



Poetry in (and after) Pandemic Times: An Ecolinguistic, Ecocritical Analysis

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/68858>

Received 24 March 2021

Accepted 29 May 2021

Published 17 June 2021

Short Research Article

ABSTRACT

Epidemics and pandemics are major events that affect and cause a lot of damage to human life. These events elicit responses at all levels, including that of literature. Covid-19 has thrown up many challenges - isolation, sickness and death of loved ones – but also has given some opportunities, e.g., to cherish normal life and show sympathy for others. The pandemic has elicited a large number of poetic responses, ranging from the very satirical to the very serious. The responses have had an unprecedented facility to go "viral" instantly. This article examines some of these "viral verses", or poetic responses to the pandemic, in English and Arabic based on a theoretical background of ecocriticism and (critical) ecolinguistics, whose major aims include the investigation of human values and attitudes to nature and the environment and the relationship and interactions between humans and their environments.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; ecolinguistics; Covid-19; pandemic poetry.

1. INTRODUCTION

A dog starv'd at his Masters Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State

A Horse misus'd upon the Road
Calls to Heaven for Human blood
(William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*)

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Epidemics, described as Black Death, plague or pandemic, depending on their scale and origin, have been there since time immemorial - and so have been accounts thereof. "Adam/ Had'em", where the contracted pronoun "them" refers to microbes, was written by the American poet Strickland Gillian (1869-1954), and is arguably the shortest poem in English. Notwithstanding its condensation, which is in an interesting contrast with its title – *Lines on the Antiquity of Microbes* - the poet seems to suggest that we are not alone and human predicaments are never new.

Later in the history of humanity, there is the bleak prosaic account of an enduring, far-reaching *Taʿuun* ("plague") that swept the Muslim world, among other regions, in the AH 4th century, AD 11th century, eloquently given by Al-Maqreezi (AD1364–1442) - a medieval Egyptian historian noted for his keen interest in the Fatimid Dynasty, 10th to 12th c., and its role in Egyptian history.

Four centuries later, in 1947, an Iraqi poetess – Nazik Al-Malaa'ika (1923-2007) – wrote a seminal poem entitled *ʔal kulira* ("Cholera"), moved by radio news about an epidemic that hit Egypt and left many thousands dead. (The word *kulira* is a borrowing; an Arabic equivalent which is not in common usage is *ʔal hayDah*, which refers to recurring agony and sorrow and also recurring disease and sickness.)

The poem, where death is represented as a rancorous fury, is a saddened commentary of someone full of anguish, listening to cries of the dying and wails of the bereaved and the bereft, its rhythm echoing the gait of horses pulling carts carrying dead people everywhere in Egypt, too many to count. The poem starts thus:

The night is silent now.
 Listen to the echo of wails -
 in the depth of darkness,
 beneath the silence -
 lamenting the dead.
 Cries get louder, more disturbed;
 grief overflows, bursting into flames,
 and stumbling into the wails.
 There is fire in almost every heart,
 grief in every calm hut,
 and everywhere,
 a soul weeps in darkness shut.

and closes with

O Egypt, my heart is torn
 by what death has done.

Al-Malaa'ika's humanistic, albeit sentimental, poem has always been remembered for its departure from traditional Arabic prosody and metrics, specifically from the hemistichal division of lines and uniform rhyme scheme. Lines in the poem have variable numbers of feet, but there is a rhyme scheme that changes from one segment to another, and a variation on one of the meters of Arabic poetry – *mutadarak* ("overtaken"). Published in the Lebanese magazine *ʕuruubah* ("Arabism"), written by an Iraqi on an epidemic in Egypt, the poem is also a reminder of the pan-Arabism of the mid-20th century. With the outbreak of Covid-19, the poem came to be remembered, along with historical accounts, most remarkably Al-Maqreezi's, for its content – human suffering under a sweeping epidemic.

There are already a large number of literary works that address or touch upon how humans cope with and make sense of epidemics, which become pandemics when they break out and cross borders between countries. Covid-19 used to be an epidemic when it was confined to Wuhan, China, but later it became a pandemic. The Covid-19 literature – some Arab intellectuals have suggested calling it *kurunyaali* ("coronial") and *poost kurunyaali* ("post-coronial"), in humorous imitation of Colonial and Post-colonial - ranges from the very satirical to the very serious, from absolute anthropocentrism to bio-, and eco-centrism, or openness to other worlds and other creatures and from ecophobia to ecophilia.

