interaction" (Ivakhiv, 1997, 2) between them. Thus, instead of perceiving that relation in terms of a subject-object one, there is possibility that nature and non-human elements be seen as active agents shaping the identity and relations between human beings and their societies. In his discussion on the main features of this recently established interdisciplinary study, Ivakhiv notes that eco-cultural theory can help curb the "expansion of capitalist resources relations" paving the way for "pluralism and difference in human-human and human-extra human relations" (3) through a critique of the anthropocentric approaches in criticism which have led to different forms of "oppression and exclusion involving inter-human and human-extrahuman interactions" (3).

In studying identity, the connectivity-diversity axiom helps shore up the pluralistic relations between humans and between humans and non-humans so that they can be "negotiated and contested" (Ivakhiv, 1997, 6). Joane Nagel (1996), for example, argues that identity is largely situational. Social and cultural variations affect the construction of identity. Donal Carbough (1996), as well, relates the construction of identity to the context in which interaction takes place. Martha Minow (1997) stresses this point also as she perceives the construction of identity as an ongoing process of social and cross-cultural interaction. This fluidity is stressed more in cases of mixed cultural origins. Stuart Hall (1990) defines identity as a process which makes the individual become what he is rather than be what he is. Writing about herself, Gloria Anzaldúa³ (1987) sees that forming an identity should transcend geographical borders and become a product of the different cultural origins they belong to and the different interactions (including interactions with their natural surroundings) they engage in. Hybrid identity, in this regard, is neither static nor predetermined, but is continuously produced as a result of the interaction with one's surroundings, including the nonhuman world.

Natural Imagery in Hogan's and Majaj's Poetry

The fact that Hogan and Majaj belong to two ethnic minorities is not the sole reason for comparing their poetry in this study. Several poems by Hogan and Majaj abound with images taken from nature. And this, no doubt, stresses the role nature plays in forming the two poets' views on a myriad of issues, specifically hybrid identity given their mixed origins. What draws attention to the natural images in those poems is that most of them are kinesthetic. Whether those images portray plants, animals or natural elements, motion is essential to the way they are represented. The fact that both poets have hybrid identities and employ kinesthetic natural images should not be taken at face value. It should be studied in relation to the view they have about what form's identity for individuals with mixed origins. Had they represented plants, animals and other natural elements as static objects, tracing a connection between their mixed origins and their nature poetry would not have yielded this study feasible.

This being said, the study proposes to trace the connection between the hybrid identities Hogan and Majaj have as members of ethnic minorities in the American society and the kinesthetic natural imagery they employ in their poetry. To achieve this, the study will analyse the different forms of natural imagery of plants, animals and natural elements in the poems under study. The aim in doing this is twofold. First, the study aims to examine the points at which motion in the images is observed

² According to Thomas A. Sebeok (2001, vii), what connects nature and culture is symbiosis which is based on a system of representation wherein an object can function as a sign and therefore have significance.

³ Anzaldúa introduces the term *La Mestiza* drawing on philosopher Jose Vasconcelos' idea of the fifth race, or the cosmic race, which embraces the four major races of the world.

in their presentation of natural elements. Second, it aims to consider the role the two poets' choice of kinaesthetic imagery plays in their perception of identity formation, especially in the case where two or more cultural backgrounds are present.

Several studies have examined the representation of nature in the poetry of Hogan, most of which adopting the theoretical approach of ecofeminism. In an eco-feminist critical approach to Hogan's *Mean Spirit*, Mona A. M. Ahmed explains that Hogan's connection to nature as a Native American can be better understood as she relates the oppressive behaviours exercised on nature to those exercised on women (2016: 16-17). Similarly, Silvia Schultersmandl stresses Hogan's belief in the connection between the landscape and its inhabitants, which is disrupted due to the "dislocation of the individual from her natural and cultural landscape" (2005: 67). In an article studying the connection between indigenous identity and nature, Fella Benabed stresses the role of bonding between women in restoring the lost connection with one's natural surroundings (2020, 240-243).

