

“Fuel Burns Mixed with Seawater”: The Relationship between the Refugee Tragedy and the Ecological Crisis in the Mediterranean Sea in Khaled Mattawa’s *Mare Nostrum* (2019)

Ashwaq Basnawi

Department of European Languages and Literature
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
King Abdulaziz University
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

With environmental sustainability gaining more attention in contemporary literature, Arab-American poets have begun to focus on the connection between nature and current Middle Eastern and North African politics. Khaled Mattawa's fifth collection of poems, *Mare Nostrum* (2019), discusses the twenty-first-century refugee crisis in the Mediterranean through the effects of economics and environmental destruction on both humans and marine ecosystems alike. This paper aims to examine the Mediterranean migrant tragedy's entanglement with its ecological crisis in Mattawa's poems. The study seeks to answer the question: can an analysis of *Mare Nostrum* (2019) illustrate a parallel between humans' oppression and the environment? A postcolonial ecocritical lens can explore this connection by looking at the "changing relationship between people, animals, and environment . . . that can be recuperated for anticolonial critique" (Huggan and Tiffin 12). The study's significance exists in showing the destructive impact of political crises that extend beyond human displacement to become an ecological issue that threatens marine ecosystems. The study's findings reveal that Mattawa's poems illustrate that the environmental and humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean is a result of both economic and political instability.

Keywords: Arab-American literature, Khaled Mattawa *Mare Nostrum*, marine ecosystem, the Mediterranean refugee crisis, nature, postcolonial ecocriticism

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Introduction

Khaled Mattawa (1964-) is a translator, anthologist, educator, and a MacArthur Fellowship recipient who immigrated to the U.S. in his early teens. Interest in poetry came out of his experiences of living in exile and feelings of homesickness, which he expressed through verse. Mattawa has published six collections of poetry.¹[i] His first and second collections *Ismailia Eclipse* (1995) and *Zodiac of Echoes* (2003) are lyrical critiques of the different kinds of repression Americans and Arabs face daily. On the personal side, these collections depict the complex relationships between native language and place in constructing the diasporic identity. Hassan (2006) notes that Mattawa's writing is "evocative of the difficult negotiation of attachment and distance produced out of filial ties to the Arabic language and Arab places" (pp. 135-136). Also, Mattawa's third collection *Amorisco* (2008) returns to Libya for a personal and political lyrical exploration of a country affected by a history of imperialism and current political strife. *Tocqueville* (2010), his fourth collection, moves away from the lyricism of his earlier collections to criticize Americans' "implicatedness" in enjoying "the vulnerable privilege of a first-world existence on a planet in political, economic, and ecological crisis" (Metres, 2010). This collection takes a step further towards the political and ecological dialogues that his more recent publications would present.

In addition to his poetry, Mattawa connects to the Arab world through his Arabic poetry translations. He explains that his translations aim to situate Arabic poetry in the English poetry canon by bringing "the Arab experience or issues in Arab life (. . .) into American English." There is also the additional benefit of helping him to formulate his voice and "learn[ing] how to write modern poetry" (Stafford, 2014). Mattawa has also co-edited two widely cited anthologies: *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Arab American Fiction* (2004) and *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999). He edits the *Michigan Quarterly Review* and has received many prizes and grants for his poetry and translations.

His fifth collection, *Mare Nostrum* (2019), draws parallels between his focus on the migration crisis in the Arab world and his interest in environmental degradation, raising awareness of the negative effect of politics and economics on the environment. Mattawa uses the vulnerable and volatile representation of the sea to draw attention to the particular tragedy of refugees crossing the Mediterranean and how this crisis plays into a larger narrative of political oppression and historical imperialism. His poems lament a region where politics exploit both humans and nature. Mattawa engages in this multicultural ecocritical conversation by attracting attention to the Mediterranean as a region ravaged by colonialism and environmental collapse.