Nature and the environment have always been there; they are at the center whenever epidemics and pandemics are referred to. Therefore, a relevant framework for analyzing pandemic poetry is Ecocriticism, which is very closely related to Ecolinguistics. Against this background, samples of pandemic poetry in English and Arabic are explored.

A basic outline of Ecocriticism and Ecolinguistics, and the stories humans live by, is provided. These "stories" include ideologies, framings, metaphors, evaluations, identities, convictions, erasure and salience. The outline is followed by an elaboration of nature and environment-related attitudes, ranging from the aesthetic to the utilitarian. Next, a number of poetic parodies inspired by the pandemic are discussed. More detailed comments are then made on the "musings" of Mark Terry entitled *Pandemic Poetry*, followed by an analysis of two poems - Simon Armitage's *Lockdown* and said an Ant

(*qaalat namlah*) by the Egyptian academic and poet Ahmad Nabawi. (The translations in the article are the author's, unless otherwise indicated.) The analysis and comments are predominantly thematic, with very few stylistic remarks, especially on metaphor and intertextuality.

2. FRAMEWORK

"One cannot think of a single composer, painter or writer who has not tracked at least one major inspiration to a bird, a tree, a rose. People automatically lose themselves in wordless reverence at the sight of a curlew or a silver cloud of anchovies or at the mournful wail of howler monkeys. Or they stare dumbly out at oceans, as if longing for their microbial past" (R. Rosenblatt, All the days of the earth. *Time*, Apr. 26, 2000, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,996742,00.html>)

2.1 Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism, following Glotfelty [1], is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. xviii). It is alternatively referred to as Green Literary Studies, Environmental Literary Criticism and Eco-poetics. An environmental movement was triggered by, among other factors, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* [2] where a town in the middle of America lives in peace and harmony, uninfected and unpolluted, and non-human creatures are free and unimpeded. A spell and a malady fall upon the town and everything changes and the harmony and peace are lost forever. *The Country and the City* [3] by Raymond Williams was another impetus. Williams examines the conceptualizations of nature and the environment in English literature. The literary, and by extension the cultural, construction of nature and the environment has come to be a basic tenet of Ecocriticism. Nature and the environment are not stable or unchanging concepts. Each is "a discursive construction, something whose 'reality' derives from the ways we write, speak, and think about it" [4].

One of the main premises of Ecocriticism is that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" [1]. It aims to explore the world around us and how we are connected to it and to critique the ways in which we represent, interact with, and construct nature and the environment. Nature does exist and we do interact with it. The interaction between

humans and their environment is at the heart of Rueckert's [5] conceptualization of Ecocriticism which is the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literary texts.

Ecocritical analyses can be controversial and subjective. One representation of nature can be lauded as sympathetic by one critic and be seen otherwise by another. For example, Hess [6] argues that William Wordsworth (1770-1850) treats the daffodils in *I wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, like a photo on a postcard. He does not involve himself in nature. Instead, he looks at nature from afar (like a cloud), and leaves as soon as he has had his fill. He is more concerned about his own feelings than about nature. Quite on the contrary, Pite [7] believes that the personification of the flowers suggests a kind of kinship between people and nature. He points out that, in the poet's work, "the natural world" is always social, both in itself and in its relation to man. Nature does not offer "an escape from other people"; it rather expresses "an alternative mode of relating to them" (p. 181). There is a lot of evaluation in Ecocriticism, and evaluation is human.

2.2 Ecolinguistics

Ecocriticism is closely related to other developments, most notably those that deal with language and ecology. The traditional discipline of linguistics is found to be treating humans "in isolation", not in connection with their biosphere. Structuralist linguistics, in the same vein, is found to be concerned with language as "an isolated system"; sociolinguistics focuses on human society; critical linguistics focuses on "unequal power relationships among humans" [8].

This is why a gap still exists for Ecolinguistics to fill. Ecolinguistics analyzes language and judges it within an ecosophical framework that considers both humans and the biosphere they are inevitably embedded in. Ecolinguists often have practical goals such as protecting nature and the environment from human harm, fighting human behavior that destroys them and ultimately destroys human life, and promoting diversity, equity and inclusion, which involve giving value to every human and non-human being as well as to the natural world.