The Arab-American Majaj is not known as a nature poet as much as the Native American Hogan is. Nevertheless, elements of nature are evidently present in her poetry, which is generally speaking known to bring the questions of identity, displacement, cross cultural interaction to the fore. Among the studies which discuss the representation of natural elements in the poetry of Majaj is "Nature in Arab American Literature: Majaj, Nye and Kahf" (2015). In this article, Ismet Bujupaj stresses the importance of reading Arab-American poetry from an ecocritical perspective to arrive at a better understanding of the Arab diasporic individual's relation to his natural surroundings, whether in his past memories about the home or in diaspora. Bujupaj wonders why "Majaj's painstaking research and artistic crafting of lines about the asphodel [should] be wasted on critics who would mine her poems only for identity politics, ignoring the significant dimension of her poetry which can be gleaned from adding an ecocritical approach?" (2015, 6)

Though the studies surveyed above examine the representation of nature in the poetry or fiction of Hogan and Majaj, they do not address the type of nature imagery in their works, nor do they consider the connection between the kinaesthetic choice of imagery and the hybrid identity they have formed as members of ethnic minorities living in America today. To this end, the significance of this study lies in considering the affective aspect of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman worlds in their poetry and the role it plays in spreading a more positive sense of tolerance and acceptance between cultures. The discussion below will be divided into three sections, each analyzing the kinaesthetic images employed to represent an element of nature: birds, plants and non-living natural elements.

Birds

In the selected poems, the birds are not represented as static elements of nature. On the contrary, they are infused with life as they move from one place to another and as they interact with other elements of nature. A case in point is Hogan's "The Sandhills"⁴ which portrays the crane birds as they roam the sky. With their long necks and stretched legs, they migrate from one place to another. In the poem, the speaker likens the act of immigration which they repeat every fall to an act of writing the story of life. As they fly across the sky in groups, they seem to be inscribing letters which when brought together form the words of this story. This image of the cranes flying above strands of earth, standing, every now and then, here and there, to rest and then to resume their journey highlights Clayton and Opatow's (2003) view that identity is constructed through interaction with the environment (3-5). The repetitive acts of flying, standing and resuming the journey denote that the act of immigration is an ongoing process; every time a group of cranes embarks on this journey, "the ancient story of life" that has been inscribed since eternity is "made anew".

Millions of years

they have blown here

on ancestral losing,

their wings of wide arrival,

⁴ Hogan has also written an essay titled "Ways of the Cranes" published in issue 79 of *Image Journal*

necks long, legs stretched out
above strands of earth.

The kinesthetic images the speaker employs in this poem show how close he is to his natural surroundings. With a keen eye to the scenes of cranes immigrating, he has been able to capture the full-of-life interactions between the cranes and the different natural habitats between which they keep immigrating.

A similarly observant eye is seen in the composition of the poem "Wind-Song, Winter Sea" by Majaj. As the speaker portrays the sun setting in the afternoon, he notices the crying seagulls soaring across the sky. Though the seagulls do not roam across vast distances like the cranes in Hogan's poem, their liveliness forms, according to Clayton and Olivos (2016), a 'positive' sense of identity stemming from their harmonious interaction with their natural surroundings (107-108). A close reading of the poem shows the waves flaring, the stones tumbling and the sea resonating. This harmonious connection is as well seen between the seagulls and the inanimate objects found nearby in the environment. As the seagulls roam the sky, a boat is noticed to be floating on the surface of the sea and a beach light is noticed to be flaring from afar.

The seagulls that soared so high
into the waning afternoon, their cries
a wild keening, an elegy-
day closing down, and year, wild hopes
Flung to the wind like bits of paper
on an updraft, fierce rush and surge
of surf, the beach light flaring fading-

As the living and non-living elements of nature interact so harmoniously in the scene, they create emotions of oneness. And, this makes the movement of the flying seagulls meaningless out of this interwoven image. As Zapf explains in "Cultural Ecology of Literature- Literature of Cultural Ecology" (2016), nature and culture should not be perceived as opposites since the relation between the two is one of connectivity and diversity (139-140). The same observation applies to the relation between the boat and the beach light which contributes to the overall effect the bringing together of all of those components of this lively image adds to the poem. The same connection is noticed between the seagulls and the natural surroundings as well. As the speaker describes the seagulls, he integrates their movement into a larger scene which includes the other natural elements. Though the human elements are absented from the poem, the wholeness of the scene shows that the seagulls take part in action and thus testify to the embedded message the poem holds: the connection between nature and the human society.