Although Mattawa writes about current issues, such as refugee crises and environmental degradation, his work is understudied. Other than an early 2006 interview by Salah Hassan in *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)*, a 2020 interview by Hadji Bakara and Joshua Miller in *The Journal of Narrative Theory (JNT)*, and some articles in online magazines, no researchers have published on Mattawa's work. Both Amal Frag's "Khaled Mattawa and the Construction of National Identity in Exile" (2016) and Leslie Tramontini's "Sheltering the Longing in the Pain of the Words" (2011) write about the formation of Arab identity and culture in exile and the tenuous ties to the homeland presented in Mattawa's works. Although these studies explore essential themes in his earlier poetry, my paper aims to examine the connection between the Mediterranean's migrant tragedy and its marine ecological crisis in his collection *Mare*

Nostrum (2019). This study has not been explored before by highlighting in Mattawa's poems the many functions that contribute to global conversations on migration and sustainable development of sea and marine resources.

This paper begins by situating the study within a postcolonial ecocritical framework to illustrate Arab American writing's contribution to multicultural conversations regarding the connection between environmental issues and social justice. It then highlights the colonial connotations of the title that were used by the Italians to claim the Mediterranean region. The analysis proceeds to analyze three pivotal poems from the collection in which Mattawa traces the tragic journey of the migrants from the start of the collection to the end. The trip begins in "Psalm of Departure" with those who pursue unrealistic dreams of delivery from ecological devastation and oppression with long waits by the shore and prayers. "Fuel Burns" graphically shows that human activities, represented by the boat fuel, jeopardize the existence of both humans and marine ecology as the migrants' skin melts when fuel from the canisters spills on them and pollutes the sea. The wild sea waves threaten the migrants' lives with drowning when seawater pours into the boat. "Psalm for the Departed" is an elegy and prayer for those who pay their lives for unattainable dreams. Through this trajectory, Mattawa suggests that the migrants' tragic lives have destined them for death, whether on land or sea.

Literature Review: Ecocriticism in Arab-American Writing

Ecocriticism, as prominent ecocritic Glotfelty (1996) explains, "is the study of the relationship between language and the physical environment (. . .) ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (p. xvii). With the rise of environmental activism, ecocriticism has become a useful lens to study nature's cultural perceptions in literary texts. As Glotfelty (1996) argues:

in the future we can expect to see ecocritical scholarship becoming ever more interdisciplinary, multicultural . . . It will become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice and when a diversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion. (p. xxv)

The link between the environment and cultural politics opens up pathways for approaching literature belonging to nations that have suffered from climate change, droughts, famine, plagues, and political turmoil, such as Middle Eastern and North African countries. An ecocritical perspective investigates these works' creative engagement with the political and sociological issues that impact their natural environments.

One challenge involved in reading Arab-American literature through ecocriticism is the perspective that the environment is "peripheral to political turmoil instead of embroiled in it," (Haque, 2019, p. 69). Yet Arab-American writers are drawn into creative and literary conversations about the environment. Nabhan (2016) describes that many Arabs are "climate refugees, from meteorological droughts and local plagues, or from political droughts, such as water wars or the export of peasant-grown foods to industrialized countries" (p. vi). Not only have these environmental conditions impacted people's livelihoods, but they have also inspired writers to engage with the issues that arise from them creatively. Middle Eastern scholars such as Sinno (2013) advocate for this movement: "the greening of modern Arabic literature is a legitimate

project, worthy of further investigation and integration into the growing ecocriticism scholarship in the USA and the world" (pp. 142-143).^[ii] As such, ecocriticism is a useful approach through which researchers explore the representations of nature in the works of Arab writers, specifically in their portrayal of the migrants' relationship to nature and Arab writers' relationship to place.

Early comparative studies seek to introduce the multicultural U.S. writing into ecocritical studies by comparing the representation of nature and the environment in two works by Arab-American and Chicana women writers (Nolasco-Bell, 2013). The study looks at the protagonists' interactions with their environment from a cultural view. Two years later, Ismet Bujupaj (2015) read the poetry of Arab-American women poets using an ecocritical approach and finds that "debates of cultural identity" and representations of nature are not mutually exclusive; in fact, the study of "nature adds a deeper dimension to experiences already shaped by political and cultural contestations" (para. 2). In these works, nature acts as a spiritual force that consoles the migrants' nostalgic feelings towards the homeland and creates links between host land and homeland. A more recent article, "Nature in Naomi Shihab Nye's Works: A Vehicle for Creating Peace" (2017), draws on ecocritical theories to show that Naomi Shihab Nye's works depict nature "as a means for creating and sustaining peace and serenity" (Allani, 2017, p. 42). The paper highlights nature's role in settling political tensions between the East and West in Nye's poetry.