An extension of Ecolinguistics is Critical Ecolinguistics. A keynote address by Halliday [9] is cited as a critical point in the development of Ecolinguistics. Halliday argues that classism,

growthism, destruction of species, pollution and similar practices are not merely issues for biologists and physicists; they are issues for the applied linguists, too. Central to Halliday's argument is the exposure of the human belief in growth - bigger is always better; more is better than less; big is better than small; grow is better than shrink - and the negative impact of this belief on the ecosystems we live in, classism - prejudice or discrimination on the basis of class or rank in the taxonomy of organisms - and specialism, or anthropocentrism (Mühlhäusler, 2006).

There is no limit to the themes of Critical Ecolinguistics. They can vary from the culture of consumerism to ecopoetry. The tools used are more or less the same as those used in Critical Discourse Analysis. The same concern with power and ideology, with control and manipulation and bias, is there too, but here ecology is at stake. The thematic focus here, as already stated by Stibbe, and as in Ecocriticism, is on uncovering "ecologically destructive behaviour and seeking out those which encourage relationships of respect and care for the natural world" [10].

How humans deal with their environment and those who are different - the unborn yet, the differently-abled, the challenged, the non-human and those who have different beliefs, skin colors, ethnicities, occupations, and so on - is a crucial question in Ecolinguistics as well as Ecocriticism. Pollution affects the unborn yet; Zoosadism, or maltreatment and cruelty to animals destroys biodiversity; misuse of natural resources, especially water, endangers the future of humans; deforestation and conversion of forestland to farms, ranches, or urban use are threats to non-human as well as human environments; abuse of the disabled and the different - midget, obese, black, extra short or extra tall, etc. - in the media, e.g., in movies and plays, is infra-humanizing and unfair, and stereotypes men and women have about each other, e.g., "When you trust a man, you entrust water to a sieve", "Two you should never trust: the brakes of your car and women" (two Egyptian common sayings), are misguided generalizations.

2.3 Stories We Live By

The stories we tell, no matter how short they are, the stories we live by, no matter how short-lived they are, are both tools and indexes - indexes to

our ways of thinking and behaving and believing, our world-views, including the ways we regard our environments, and tools for shaping the world around us and talking about it.

Some of the stories we live by [11] that Ecolinguistics and Ecocriticism may look for in a text are **ideologies** - common stories and ideas about how the world was, is or should be, e.g., myths and folktales; **framings** - stories that use a packet of knowledge about an area of life to structure another; **metaphors** - a type of framing that uses one area of life to structure another, very different, area of life; **evaluations** - stories about whether an area of life is good or bad; **identities** - stories about what it means to be a particular kind of person, especially in relation to the environment; **convictions** - stories about whether a particular description of the world is true, uncertain or false; **erasure** - stories in people's minds that something is unimportant, unworthy of consideration; **salience** - stories of an area of life as important and worthy of consideration.

2.4 Nature-related Values and Attitudes

Central to Ecocriticism and Ecolinguistics is the examination of values attached to and attitudes toward nature and the environment. Here are the nature-related attitudes and values identified by Kellert [12], elaborated and illustrated:

- **Aesthetic** - appreciation of the physical appeal and beauty of nature, which characterizes a great deal of Romantic poetry.

And this our life, exempt from public
haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the
running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in
everything.
(William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*,
2:1, lines 41-43)

- **Dominionistic** - physical control, dominance of nature. This attitude comes from anthropocentric beliefs and can result in ecocide. Human life can be damaged and caused to stop in an anthropause as is the case in lockdowns. In this regard, the dominionistic attitude to nature and the environment is closely related to dominance over women, the young, the disabled, the non-white and the colonized.

- **Ecologicistic-scientific** - appreciation of structure, function, and relationships in nature. Science has always used nature and the environment as objects of analysis and exploitation, guinea pigs is a classic example, and it has availed means and tools for manipulating both in more ways than was ever conceivable.

- **Humanistic** - strong emotional attachment and "love" for aspects of nature, which can become ecophilia. In this regard, the phrase *genius loci* refers to the protection and the warmth some places provide humans; *place attachment* refers to humans' emotional connectedness to certain places. One poem by Al-Mutanabbi (915-965) starts with this line "Homes have their places in hearts. When they are deserted or no longer exist, they continue to inhabit those hearts."