Hogan's and Majaj's choice of kinesthetic images in these two poems reflects how close the two poets are to their natural surroundings. This closeness is seen in the keen eyes they have for the interaction taking place between the living and the non-non-living elements in the natural setting. It also reflects the affective impact this connection has on the identity they have developed as individuals who have mixed cultural origins and who live in a society where different cultures are brought together. Like the cranes and the seagulls which engage actively with their natural habitats moving back and forth to stay in tune with the other natural elements, Hogan and Majaj have not chosen to isolate themselves from their surroundings. This point is emphasized by Hogan (1994) in one of her interviews where she explains that she has been "part of diverse communities" as her family has spent "much of [their] time travelling". Being a member of an ethnic minority and constantly on the move must have exposed her to different kinds of obstacles such as trying to fit in the different communities she has been part of or coping with the Relocation Act which forced many Native Americans to move to new residing places during the 1950s. Still, Hogan has managed to form an identity featuring Zapf's (2016) two axioms of connectivity and diversity (139-140).

Plants

Kinesthetic images can also be observed in Hogan's and Majaj's representation of plants in the selected poems. Though motion in the case of plants is limited compared to animals, it can be observed in the plant's physical interaction with its natural surroundings and in its growth. This goes in line with Clayton's and Opatow's (2003) view on environmental identity as one constructed through interaction with the surrounding environment (3-6).

To begin with, Hogan's "The Way In" portrays the plant roots moving through the hard earth absorbing water. The motion of roots is indicative of the plant being alive and of its interacting with its natural surroundings. The same kinesthetic image is found in another of Hogan's poems "To Be Held", in which the speaker compares himself as he seeks to be held by light to a tree drinking rain water in a hot environment. With its far-reaching roots which absorb water from the dry soil, the tree shelters the unborn leaves on its branches by saving the minerals inside its stem. The speaker extends this comparison further to indicate that the land in which the tree grows can sometimes become hardened leaving little water for the tree roots to absorb.

The fact that the tree is planted in an environment with scarce water resources minimizes the chances for a healthy growth. Unlike the plant in "The Way In" which, as the speaker explains, is making its way through the hard earth, this plant is not noticed to move that much. Harsh environmental circumstances, as Zapf (2016) explains (140), restrict the connection between nature and culture so that the tree might seem unresponsive to external stimuli. Yet, reading the following lines in the poem shows that, despite the water shortage, the plant interacts with its natural surroundings minimally; it does not close on itself or isolate itself from its environment. Similarly, the person the speaker is comparing to the tree waiting "to be held by light" stays in touch with his surrounding despite the harsh circumstances he is placed in. The speaker explains that though "the land consumes the thirsty need", the unborn leaves are sheltered from the storm. This indicates that even under hard conditions, the individual should not isolate himself from his surroundings as interaction with those around him is what forms his identity. Seen in light of Hall's (1990) perception of identity as a process of interaction through which the individual with mixed origins or upbringing becomes who he is, this makes sense. Just as the tree continues growing even when little water is available, the individual with mixed cultural backgrounds should continue interacting with members of different cultures to be able to balance the hybrid identity he forms. This point is clearly expressed by the speaker in the poem as he portrays the difficulties the person faces as he tries to be held by light and to survive "the storm which has been our life".

In "Innocence", another nature poem by Hogan, the speaker draws an extended metaphor between the "still unformed creatures struggling beneath the soil" and himself. Both are growing and their growth is best manifested in the motion that takes place in nature. The following lines which are taken from the poem stress the interactive relation which, as Clayton and Opatow (2003) explain (3-6), holds between nature and the individual.

There is nothing more innocent
than the still-unformed creature I find beneath soil,
neither of us knowing what it will become
in the abundance of the planet.
It makes a living only by remaining still
in its niche.

When brought together, the kinesthetic images in the lines above refer to growth as a process through which change takes place. Thus, the speaker begins by referring to a thing that is still unformed. Under the soil, it is protected by outer cover until it starts pushing its way through its skin into the soil. Through rooting itself into the soil, it grows into a young plant. The fact that the speaker chooses to describe the different growth phases of a plant starting with a thing still unformed shows that he chooses to shed light on the element of motion in this process. Words like struggling, growing, leaving describe how the "still unformed" plant moves from one phase to another as it interacts with its natural surroundings. This description goes in line with Minow's (1997) view that the

construction of identity is an ongoing process. To add to this, the speaker imbues the process of growth with continuity. This is seen in the last line of the poem in which the speaker explains that the thing that has struggled its way from underneath the soil is “not aware yet of what [it] will become” even after it has grown out of “its tender pearl of blind skin”. This sense of ambiguity refers to an ongoing process of growth taking place as long as the young plant is still interacting with the environment around it.