Due to the entanglement of politics with nature, writers connect people's oppression with the treatment of the environment. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) considered the convergence of postcolonial and environmental studies as postcolonial ecocriticism that addresses:

the need for a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals and environment – one that requires attention, in turn, to the cultural politics of representation as well as to those more specific 'processes of mediation [...] that can be recuperated for anticolonial critique.' (p. 12)

The writings of contemporary Arab-Americans engage with the "cultural, moral, and aesthetic issues surrounding the environment," as Nabhan (2016, p. vi) notes. Due to the different experiences of Arab-Americans, they approach their connection to the environment from various perspectives.

The latest postcolonial ecocritical reading of Arab-American literature, and the reading most relevant to this study, is Danielle Haque's "Water Occupation and the Ecology of Arab American Literature" (2019). Haque (2019) compares the threat of the Dakota pipeline to the Israeli occupation of the water in Gaza by analyzing the works of Laila Halaby, Rasha Abdulhadi, and Dawud Mulla. Her research gives an account of the marginalization of ethnic groups that "transform[s] them into peripheral citizens subject to state terror, and terminate[s] tribal and local sovereignties" (p. 66). Haque argues that human practices impact humans' relationship to land and water in the same way that water colonization affects the seas' ecology via countries' colonization. These recent studies on Arab-American literature use an ecocritical approach to explore the problematic representations of nature in Arab-American writings that are impacted by cultural and political views of the environment.

Nature in Arab-American poetry connects the present diasporic home with the former homeland. Poets use it to engage in reflective thought to overcome the spatial gap between these

two places. Arab-American poets such as Lisa Majaj, Naomi Nye, and Mohja Kahf depict the homeland's natural landscapes – Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria – as sites of remembrance, sources of spirituality, and chances for peace between East and West (Allani, 2017; Bujupaj, 2015). However, these writers do not explore the role of politics in displacing humans and exploiting the land. Khaled Mattawa, a prominent Libyan poet, approaches nature related to the migration crisis. His Libyan origins contribute to his focus on the political and ecological situation in the Mediterranean region.

***Mare Nostrum*: An Ecological and Humanitarian Crisis**

The tragic destiny of the Mediterranean region and its inhabitants is caught up in its history of colonialism as represented in the title to the collection, *Mare Nostrum*. In a video entitled "Mare Nostrum: Lyric Documentation and the Migrant" (*Crisis/Flow*, 2018), Mattawa explains the historical and political significance of the phrase *mare nostrum*, Latin for our sea. This term, first used by the Romans, was adopted by the Italians in 2013 after the Lampedusa boat tragedy when 366 migrants from Africa drowned in the Mediterranean. The Italians revived the term to name a military operation conducted from October 2013 to October 2014 to stop or thwart the increasing flow of migrants from Libya and other African and Middle Eastern countries to European countries. This name's choice shows that the Italians tried to claim control over the sea and, by doing so, over the activities of people who used it.

In the early twentieth century, the Italians colonized Libya. As heirs to the Roman imperialism, the Italians laid claim to Libya as their fourth shore. According to Mattawa, colonization brought the following with it:

modern modes of administration, government, and systems of oppression. Before the Italians, Libya had been part of the Ottoman Empire for four hundred years. Although that regime was also oppressive, people had an allegiance to the Caliph and to the notion of a unified Muslim entity. Unlike the Turks, the 'modern' Italians wanted to confiscate land and inhabit it with their own people. (Mobility & Movement, 2018)

As Lovino (2017) explains, the negative connotation of "Mare Nostrum" stems from its impact on people of the global south, for whom the term is "a propriety expression where 'nostrum' clearly refers to a Euro-Atlantic collective of forces" (p. 7). In naming his collection *Mare Nostrum*, Mattawa is imaginatively reclaiming the Mediterranean region from a history of imperialism. Indeed, the recovery of colonized land starts, according to Edward Said (1994), "only through imagination" (p. 77). The collection of poems in *Mare Nostrum* is approached in this paper through an ecocritical reading of nature's treatment as impacted by politics and a close reading of various poetic forms.

