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**Nature-Healing: Ecopsychological Readings of
Anthony Doerr's Short Stories**

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The Shell Collector, The Caretaker and Mkondo

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Though the act of displacement includes elements of both, geographic or spatial change, as well as psychic upheaval, most narratives on displacement tend to focus on the psychological aspect. However, it is equally important to consider the role of altered environments on human psyche, especially in a world where human intervention is increasingly affecting ecology. The reason why most critiques do not integrate the ecological and psychological dimensions of displacement is because of an underlying implication of the nature/culture binary—a distinction of the human from the non-human environment, as if the former does not actively construct, and get constructed by the latter.

Within the larger ambit of ecocritical discourses, ecopsychology represents a nascent field of theorization that seeks to bridge this gap. Ecopsychology, as a largely overlooked academic intersection of psychological and ecological discourses, questions the human condition itself by seeking to establish a relationship between humanity and nature rooted in the psyche. However, the most significant gap in ecopsychological knowledge is its underutilization in critical work, for analyses of cultural and literary products that are a reflection of our socio-political scenario. In other words, there have been precious few instances of interaction between ecopsychology and literature. This, despite the fact that the parent field of ecocriticism has long demonstrated the implications of literary ecology. Furthermore, ecopsychology has tended to rely more on phenomenological and experiential methodologies, leaving the entire area of methodologies related to textual and discourse analysis unexplored.

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The present research attempts to do precisely that—to bring together ecopsychology and literature, to employ key concepts and theorizations from ecopsychology to read literary narratives. In the process, this research hopes to extend both fields. This paper analyzes three short stories contained in the debut collection of American author Anthony Doerr through the lens of ecopsychology. In *The Shell Collector*, *The Caretaker* and *Mkondo*, Doerr depicts displaced characters who find a certain psychological balance through the relationship they develop with nature. This paper employs textual analysis to understand how the development of an ecological unconscious—an almost spiritual bond with nature—leads to nature-healing: here understood as both, the act of preserving nature, and the process of being healed by and within nature. In the process, concepts of belongingness, exile and trauma are re-evaluated through an ecocritical lens. The ultimate assertion is that through such a depiction, these narratives go beyond anthropocentric models of representing psychological distress; instead, they present the possible role of affect-based ecological integration in addressing human trauma. By reading and problematizing themes of exile, alienation, belongingness, isolation, community, madness, etc. in the primary literary texts through an ecopsychological lens, this research points to a possibility of incorporating the ecological unconscious in our societal consciousness through the influential medium of literature.

All three of the stories that form the subject of study for this paper revolve around central characters that are displaced from their homelands. Such displacements often occupy the blurred boundaries between exile (self-imposed or otherwise) and escape, refuge and migration (forced or reluctant). In *The Shell Collector*, the eponymous, unnamed protagonist is a fifty-eight year old conchologist who leaves behind his birthplace of Whiteland, Canada, to settle in a thatch-roofed single-room hut on an island off the coast of Lamu, Kenya, after travelling the world. In *The Caretaker*, the protagonist, Joseph Saleeby is a refugee from the civil war in Liberia, who arrives on the shore of Astoria, Oregon, having physically escaped the traumatic conflict, but carrying the mental scars of the same. Lastly, *Mkondo* revolves around Naima, who falls in love with and marries an American fossil-hunter named Ward Beach, and migrates from Tanzania to Ohio. In every case, the central characters experience a loss of belongingness; in different ways, they come to experience what it is to be without a ‘home’.

Neil Evernden describes the feeling of being at home as the inexplicable ‘rightness’ of “knowing”, of having a “sense of place” that arises from “being part of a known place” (98). The “feeling of placelessness” engendered by not belonging or feeling homeless is a state of tension: since individuals exist only in the context of their place, feeling “out of context” is to be in a state of restless anxiety. (98) These theorizations hold true for the central protagonists in all three of Doerr’s short stories. “[T]he establishment of self is impossible without the context of place” (Evernden 101). What this means is that the immediate, spatial environment of an individual is intrinsic to the way that the individual conceives of themselves. The distinction of the human self from the non-human environment is a debilitating exercise in Cartesian dualism, something that ecopsychology as a discipline constantly opposes.