From an eco-cultural perspective, the continuous process Hogan describes in these lines features the two axioms of connectivity and diversity which, according to Zapf, bring together the study of culture and that of nature (2016: 139-141). In the case of the individual who straddles two cultures, the kind of identity he develops is dependent on his interaction with members of the two cultures he belongs to. Just like the thing that has struggled its way through by interacting with its natural surroundings, the individual cannot form an identity that is solely a product of one culture. His identity is a product of his interactions which span the two cultures he is part of.

Like Hogan, Majaj represents plants as moving elements of nature in the selected poems. In “Asphodel”, for example, the speaker uses words such as rising, flaring and cresting to show that the asphodels are part of the natural surroundings. As they interact with the environment and its creatures, they form a symbiotic relationship, similar to the one Zapf (2016) speaks of in “Cultural Ecology of Literature- Literature of Cultural Ecology”. In the poem, several benefits are listed for the asphodels. They are used as medicine, as food, as glue and as a love token. The effect they have on the surrounding environment is represented in the kinaesthetic images the speaker employs in the poem to describe the other natural elements around them. The butterflies are noticed to be trembling as a result of their interaction with the asphodels. The air is seen to be sparkling and the light of the afternoon seems to be turning into darkness. Despite the benefits the asphodels have, they are expected to be useless if removed from their environment. Pondering on this point in her discussion of the poem, Bujupaj (2015) explains that the asphodel stands in contrast to humans who underappreciate the diversity in their relationships with their fellow men and see in their cultural differences a reason for rejection, at a time when they “could benefit by looking more closely at the actions modelled by the asphodel” as it connects with its surroundings. Taken metaphorically, this indicates the importance of interacting with culturally different groups for the individual with a hybrid identity. As he straddles different cultures, he is expected, as Anzaldúa’s (1987) explains, to become a *mezza terra* of these two different cultures.

“Tree”, another poem by Majaj, employs images denoting motion, but a little differently than in the poems discussed above. Reading the poem shows that Majaj has chosen to render some of these images in the passive voice. The poem opens with the trunk of the tree being portrayed as twisted and knobbed and the branches sawed off.

Thick in the trunk,
 twisted, knobbed
 to a pained
 beauty, bark
 like a crumbling
 map, circuitous paths
 etched by wind, rain,
 the subtle violence
 of time. Branches
 sawed off to stumps;
 circled whorls marking years
 of living.

The fact that Majaj has chosen to represent motion through giving more attention to the action being done rather than the object doing the action is not coincidental. The reader gets the message that a certain hidden power is controlling the tree by restricting its movement so that it seems twisted and knobbed. Put in the cultural and political contexts of Majaj’s works, it could be inferred that since the olive tree is a well renowned symbol of Palestine, restricting its movement can refer to the destruction nature in Palestine is exposed to under colonialism.

Not all kinaesthetic images are represented using the passive voice in the poem, though. The speaker portrays the bark and the leaves of the tree scattering light and murmuring a melody while a child lies sleeping against its trunk and the insects feel at home. These images ascertain that though a hidden power controls the tree and restricts its growth, the tree still interacts with its natural surroundings. It knows well that the source of the restricting power is not the environment in which it has been planted for years, but that it is external; probably man-made. As Ivakhiv explains in his article "Eco-cultural Critical Theory and Eco-cultural Studies: Contexts and Research Directions" (1997), the interaction with nature in the presence of restricting elements helps establish "counter-hegemonic modes of interaction" (p. 2) which defy its control. In the poem, this is made obvious in two images. First, the fact that the tree shelters a sleeping child though its branches are sewn off shows that the tree exists in harmony with its own environment despite all external human intervention. Second, the fact that Majaj portrays some parts of the tree only (not the tree as a whole) as restricted by that external power leaves some hope that, regardless of that intervening external power, the tree cannot be uprooted from its environment as seen in the last line which portrays the tree watching as the day wanes into night.