Mattawa writes in multiple forms, in psalms, lyric narratives, songs, a blues poem, an ode, a dramatic monologue, an erasure, two Qasidas,^[iii] a poetic journal, and an 'Allam.'^[iv] This variety stands as a textured testament to the diverse narratives and multicultural experiences of the migrants. Mattawa identifies the theme and setting of migration from Arab Mediterranean countries in the first epigraph to the collection taken from Algerian singer Dahman El Harrach's famous song "Ya Rayah":

Traveler, where are you heading?

You embark, take sick and return.

So many innocents like you and me

were duped and lost their way. (Mattawa, 2019, p. 4)

The song holds an iconic place in Arab migrant culture as it laments the suffering of the migrant in the diaspora due to displacement, alienation, and nostalgia for the homeland. It posits migration as a flawed solution for Arab migrants. Opening the collection with the theme of the "many innocents" who "were duped and lost their way" supports Mattawa's project of uncovering the painful and dark side of migration. The phrase "lost their way" suggests loss of home and identity, failure to return, or even worse, death. The word "embark," which hints that the means of transportation is by ship, leads into the second epigraph Mattawa uses, which he takes from Emily Dickinson's "How sick — to wait — in any place — but thine —":

Ours be the tossing — wild through the sea —

Rather than a mooring — unshared by thee. (Mattawa, 2019, p. 4)

With this second epigraph, Mattawa explicitly identifies the means of migration as being by "sea." As Dahman El Harrach does in his song, Dickinson emphasizes the dangers of traveling by sea. She uses the sea, which she describes as "tossing" and "wild," as a metaphor for extreme and unbridled love that can be dangerous to both lovers. Mattawa seems to have chosen this quote for its literal representation of the sea and its symbolic connotations. The metaphor allows him to present the journey over the sea as a deadly passion for migrants, who prefer those rough waters over "a mooring" in a place of safety and refuge. Paradoxically, however, the speakers of these two epitaphs take opposite positions in this saga. The speaker in "Ya Rayah" appears to be a wise native of the traveler's homeland who warns the migrant of the risks and dangers of irregular migration pathways; the speaker in Dickinson's poem, though also a migrant, romanticizes the journey, clinging to the dream of better prospects and work opportunities. Dickinson's poem's message is clear: a life without risk is not a life worth living. Thus, Mattawa presents two perspectives of the migrant experience: the realistic and the ideal.

The cover image of the collection was produced by the Tunisian-born immigrant Slim Fejjari (2011), who knows too well the long and challenging journey of migrants after surviving the experience before finding a home in Italy (see figure one). From a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, the illustration is a chilling depiction of the impact of politics and economics on humans' relationship with nature. The picture reproduces the theme of migration and its challenges in an art form. As depicted in the image below, an overcrowded boat of hopefuls braves its way across the tumultuous sea. The ship appears suspended in sea and time with any chance of rescue or salvation out of sight. The bird's-eye view of the ratio of the sea to the migrants captures "an omniscient viewpoint that leaves no room for intervention—the crowded vessel is dwarfed by the surrounding sea, whose waves curl like ferocious eyes around the tiny boat" (Zemel, 2018).



Figure 1. Erano come due notti (2011)

The aerial view also compresses the migrants on the boat into a single black bullet-shaped form, which creates an existential moment for the migrants that echoes Jean-Paul Sartre's (1956) concept of being-in-itself and being-for-itself. The in-itself being is unconscious, passive, and inanimate, while the for-itself is conscious, dynamic, and alive. As the migrants are stripped of their agency and become one with the boat, they are static beings-in-themselves, submitting to the sea's will. On the other hand, the sea's waves' ferocious movement portrays an omnipotent being-for-itself conscious of its threat against humans and in control of their destiny. This binary represents not only the imminent fate of the migrants but also their vulnerability.

If Fejjari's illustration denotes the universal dilemma of migrants, Mattawa's collection portrays the specific plight of migrants from the west and central Africa. The collection's trajectory reflects the route of the migrant's journey: the departure of the disillusioned, the horrific journey itself, and the obscure fate of the departed. Like the cover image, the poems end on a vague note with no refuge in sight.