- **Moralistic** - ethical concern for nature and for biosecurity. Calls to save the planet can be direct or indirect. *A Minor Bird* by Robert Frost (1874-1963) starts with a wish not to put the bird in a cage and ends thus:

And of course there must be something
wrong
In wanting to silence any song.

- **Naturalistic** - enjoyment of and immersion in nature, e.g.,

They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils
- William Wordsworth, *I Wander'd
Lonely as a Cloud*

- **Negativistic** - fear, aversion, alienation from nature, which can amount to ecophobia and theriophobia, or fear of animals. Most phobias humans have are somehow related to nature and the natural world – e.g., fear of water is aqua-, or hydrophobia, fear of fire is pyrophobia, fear of high buildings is acrophobia, fear of spiders is arachnophobia, and fear of thunder and lightning is astraphobia. Only when we are dead we stop fearing nature:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun;
Nor the furious winter's rages,

Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages;
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney sweepers come to dust.

- William Shakespeare,
Cymbeline, 4:2.

- **Spiritual** - feelings of transcendence; reverence for nature. Humans have always deified animals and objects such as the sun, the moon, stars, stone idols, fire, cows and snakes. This is the closing quatrain of *Worship of Nature* by John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892):

So Nature keeps the reverent frame
With which her years began,
And all her signs and voices shame
The prayerless heart of man.

- **Symbolic** - inspiration from nature in language and thought. Examples of drawing inspiration from nature and the environment, and of using both to allegorically address human issues and ideas are countless. Zoosemies, or animal epithets, fables and fictional allegories are cases in point. The following example comes from *Dover Beach* by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888):

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round
earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges
drear
And naked shingles of the world.

- **Utilitarian** - benefit from the practical use and material exploitation of nature. Exploitation of nature by humans seems to be inevitable even in their most artistic pursuit. "To make a guitar, you must fell a tree; ... you cannot disseminate [a poem] more widely - or hope that it will endure beyond your death ... without paper, papyrus, electronic reproduction devices or some other medium which has required the working-over of raw materials" [13].

It should be remembered that these attitudes are never static or unchangeable from one culture to another, one situation to another. In fact, the same natural event or phenomenon can cause

different reactions depending on where and when it happens. Rain can be a cause of joy and delight and a herald of a prosperous season in a desert, while it is almost a disaster in a crowded, unprepared city or town. A Facebook post in Arabic by a Saudi academic and poetess, February 18, 2021, (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100001320028827>) is a poetic celebration of a rainy day:

O Rain, come and dance with me;
the thunder symphony has already
started,
and the reverberations of clouds, too.
I passionately want to dance,
and touch your magical drops;
you are a universal symphony,
and this child craves your embrace.
But you crave the earth's embrace and
vanish,
while clouds continue to resonate their
symphony.

Nature-, and environment-related attitudes and values are a good starting point in any ecocritical/ ecolinguistic approach, bottom-up or top-down, to language in use, including poetry. Some poems are professedly ecological; some are vaguely and obliquely so, but nature and the environment are always there. Some knowledge of ecology and related issues is necessary for ecolinguistic analysis, which is inherently interdisciplinary/ transdisciplinary. Almost every area of culture and social life is significant in making sense of how humans treat one another and how they treat their environments. Language, no matter which context it occurs within, which variety thereof is used, and which mode and medium it uses, is both an index and a tool: an index to how humans interact with their ecosystems and to their nature-, and environment-related attitudes and values, and a tool for shaping, reshaping and informing these values and attitudes.

3. NEXT

In the remaining sections of this article, three pandemic poems are analyzed, in addition to notes on other less serious poems, with a view to discovering their expression of nature-, and environment-related attitudes and values. Notes on humorous parodies in addition to a "deistic" poem are made before a more detailed analysis of the three poems – two in English and one in Arabic – is provided.