On a metaphorical level, the fact that the tree still interacts with its natural surroundings despite its trunk being twisted and its branches being sawn off indicates that the individual is likely to face challenges as he tries to balance the two sides of his identity. As a member of an ethnic minority living in a culturally diverse society as the American society, he might be pressured because of his upbringing to abide by specific cultural codes of behaviour. At the same time, exposure to the mainstream culture might pressure him into acquiring new codes of behaviour which are not familiar in his native culture. The ensuing clash might make him feel restricted as he feels forced to act in accordance with predetermined codes in some situations. Yet, like the twisted olive tree, he should not choose to isolate himself from his surroundings or choose to adopt the social codes of one culture and reject those of the other. This point is emphasized by Majaj in one of her interviews where she explains that she engages with multiculturalism "not as a homogenization of contested realities, but as an interaction between and among individuals and groups focused on larger scales" (2007: 408).

In "Seasons of Fire, Seasons of Light", Majaj employs several kinaesthetic images to describe how the trees which interact with the environment in New Hampshire remind her of the trees in the war-torn Beirut.

Outside Lebanon, New Hampshire
a hundred trees are chanting of fall.
When the wind stirs, gold coins flash
under every tongue. Their fares have been paid,
but the dead still can't cross
to the other side. Bright ghosts they linger
on the chill New England air.

The speaker describes the movement of the different parts of the tree. Blossoms are trembling on trees, leaves are flaring, seeds are sprouting, roots are lacing the mountain. This point is emphasized by Bujupaj who notes that it is not "the color of the trees that Majaj evokes vividly in her lines; it is their movement in the wind" (2015: 8) which she evokes to capture the connection between the two locations, the present and the past ones. She also achieves this effect by portraying different types of trees moving and interacting with their natural surroundings. Maple, for instance, is described as breathing fire. Cedar trees are described as watching. Sassafras and sweet gum are described as filling the hollows. Almond trees are described as whitening to mist. The speaker also describes types of plants which grow in specific environments. Sumac, for instance, is a bush-like plant that grows in the Levant and is known for its salty taste. In the poem, sumac trees are described as glowing and as cresting the hills with other plants.

Despite being planted in different places, the trees interact equally with their environment. This paints a unique picture bringing together Zapf's two axioms of connectivity and diversity to highlight

the fact that social relations in the culturally diverse human world ought to be modelled on relations in the non-human world. Bujupaj stresses this point as well by explaining that by vividly describing the New Hampshire trees Majaj is able to evoke the Beirut trees despite the different “nationalities, ethnicities, and religions that form the social context in each location” (2015: 8). Belonging to intersecting cultures is, therefore, expected to lead the individual to form a hybrid identity which is nourished through his encounters with culturally different groups.

Natural Objects

Natural elements other than animals and plants are also represented as moving objects in the selected poems. Despite the fact that their motion does not take the form of growth, they are not portrayed as still objects by Hogan or Majaj. They are observed to interact with other natural elements creating a sense of harmony and connection.

In “The Way In” by Hogan, the speaker describes the path a number of natural objects take as they move in their environment. Water finds its way through stone, dry objects through fire and milk and honey through the body. The path each element takes helps connect it to its natural surroundings and this ascertains Clayton and Opatow’s (2003) view that environmental interaction takes place at all levels: between humans, nonhuman creatures and inanimate objects (3-6). It is not only animals and plants that react to their natural surroundings. Other elements of nature are part of this two-way process of interaction. When water moves through the stones, it reaches plants and animals in different places and gives them life. Similarly, milk and honey move through the body and nourish it to grow. Even in the case of dry objects which are said to turn to ashes, when they are burnt, they help sustain the fire. The implicit message in this nature poem is that non-living objects in nature contribute to the continuation of the process of growth and this ascertains Hogan’s harmonious view of nature as a harmonised habitat in which the different constituents contribute to the well-being and the sustainability of the whole system.

In another poem, “The Sandhills”, the same sense of connection is found between the different constituents of that specific natural setting. As the cranes embark on their yearly journey, other natural elements are noticed to be in tune with this life-saving journey. The wind, for instance, is observed to act as their method through which the cranes enact their journey. The strands of earth likewise take part in this process. This collaboration the speaker notices between the living creatures and the non-living objects in that natural setting stresses the sense of continuity which, according to Zapf (2016), is an integral feature of the natural system (139-141). In the poem, this sense of harmony is reflected as the speaker connects the cranes’ yearly immigration with an ancient story that is retold every time the cranes embark on this journey. The story, however, is not told by the cranes only, but by other natural elements which, as the speaker explains, become the cranes’ “language and method”.