The migrants' tragic narrative begins with "Psalm of Departure," which establishes the collection's bleak and sad tone. The verse, quoted here in its entirety, is set in Africa and highlights the theme of departure:

Locusts wrap the sun in gauze,
the river swallows its banks.
No pleasure but seeing the no-
king crop here, the no-fields,
a petrified forest where twins were slain.
Someone will follow a bird.
The work of fire never ends:
Djinn build cities of mirage,
the poor stand waiting by the shore.
Signs made of stardust and spider
thread. Any way you measure it,
the difference will be a road. (Mattawa, 2019, p. 7)

The title of the poem evokes Hebrew prayers, as the entry for "psalm" in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* shows that "the term usually refers to the Hebrew verses in the biblical book of Psalms" (Baldick, 1996, p. 181). Together with "departure," the poem alludes to the Israelite's liberation from slavery and suffering, as stated in the Book of Exodus. The word "exodus" is used in many news articles and reports on Africa to denote the mass movement of migrants across land and sea and their dreams of deliverance. Namely, the first two tercets describe the harsh environmental conditions that constitute the main reason for leaving the island, and the second two describe idealized dreams of migration. Mattawa explains that the desolate African "environment is part of it, these places had become bereft of their source of living, with devastated economies" (Smyth, 2019). Foregrounding this poem at the start of the collection underscores the influence of the environment on migration.

Drawing on psalms' connection to biblical literature, the first line of the poem evokes the ancient plague of a massive locust swarm. Hundreds of billions of swarms like this ravage the crops of East Africa. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) calls these swarms "extremely alarming" and an "unprecedented threat" to the region. It reports that "[t]ens of thousands of hectares of croplands and pasture have been damaged in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia with potentially severe consequences in a region where 11.9 million people are already food insecure" (Food and Agricultural Organization, 2020).

In the context of dry environments and food shortages, locust swarms migrate in search of better resources, but the swarms devastate the vegetation and livelihood of humans as they travel; thus, an ecocentric reading of the first line shows that the wellbeing of locusts and that of humans are mutually exclusive. Through personifying the locusts, which "wrap the sun in gauze," as well as the river, which "swallows its banks," the poem creates a bewildering sight of sky and earth masked, giving nature agency as the catalyst for departure. Nature not only offers "no pleasure" visually but also no sustenance, with the "no-king crops" and the "no fields."

In the second stanza, nature witnesses humans' transgressions against each other committed through age-old traditions. The "forest" is "petrified" as it becomes a graveyard "where twins were slain." Mattawa refers to some Nigerian tribes' practice of killing twin babies based on the belief that twins are evil spirits that threaten the village people's safety. The villagers believe the twins to have strong powers and call them "gods among men. So, at birth, the entire village is alerted that a threat and perhaps an evil has been born into the community" (Sunday, 2018). Chinua Achebe describes in his novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1994), that in the Igbo society, "twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest" to die (p. 61). Therefore, with Mattawa drawing parallels between the deterioration of the environment and human suffering, the last line of the second tercet figuratively states the consequence of this calamity when migrants follow birds. As birds symbolize freedom and life, humans turn to this aspect of nature for escape.

With its ability to soar above sorrow, the bird's symbol ushers in the lighter tone of hope mixed with illusoriness in Mattawa's last two tercets. Djinn, which in Arabian mythology and theology are devious spirits made of fire, is the subject of the third tercet's first two lines. Mattawa (2019) draws on them as an allegory for the smugglers who give false hope to the "poor stand waiting by the shore," (p. 7) whose indefinite state is countered by the hope of escape as illustrated in the internal rhyme "poor" and "shore." Geddes et al. (2019) note that smugglers help to enable

the migrant flow by "exploit[ing] vulnerable people and put[ting] their lives at risk . . . tricking migrants into making the journey and giving them the means to do so" (p. 97). Additionally, the word "poor" is a pun, indicating that the people are impoverished, but also naïve, having been duped by the smugglers into paying their life's savings in hopes of a better life as in Dahman El Harrach's song "Ya Rayah."

The mythical atmosphere continues in the last tercet. The road signs of the migrants' journey are crafted tenuously, made of "spider thread" and magical "stardust." The smooth-talking of the smugglers is apparent in the alliteration of the "s" here – "signs," "stardust," and "spider." The whole image is idealistic and romantic, marking the migrant's unrealistic perception of crossing the sea. This dream comes to a halt at the end of the poem when the speaker warns a migrant listener ("you") of the dangers of the journey: "Any way you measure it, / The difference will be a road." Thus, the poem ends by lamenting that the sorrowful conclusion is the same no matter which road the migrants take, whether by land or sea. Mattawa's use of the word "road" instead of "sea" alludes to his grandparents, who migrated to Egypt on foot when the Italians conquered his ancestral city, Misrata, in 1923. Moreover, "road" signifies the universal concept of migration. As Taylor (2019) notes, "Psalm of Departure" is "a tiny poem that in only twelve lines captures a moment that must have been reflected in millions of imaginations."