The shell collector in Doerr's story is a man whose sense of self is intimately tied up with his place in the world, and his profession as a conchologist forms a big part of it. Following his loss of vision, the only solace he has is in the world of shells and molluscs. Evernden states that "[p]erhaps the naturalist, with his penchant for learning the names of everything, is establishing a global space, making the world his home" (101). The shell collector certainly seems to fit the bill—"he learned to identify a shell by flipping it up in his hand; the shell spun, his fingers assessed its form, classified it: *Ancilla*, *Ficus*, *Terebra*" (Doerr 13). The question of the shell collector's place in the world is especially complicated by his blindness. As disability studies theorists often point out, disability is more a social condition than an inherent defect in the body. In being situated in a hostile environment, the 'impaired' body experiences a "misfit" (Garland-Thomson 591) that renders it disabled. In the beginning of the narrative, the reporters from the New York tabloid who arrive to interview the shell collector are "impressed he moved so quickly" because he is blind and the path isn't easy (Doerr 10). The point is, despite his blindness, the shell collector is attuned to his environment; he isn't disabled by this spatial setting that defines him, to which he belongs to. In fact, it is the tabloid reporters, the two Jims, who are disabled despite the lack of any obvious bodily impairment, because they are out-of-context in this setting.

Yet this 'home' that the shell collector manages to establish for himself is also an escape. His lover, Nancy, accuses him of having "run off"—far removed from any civilization or sense of community, he resides in isolation. He isn't even in regular contact with his son, Josh. Which is why when his island of solitude is invaded by the foreign presence of all those looking for "miracle cures" in the poison of the snails he studies, he is suddenly set adrift. "[T]he shell collector did not shell for fear that he would be followed" (Doerr 24), "[h]e began to doubt his previous identifications...it was terrible not to know" (Doerr 26). Thus driven out of context even in the place he knows best, he experiences what Glenn Albrecht termed solastalgia: "the pain experienced when there is a recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault...a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'" (Smith). For the shell collector, "everything was changing: the reef, his home, poor frightened Tumaini" (Doerr 26). The situation is further exacerbated after the death of his son Josh due to the same poisonous cone shell that people considered a "miracle cure". With the arrival of the police, "he felt as if thick clouds were being shoved between him and his world; his fingers, his senses, the ocean—all this was slipping away (Doerr 30). Alienated and disconnected from his only refuge, he undergoes a psychic exile.

In *The Caretaker*, the refuge itself becomes a space of exile. Haunted by the memory of his mother's death and his own hand in killing a possibly innocent man, Joseph Saleeby escapes to America from the civil war raging in his homeland, Liberia. "Rape, murder, an infant kicked against the wall, a boy with a clutch of dried ears suspended from his neck: in nightmares Joseph replays the worst things men do to each other" (Doerr 139). Deeply traumatized as he is, Liberia is his psychic wound; yet America offers him no solace while he stuck in a job as the caretaker of a seaside estate, Ocean

Meadows. Millionaires vacation in this spot; they get into food-fights and discard plump trash-bags as their only leavings, which form Joseph's chores. His survivor's guilt, and the blame he carries for the murder he was forced to commit get engraved so deeply in his mind that Joseph constantly fixates on the idea that "everything remains unburied" (Doerr 140)—his lost family, home, life and the innocence he cannot mourn.

In describing the ecology of grief, Phyllis Wilde's thesis explores ecological grief for its own sake. This paper, however, borrows from her theorizations to assert that ritual mourning for ecological loss, for scenes of despair in Nature, have a very important role in resolving grief caused due to other, more 'human' losses. Thus, in lieu of all the unburied bodies he left behind, Joseph "seeks salvation in the clandestine act of burying the hearts of beached whales" (from the backcover blurb). "Almost all of the literature on grief pertains to the death of humans" (Wilde 137). Grieving for ecological loss, then becomes something that the 'sane' human psyche has no right to; it is repressed and disclaimed grief. Joseph's grief, in the context of his displacement and exile, is equally as repressed and disclaimed. His ritual acts of digging the earth, eviscerating the dead whales, transporting their hearts and finally pushing them into the earth, appear irrational and insane. To him though, it provides some small measure of solace. "He thinks: at least I have buried something" (Doerr 144).