A reversed sense of connection is found in Hogan’s poem “To Be Held”. The hot environment acts as a challenging factor to the growth of the tree. As the weather gets hotter, the land is noticed to “[consume] the thirsty need” leaving little water for the roots which are growing in a tunnel to adapt to the harsh conditions. Despite the negative effect the surrounding environment has on the sustainability of the living creatures, the tree is still noticed to be able to bear the little available water to nourish itself and “shelter the unborn leaves”. Despite the harsh conditions, the tree does not see in isolating itself from its environment a solution to the shortage of water. This stresses the connection Clayton and Opatow (2003) speak of between the living creatures and the non-living objects in nature (3-6); though they can act against the sustainability of each other sometimes, they cannot be severed from the overall system.

Read from Zapf’s (2016) perspective, the connection noticed between the different natural elements in Hogan’s poems shows that identity for her as an individual with mixed cultural backgrounds cannot be formed in relation to one culture, but is relational as she straddles the two cultural backgrounds she belongs to (139-141). It also shows that though the outer environment might place some obstacles in the way of the individual who is trying to strike a balance between his two cultural backgrounds, he should not choose to isolate himself from his surroundings. He should instead see these obstacles as challenges that motivate him to form a flexible identity that is a product of the different interactions with individuals belonging to different cultures.

In the selected poems by Majaj, non-living elements in nature are likewise represented through kinaesthetic images to stress the relationship of harmony which brings together all natural objects. In "Asphodel", for instance, air is portrayed as a sparkling atmosphere embracing the flaring asphodels and the trembling butterflies. This connection between those natural elements is likewise extended to include the half-lit afternoon as it is turning into night. A likewise harmonious vignette is portrayed in "Wind-Song, Winter Sea", in which Majaj describes the seagulls soaring tunefully around the sea. Several natural elements in the poem reciprocate the seagulls' oneness with the environment. The speaker describes the sea waves surging, the moon rising and the stones tumbling as the seagulls' cries are heard in the sky. The harmony this scene is infused with shows that, as Clayton and Opatow (2003) argue, each natural element has a complementary function in the overall system of that natural habitat (4-6).

In "Seasons of Fire, Seasons of Light", an extended relationship of harmony between the living and the non-living elements is portrayed through the use of kinaesthetic images. As the trees are chanting of the fall, other natural elements tune into this festivity. The speaker describes the wind stirring and the current running between the trees. As night comes, constellations are noticed to erupt and stars are noticed to implode their light in streams. The light produced by those celestial bodies moves through the water producing fire-like reflections on hills which the speaker describes as bodies "taken by fire". This full-of-motion scene is continued till dawn is close "[sparkling] blossoms of due to crystal" replacing the starlet fire by a sunlit one. The sense of continuity created by the use of those kinaesthetic images makes light, regardless of its source (fire, sun, constellations or stars), an inherent element of the scene. Thus, whether it is day or night time, this natural setting is always lit and its light is not artificial, but is created by the different living and non-living elements of which it is made-up. Just like the other natural elements in "Asphodel" and "Wind-Song, Winter Sea", the natural elements in this poem play an important role in producing a harmonious habitat.

Read from an eco-cultural perspective, the harmonious connection taking place between the living and the non-living natural elements shows that Majaj perceives her hybrid identity as an overall product of the different interactions she takes part in. Had she thought of accepting one of the cultures she is part of and of rejecting the other, she would have ended up isolated from her social surroundings. As Hall (1990) explains, for the individual with mixed cultural origins is relational and should not be formed in isolation from social exposure to the different cultures he belongs to. Just as the non-living objects in the selected poems are represented as environmental constituents which contribute, through interacting with the living creatures, to the sustainability of the overall ecosystem, hybrid identity is likewise sustained through connection between the different cultures constituting it.

Could connection to nature make balancing a culturally hybrid identity easier?

The poems under study describes natural scenes highlighting motifs of connection, transformation, continuity, growth and the creative power of nature. Along those motifs, the poems reveal an implicit relation between the two poets' connection to their natural surroundings and the hybrid identities they have formed as members of ethnic minorities. This relation is highlighted by both poets through the use of kinesthetic images which describe the harmonious connection holding the living creatures and the non-living objects in the natural world. This, however, is done differently by Hogan and Majaj. While Hogan employs extended metaphors to imply that there is a connection between the natural setting and the human society, Majaj integrates natural elements into the events taking place in her poems so that they are involved in the actions humans undertake. What could these two different techniques talk about the way each poet perceives hybridity?