The other poems in the collection form a roadmap of the many stations and experiences on the journey from the west and central Africa to the Mediterranean: Addis Ababa, Mount Entoto, the Nile river, Khartoum, Darfur, Sebha, Arwad, Daraa, Agadez, Nimroz, Abyssinia, and Bani Walid. As migrants leave these places behind, Mattawa describes the areas in "Season of Migration to the North/Northwest" (2019) as dilapidated places with "Names like shabby trees on a map" (p. 9). In "Psalm on the Road to Agadez" (2019), the repetition of "North" underscores migrants' unidirectional mass migration around the clock: "Day and night / West to North / East to North / North to North / to North to North" (p. 10). However, the dangers of the journey across the land are only half the story. If the migrants survive crossing the Sahara's sea of sand, they must endure the second part of crossing the earthy ocean of the Mediterranean – a graveyard with no return.

Mattawa seeks to draw attention to this fatal kind of migration in "Fuel Burns" by underscoring the connections between the humanitarian crisis and the Mediterranean Sea's environmental crisis. After coming across a blog post entitled "Fuel Burns" by a Canadian doctor volunteering in the Mediterranean region, Mattawa discovered that in addition to hypothermia and dehydration, migrants suffer from fuel burns when boat fuel mixed with seawater burns their skin. Since the scars left by these burns are a physical reminder of the suffering of the migrants, Mattawa's adoption of the title of Giles's (2018) report invites readers to consider the various potential meanings of "burns," which can result in loss of skin, loss of dreams, and loss of life:

Gasoline canisters leak
or get knocked over;
gasoline mixes with seawater,
and when the mixture
touches human skin,
skin begins to burn. (Mattawa, 2019, p. 26)

Mattawa explains the poetic form as an erasure, which removes words and phrases from a text to create a second version that is shorter and sharper than the original (Poetry Foundation). He illustrates that, by crossing out specific words and sentences in Giles's post, he "whittled or rephrased" seven hundred words down to one hundred and thirty-five words." Mattawa did this with the purpose of "let[ing] the images simply speak for themselves. I did not cut off a lot of her language. It was simply a matter of making it a tighter description" (Kenyon Review, 2019). Using erasure, Mattawa finds a way of engaging with the migrant crisis by engaging with first-hand accounts of the migrants' suffering in Giles's blog. The form that is produced entirely from deleting is appropriate to depict the loss of lives in the crisis and alert the reader to the ghostly presence in the original report's background.

From the beginning, "Fuel Burns" presents that human activities and the ecological are entangled. Mattawa's articulation in line three that "gasoline mixes with seawater" implies "the impossibility of an ontological divide between nature and culture" (Alaimo, 2012, p. 489). Humans are not only primary consumers of land and sea environments, but they are also abusers. Although fossil fuels are natural resources that are mined and used for energy, their misuse can negatively impact marine ecology. Doney (2010) explains in "The Growing Human Footprint on Coastal and Open-Ocean Biogeochemistry" that "[h]uman activities have also increased levels of naturally occurring compounds such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, which have sources from petroleum spills . . . and fossil fuels" (p. 1516). Mattawa illustrates in the first two lines of the first stanza that some spills are a result of the "Gasoline canisters [that] leak / or get knocked over." In "A Global Map of Human Impact on Marine Ecosystems," it is reported that 41% of the world's oceans are impacted by human activities, with the Mediterranean being one of the most impacted regions (Halpern et al., 2008). This detrimental impact of human stressors will result in the loss of precious marine life that will further jeopardize other species' survival in the area. The oxymoronic mixture of gasoline with seawater is a grim reminder of human civilization's ecological consequences on all organisms.

However, the gasoline-seawater environmental hazard is additionally dangerous because "when the mixture / touches human skin, / skin begins to burn" (Mattawa, 2019, p. 26). Mattawa takes this image from a section in Giles's (2018) blog that graphically describes the effect of the toxic mix on skin:

Picture the effects of having a vegetable peeler applied to someone's buttocks, plus or minus the backs of the legs (. . .) and back (. . .) Fuel burns occur when gasoline mixes with seawater and then comes in contact with human skin. In a remarkably short period of time, the skin begins to burn.