Naima's dilemma in *Mkondo*, following her marriage museum director Ward Beach, is the way migrating from the wild world she inhabited in Tanzania to the bleak cityscape of Ohio leaves her suffocated and alienated. The wildness, the movement that had defined so much of her life is tamed and rendered stagnant. "Somewhere inside she could feel the winds dying, the gales of her youth stifled. She was learning that in her life everything—health, happiness, even love—was subject to the landscape; the weathers of the world were inseparable from the weathers of her soul" (Doerr 199). Andy Fisher asserts that "one of the main consequences of adjusting to environments that are at odds with our nature is that we come to live according to certain meanings...that *replace* our own organismic, implicitly felt meanings" (76). In Naima's emotional universe, what this amounts to is an "immense emptiness" settling inside her (Doerr 204)—her memories had changed meanings, "had lost their context, their edge, their wild savor" (Doerr 205).

Naima's condition is a kind of trauma—she is dissociated from her very sense of self, disconnected to her inner reality. A consequence of her psychic exile is also her distancing from her husband, Ward. No longer is he the man who changed himself, became wild as "a stag in rut" (Doerr 197) to woo her in Tanzania; the Ward of Ohio, who works in a museum and names dead things for a living is so different that he and Naima are "leveraged apart by the incompatibility of their respective landscapes" (Doerr 203). Here too, therefore, the influence of environment extends beyond the merely physical.

Kaisa Puhakka introduces Andrew Harlem's idea of exile as "not just a migratory experience", but as "a dissociative state marked by gaps in appearances that are not bridged by memory"—one is therefore, in effect, exiled from one self, cannot reconcile with one's own psyche (16). Alienation, preceded by sensory shut-down or desensitization (Puhakka 15) leads to depersonalization—a loss of

sense of self. In all three of Doerr's short stories, when such a stage is reached, it is characterized as psychopathology—suffering of the psyche. Within the narrative universe they occupy, the characters are said to be suffering from madness.

Madness, as it is understood in relational context within a societal structure, is said to be a deviation from the norm. The one who is mad, therefore, is a deviant, does not fit in, is in some way 'abnormal'. Within *The Shell Collector*, *The Caretaker*, and *Mkondo*, all the three central characters exhibit traits of this kind of deviant "madness". The shell collector initially lives an absolutely secluded life, cut off from all community. He has no familial attachments, only fascination with the world of conchology which is more than a mere profession to him. Nancy implies that his way of life is 'unnatural', how he does not miss Josh, has neither fresh water nor friends, only bugs crawling in his bathtub. Later, when the entire world gets invested in the venomous snail that accidentally cured Nancy and then Seema, a native girl, only because of the 'miraculous' properties of the poison, the shell collector feels this is insane. Unlike the society he is a part of, his interest in conchology is not utilitarian, but aesthetic and emotional. That is what sets him apart, makes him the outsider.

In the case of both Joseph and Naima, their madness takes the form of bizarre actions that make no logical sense to the 'cultured' society they inhabit. Joseph buries the hearts of beached whales, forages in the forest like a 'savage', and grows a garden by moonlight. Naima invents the game of mkondo while in Tanzania, which involves running through uncharted trails in the forest. She does not get married, or settle down. "Children called her mwendawazimu¹; the tea pickers treated her as an outsider" (Doerr 195). Once married and in Ohio, her attempts to bring the wildness she has left behind into her life in the city lead to her neighbours viewing her suspiciously. They complain to her husband about the wild hawks she tries to tame, about the dead dog and trash cans she photographs.