4. PARODIES AND MORE

In the worst hour of the worst season
of the worst year of a whole people
a man set out from the workhouse with
his wife,
He was walking - they were both walking
- north.
She was sick with famine fever and
could not keep up.
He lifted her and put her on his back.
He walked like that west and west and
north.
Until at nightfall, under freezing stars
they arrived.
In the morning, they were both found
dead.
Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a
whole history.
But her feet were held against his
breastbone.
The last heat of his flesh was his last gift
to her.
(Eavan Boland, *Quarantine* – written in
2008 about the 1847 epidemic)

Remembering the poem about the microbes that Adam had, Al-Maqreezi's account and Al-Malaika's poem, and similar works, seems to be one way of dealing with, and making sense of grief and isolation in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Other ways of coping with the discombobulating, tough situation include humor. One subgenre that mixes poetry with humor is poetic parody, or mock-heroic, where the rhythm and the rhyme of an ancient poem, and some of its words and tropes, are revived using different vocabulary and addressing contemporary issues.

An anonymous quatrain signed with the fake name of Abu Kimaamah al Koorooni ("The Coronial One with a Face Mask") translates as (Arabic original from https://twitter.com/Zad_100/status/1233477033574965254):

I used to adore the music
of her sneezing; it was melodious.
Now, I panic when I hear'er sneeze;
it's really contagious.

I've distanced her from my heart,
the same manner some -
who from China recently come -
are quarantined and set apart.

One anonymous parody that spread on social networking site

(<https://www.facebook.com/349457068430519/posts/3002162656493267/>) for quite some time is an imitation of the Mu'allaqa of the pre-Islamic poet Antarah ibn Shaddad (525-603). The original ode starts with this line: "Have poets ever left the well-wrought, yet very old poetry which had persisted so long, like those actually dead, but unburied on the battlefield? Have you recognized that home after fancying it?"

The parody starts from the second line where Abla, the beloved, shows up: "Speak, O home of Abla, speak. Be safe and have a good morning." The parody advises the new Abla to stay home so that she may be safe. There is a curfew and Covid-19 does not know who Abla is, or who her strong lover is. Meanwhile, the new Antarah is confined, locked down, home alone taking care of himself. He no longer can go out to fight for his beloved. The swords and arrows that the warrior used to carry are now replaced with dishes, bread and tea cups. He now spends his time cooking, and clean dishes, rather than bright swords, remind him of Abla's bright smile.

Humorous responses to epidemics and pandemics have always been there. An anonymous poem published in *Winnipeg Tribune* in 1918 hints at the exaggerated reaction and fear of the Spanish Flu (1918-1920).

The toothpaste didn't taste right - Spanish Flu!
The bath soap burned my eyes - Spanish Flu!
My beard seemed to have grown pretty fast and tough
overnight - Spanish Flu!

Likewise, the poem *Everything's Flu Now!* published the same year in *Bourbon News* in Paris ends thus:

Have you stumped one of your toes?
Have you just a bleeding nose?
Or no matter what your woes –
Spanish Flu.

Quite predictably, the pandemic has inspired a deistic discourse where it is seen as a punishment for the wrongdoers and a trial for the believers. One long poem by Abdalah Kamal, written in the traditional hemistichal verse form, ends thus

(<http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2395104.aspx>):

"(Covid-19 speaking)
Is it that God, the Merciful,
has turned away from you
because you yourselves have turned
away from Him?
"Enough is enough," I said to Corona.
"Go away; you have done a lot of harm
to the poor and the powerless."
To which Corona responded thus:
"Have you ever had mercy on the weak,
ever shown pity?"
It is a predicament, I concluded,
and in times of distress
only the merciful will receive mercy.

Other, less deistic, poems focus on the social aspects of the pandemic. A poem sent to the editor of *New York Times*, May 22, 2020 by Scott Momaday is entitled *In the Time of Plague* touches upon social issues of Covid-19 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/22/opinion/letters/coronavirus-poems.html>):

We keep indoors.
when we dare to venture out.
We are cautious. Our neighbors
smile, but in their eyes there is
reserve and suspicion.
They keep their distance,
as we do ours, in mute accord.
Much of our fear is unspoken,
for there is at last the weight of custom,
the tender of rote consolation.
We endure thoughts of demise
and measure the distance of death.
Death too wears a mask.
But consider, there may well be good
in our misfortune if we can find it. It is
hidden in the darkness of our fear.

The poem does not mention nature or the environment. Its focus is on human conditions which can be improved, human potential "for goodness and morality" that can be realized and "pestilence, war and poverty" which must be overcome in order to make "a better future" and to become worthy of the best human destiny.