The proximity of the fuel spilling in the first stanza to the burning in the second stanza creates a unified frame of reference for the tragedy mirroring the short time it takes the skin to burn. Form reinforces content as the two stanzas' lines are connected through enjambment, coming to an end with the consequential "burn." Together with Dr. Giles's report, the poem shows us that the "stories" of environmental crisis and migrant crisis "are connected;" in essence, "Humanity is all involved" (Smyth, 2019). Mattawa's "underscoring [of] connections between environmental injustices and human suffering," according to Danielle Haque (2019), "is key to articulating

postcolonial ecology" (p. 72). His description of the marine ecosystem destroyed by gasoline intensifies the representation of the fuel's devastating effect on humans.

The poem's stanzaic division situates the victims who "are at highest risk" at the poem's center. In eleven stanzas, the poem alternates in a pattern of two stanzas versus one. Two stanzas describe the tragedy alongside one stanza about the "women and children" who "fall through the floor / or are trampled, and drown," mirroring their place at "the center of the boat" (Mattawa, 2019, p. 26). In her blog, Giles (2018) explains the tragedy of their vulnerable position:

People sitting in the bottom of the boat are at the highest risk of acquiring these burns when the canisters carrying gasoline leak, get knocked over, or the gasoline is dumped out in a frantic bid to bail out a sinking dinghy. In the dinghies, women are the most likely to be found sitting on the floor as people erroneously believe it is the safest location in the boat.

The unsteady structure of the boat compounds the risk of burning from the fuel. Commercial dinghies are "fitted / with plywood floors," and the wood "expands, and then splits" when it "soaks up water" (Mattawa, 2019, p. 26), as Mattawa explains in the poem. As the boat is at risk of sinking, the boat structure's tenuousness sets the migrants up for death. The "tragic irony," as Mattawa explains, is the diversity of risks women and children face. While the fuel burns when gasoline canisters spill, the planks of the floor are "fixed with nails and screws / that puncture people's feet" (Mattawa, 2019, p. 26), and when these planks begin to split apart, the boat sinks. The vulnerability of migrants' lives is rendered by the cheap plywood's precariousness that expands with moisture and is less sturdy than solid wood. As Giles (2018) explains, these women end up "falling through the floor and getting trampled in the ensuing panic. Tragically, when people trample each other on a leaky boat, they often drown in just a few inches of water." These lines depict humans' complicated relationship with the marine ecosystem and the impact of postcolonial Africa's political and socio-economic situation on both man and sea.

Mattawa's gruesome imagery to describe the migrants' injuries echoes the physical suffering soldiers face in war. In an interview with Mattawa, Gareth Smyth (2019) points out that the "scratches, bite marks, / cuts and bruises" in the "bodies of survivors" (Mattawa, 2019, pp. 26-27) as depicted in "Fuel Burns" resemble the wounds of soldiers in the English poetry of World War I. Mattawa draws on Wilfred Owen's image in the poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1920) of a victim of "gas-shells" that leaves him with "white eyes writhing in his face," and "blood / Come[s] gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs." In the tragic irony of the title and the soldier's hardship, Mattawa notes that "Owen presents one case study, one death, which becomes an argument against patriotism being sweet and delightful (. . .) [using] factual detail" (Smyth, 2019). Drawing a parallel between soldiers' distress and the distress of migrants, Mattawa indirectly argues against fanciful perceptions of migration. His message is that migration is neither glorious nor worth the struggle as it does not offer the rewards that the sacrifice entails – only the tragedy of death awaits.

"Fuel Burns" ends on an ironic note. The doctors treating the survivors become endangered themselves, as their protective gloves dissolve upon touching the survivors' clothes. The fuel-seawater mixture is so corrosive that, as Giles (2018) explains, "just touching their clothing has been enough to make . . . medical latex gloves melt." The word "melt" that concludes the poem further presents the reader with two tragic ironies. On one level, it prompts the reader to consider

that the mixture's damage to human skin is far worse than what it does to the gloves. On another level, it signifies the vulnerability of those involved in this crisis, even the physicians. "It's also a point," as Mattawa notes, "where the person who is protected loses their protection. That's where I wanted to leave reader, feeling the glove burning under their fingers" (Kenyon Review, 2019). The message at the end of the poem is clear: there is a strong connection between humans' destiny and nature in the way that the violation against one leads to the ruin of the other.