Yet within ecopsychological discourse, madness is understood entirely differently. James Hillman states, "The "bad" place I am "in" may refer not only to a depressed mood or an anxious state of mind; it may refer to a sealed-up office tower where I work, a set-apart suburban subdivision where I sleep, or the jammed freeway on which I commute between the two" (xx). When one's mental state, is a function of one's environment, the obvious corollary is that in a damaged environment, everybody is collectively mad. Therefore, "[W]hat is diagnosed as madness...is more truthfully an attempt at *healing*, misperceived because of its high emotionality and seeming bizarre nature" (Fisher 160, emphasis added).

The bizarre, emotionally-driven actions that the shell collector, Joseph, and Naima engage in can thus be seen in a new light as their attempts to heal the trauma inflicted by their respective conditions of exile. Elan Shapiro sees environmental restoration practices as "psychospiritual work" aimed at reclaiming the disowned fragments of one's inner world, since it helps relieve "often-repressed but still crippling emotions of guilt and shame, grief and despair, loneliness and powerlessness" (226-227). The garden Joseph grows in his mother's memory is such an act of environmental restoration that finally brings

¹mad-woman, mentally retarded

him salvation as even burying the hearts of dead whales did not. Tasting the first melon from his patch, he muses “I’d make a garden so huge and colourful everyone would see it; I’d let the weeds grow and the ivy, everything would grow, everything would get its chance.” This, in direct opposition to the effects of the war he ran from, which took lives and stole chances for people’s growth.

Naima, in seeking life and movement in a world devoid of any wilderness, uses photography as a restorative practice to capture the sublime, ethereal, intangible fleetingness of moments. As an artist, she sees the world in terms of light and shadow, finding tenderness where others only see morbidity—“a cerulean rhombus of sky mirrored in the eye of a dog, killed minutes earlier by a bus” becomes an object of art. This art, while quite different from Joseph’s gardening, is still restorative in that it “generate meaningful work” and leads to “personal and community renewal” (Shapiro 234).

Such actions still designate these characters as “outsiders” because what they are doing is seen by society as deviant and non-normate. Puhakka, however, is of the opinion that if there is “something in us that can have intimacy with such an “other” [as Nature]...it must itself be “other” than the socially, culturally, and linguistically conditioned self” (22). As outsiders, as “othered” selves, the shell collector, Joseph and Naima all manage to forge an intimacy with Nature that heals them; an intimacy, furthermore, that most people around them do not understand at all, because it is socially, culturally and linguistically inexplicable. Consider this description of the shell collector’s fascination and emotional engagement with Nature:

Every six hours the tides plowed shelves of beauty onto the beaches of the world, and here he was, able to walk out into it, thrust his hands into it, spin a piece of it between his fingers. To gather up seashells—each one an amazement—to know their names, to drop them into a bucket: this was what filled his life, what overfilled it...Some mornings, moving through the lagoon, Tumaini splashing ahead, he felt a nearly irresistible urge to bow down. (Doerr 14)

Yet such intimacy does not preclude a sense of community. The shell collector, Joseph, and Naima are all, at the beginning of their respective narratives, exiled characters. Forging a bond of mutual healing with nature also allows them to come out of their isolation. For the shell collector, this means befriending Seema, the girl whose life was saved by the cone shell poison, and who ultimately saves the shell collector’s life. For Joseph, it means coming into contact with the human and humanizing presence of the Twyman’s daughter Belle, a hearing-disabled teenager and fellow outcast. In Naima’s case, things are more open-ended; Ward is a changed man who is willing to seek the wildness within his own self before seeking a reconciliation with his wife.

Ultimately though, where the ecopsychological analysis of the characters within these three stories leads us to is a reconfiguration and redefinition of such terms as exile, belongingness, alienation, isolation, community, madness and healing in explicitly ecological terms. This is significant not only because such redefinition opens up interpretive possibilities within a literary meaning-making process; outside of literature, it illuminates possibilities for new kind of psychic engagements with our environment. In light of the kind of destructive human/nature interactions that prevail today, *The Shell*

Collector, *The Caretaker*, and *Mkondo* offer a possibility of discovery of an ecological unconscious within the societal consciousness in such a way that nature-healing becomes a two-way process: humans healing nature, and humans being healed *by* and *within* nature.

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