In Hogan's "The Way In", growth and continuity are conditioned by interaction with one's surroundings and by exerting effort. Hogan draws a comparison between the individual and the plant. Just as the plant needs to "[desire] sunlight" and "[believe] in water" to "rise through hard earth", the individual with mixed cultural heritages cannot develop an identity away from his social surroundings which impose some obstacles on his way to blend in. Integration, as the speaker shows, is not that easy, for the three ways to do so (the dangerous, the wounding and the beautiful) require exerting effort and offering condescension.

A similar comparison is drawn in Hogan's "To Be Held" to show that for an individual with mixed cultural heritage "waiting for the healing/ after the storm/ which has been our life" is not an easy

task. It implies responsibility and diligence. Just as the plant finds itself in a dry land, the individual might do so. Yet, hope and anticipation are always there. Experiencing barrenness implies that the tree has been planted somewhere where water has not been limited as a resource. And this entails that the plant manages to spread its roots in the new environment to absorb the water needed for staying alive. It realizes that responsibility is a force of life as it spreads its roots "in a tunnel growing/ but also to be sheltering the inborn leaves". By analogy, in cases when the individual is introduced to a new culture which tears him from his comfort zone, he should not see in separation from his surroundings the solution. On the contrary, he should derive his life force from facing the challenges enforced on him in a different environment.

The same comparison is drawn in Hogan's "Innocence" which presents a statement on the human condition through comparing a blade of grass sprouting to an individual growing. As a coming-of-age poem, it describes an ongoing process of becoming in which change is instigated by connection between the growing sprout and the surrounding environment. The mystifying power of nature is passed onto the speaker who expects to face obstacles through the journey of maturity as one exposed to different cultural orientations. Realizing it is not easy to balance the two identities he has, he finds it hard to know how he will mature. Yet, like the sprouting blade of grass which he digs out but decides to bury again to give it more time to mature, he realizes that "one day [he] may struggle out of [his] tender".

In "Sandhills", a comparison is drawn between the birds and the speaker. The cranes' connection with their surroundings is passed onto the speaker with mixed cultural origins. Part of this connection is embodied in the cranes' ability to adapt to the changes which are sensed in the different environments between which they keep moving. Similarly, the individual with mixed identities learns not to see the changes he experiences in his social surroundings as threats, but as a route leading to a myriad of opportunities.

In Majaj's selected poems, the connection between the natural and the human worlds is more directly represented through the use of personification. In "Seasons of Fire", for instance, the description of nature is interweaved with a description of the harsh conditions displaced Palestinians have suffered from for being forced to leave their homeland. It is as if the surrounding environmental elements are experiencing the same agony as the Palestinians who are being evacuated but exhibit the same feelings of resistance in the face of the Israeli occupation. As the Palestinians leave their homeland to another, the natural elements in the new environment are described as sharing the same agony of those in the homeland.

The same connection is noticed in "Asphodel". The asphodels which are personified to help make the connection between the natural and human more feasible are represented as human beings who interact with their surroundings and resist being torn apart from them. In "Tree", the trees are personified as well. The speaker represents them as human beings watching a scene and this ascertains the fact that in the poems by Majaj natural elements are involved in action in an attempt to emphasize the connection between nature and the human society.

In "Wind-Song, Winter Sea", the same connection is noticed between the seagulls and the natural surroundings. As the speaker describes the seagulls, he integrates their movement into a larger scene which includes the other natural elements. Though the human elements are absented from the poem, the wholeness of the scene shows that just as the olive trees and the asphodels, the seagulls take part in action and thus testify to the embedded message the poem holds: the connection between nature and the human society.

Despite the different ways Hogan and Majaj employ kinesthetic images in the selected poems, both impart a message which, from an eco-cultural perspective, highlights the fact that the relation between the individual with a hybrid identity and nature is based on connectivity and diversity (Zapf, 2016, 139-141). Portraying the living creatures and the non-living objects in nature as constantly moving and interacting with each other implies that both poets perceive identity formation as an ongoing process of interaction with one's surroundings. And this process acquires more importance in the case of individuals with mixed cultural origins. This is seen in the comparisons the two poets draw between nature and the human society, represented in the figure of the speaker in each poem. As the speaker describes the continuous and harmonious interaction taking place between the living and the non-living elements of nature, he foresees himself engaging in the same interaction in society.

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