In the last poem of the collection, "Psalm for the Departed," Mattawa (2019) returns to the entangled destiny of humans and nature presented in Slim Fejjari's illustration on the cover. The poem is an elegy connecting the land to the migrant's death as he is buried with "a fistful of myrrh in his left hand" while "his voice [is] a thread buried in sand." The migrant's body is a relic of the land as the "myrrh" embalms it, and the intangible voice becomes a physical metaphor "in sand." His soul, however, belongs to the sky on its "upward flight" like the "Bennu," soaring above the suffering and pain as "a fluorescent light / inflaming a sky gleaming / with ink." The elegy's narration is from the standpoint of a new migrant who is one of the many nameless symbols "waiting to be assigned" to his fate. As the third stanza transitions to the fourth, the speaker moves from a monologue to a conversation, asking the migrant to "measure" the loss of his life ("in blood") due to the illicit desire ("heart's contraband") of a better land, indicating that the cost of this passion was the migrant's life. The shift in reference from the specific "your heart" to the more general "the mind" in the last stanza suggests that the speaker addresses not only the migrant himself but also all future migrants. The message itself seems to be to "withstand" their life of suffering and pain rather than give in to a dream that could never be "disavow[ed]." The collection leaves us with the grim reminder that there is no escape from suffering except death.

Conclusion

Mare Nostrum (2019) illustrates the correlation between environmental and humanitarian crises. Khaled Mattawa shows that ecological and economic destruction impact both marine ecosystems and humans throughout the poetic collection. By drawing parallels between the Arab refugee crisis and the Mediterranean ecological crisis, Mattawa aims to voice the moral and cultural concerns raised by both problems. Using images of environmental collapse and dangerous seas, and diverse poetic forms, Mattawa presents nature as a threatening force and a catalyst for the migrants' departure. The oil spills from the migrants' boats, in turn, reveal the danger of human activities to the marine ecosystem of the Mediterranean Sea. In particular, Mattawa's use of the erasure poem reimagines migrant and marine life's tragic interconnectedness.

This paper explores Mattawa's account of the negative impact that politics has on the people of the Mediterranean and their environment through a postcolonial ecocritical approach that looks at "the complex interplay of environmental categories (. . .) with political or cultural categories" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 2). He seeks to reveal the problematic relationships between European powers and their former colonies and peoples. This theme permeates not only this collection but also many of his other poems. Therefore, the historical and political articulations of the mutual oppression of nature and human culture in Arab-American literature contribute to the "interdisciplinary [and] multicultural" discussions of the connections "between the environment and issues of social justice" that Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) anticipates in ecocritical scholarship (p. xxv). Like other Arab-American writers, Mattawa uses nature to express nostalgic

sentiments towards the homeland. Yet, it is the harmful impact of politics on migrants and nature that distinguish his work.

Notes

[i] Mattawa's sixth collection, *Fugitive Atlas: Poems* (2020), was recently published.

[ii] Recent examples of ecocritical readings of Arab literature are Hala Ewaidat's (2020) exploration of the political and economic questions that surround ecological issues in Al-Sharqaw's *Al-Ardd*; Hamoud Ahmed and Ruzy Hashim's (2014) ecopostcolonial reading of Mahmoud Darwish's opposition of colonialism through poems on nature; and Sharif Elmusa's (2013) examination of the role of Arab desert novels in evoking the figure of the "Ecological Bedouin."

[iii] The Qasida is a classical Arabic poetic form that evokes memories of lost love. It is a long, fixed verse form divided into three parts and relays the speaker's yearning for the beloved (Koenek, 2014).

[iv] Allams are poems sung by the eastern Sahara Desert nomads between Libya and Egypt. They are discursive short poetic sequences lined up in rows and columns, reflecting the nomad's physical and emotional struggles in the desert (Smyth, 2019).

About the author

Dr. Ashwaq Basnawi is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. She specializes in contemporary women's poetry. Her interests lie in ecocriticism, environmental studies, and representations of diaspora and migration in postcolonial literature.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2605-335X>

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