Another poem sent to the editor of NYT by Felicia Nimue Ackerman is a parody of a poem by Emily Dickinson

The Soul Selects Her Social Distance

The soul selects her own society,
then shuts the door.
She keeps her social distance of

six feet or more.
Unmoved, she notes the careless crowd
outside her gate;
unmoved, she notes the feckless folk
still tempting fate.
I've known her from those foolish people
choose none,
Then turn her mind to friends she's meeting
by phone.

In another poem where "normalcy" has become "a myth", Erika Fine wants her "normal problems back." John Bullard speaks of a very cautious person who, "in deference to the pandemic," decides to become his "own pet," eating, pooping and peeing, and, once a day, taking himself "out for a walk in the woods." When he beholds some humans, he keeps himself "away from them." Brian Grant's *Virus*, built on repetition and parallelism, takes a didactic stance. There are many viruses other than Covid-10 – uncertainty, fear, false knowledge, shortages and gun sales. And here are the vaccines:

We kill the virus with questions.
We kill the virus with challenged truths.
We kill the virus with kindness.
We kill the virus with patience.

5. "A whisper to you and me"

Other serious poetry on Covid-19 includes some "musings" by Mark Terry entitled *Pandemic Poetry*, with a very transparent message and a moralistic attitude toward nature and the environment. For Terry, the pandemic seems to be "a whisper to you and me," to all humans "to reconsider their abusive ways with nature." Human activity and abuse are staining lands, polluting the air and plasticizing seas. Nature needs some time "to heal"; otherwise, there will be "an eternal Silent Spring." More musings by Terry are analyzed below, together with one poem in Arabic and another in English.

5.1 Lockdown

Poet Laureate Simon Armitage's *Lockdown* (Appendix 2), published in the *Guardian*, March 21, 2020, makes no reference whatsoever to Covid-19, although the poet wrote it feeling "the need to respond," as he states on Instagram that day (https://www.instagram.com/p/B9_Q-8aplt/). The poem starts in Eyam with the 1666 plague, ends with a Cloud Messenger travelling to the Himalayas, and pays homage to the old Sanskrit poem *The Meghaduta*. Armitage was trying to "say something about contact and connection

with loved ones when we're separated and confined."

The speaker in the poem is forced by the present situation – Covid-19 lockdown - to recollect the fleas that used to carry infection to the "ye olde Eyam," a village located 35 miles southeast of Manchester. The plague that struck this British village began in 1665 when a bundle of cloth infested with fleas arrived from London to Alexander Hadfield, the local tailor - "the warp and weft of soggy cloth, by the tailor's hearth." People of the village took many precautionary measures, including quarantining the whole village to stop the disease. Marked stones, each with six holes - "thimbles brimming with vinegar wine, purging the plagued coins" - were used to define the boundaries of the village and to exchange money for food and other goods with merchants from surrounding villages.

Behind the bleak scene, there were stories of human compassion and suffering, one of which is that of the "star-crossed" lovers Emmott Syddall and Rowland Torre, each on one side of the borderline. Their "wordless courtship" continued to cross the river "till she came no longer."

The speaker has another recollection, this time of "exiled yaksha" sending "a word" to his wife on a cloud. The cloud follows an "earthly map" full of pleasure to the eye - "camel trails and cattle tracks," "streams like necklaces," "fan-tailed peacocks, painted elephants," embroidered bedspreads of meadows and hedges," "bamboo forests and snow-hatted peaks," "waterfalls, creeks, the hieroglyphs of wide-winged cranes and the glistening lotus flower after rain."

"The messenger cloud" is a literal translation of the *Meghaduta*, or *Megha Duta*, a poem written by the renowned Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa [14]. The poem tells the story of a *yaksha* ("nature spirit") that is sent to exile in a remote place for a whole year. The spirit asks a cloud to take a message of love to his wife back home and promises the cloud a lot of delight beholding beautiful earthly scenery on its way. The journey of the cloud, as well as our human journey, is "a ponderous one at times, long and slow but necessarily so."

Armitage seems to be using proximization, rather than direct expression of confinement and glimpses of hope. Proximization has a "persuasive power" as it brings the addressee to the center of events narrated to him/her" [15]. It

seeks to represent "physically and temporally distant events and states of affairs ... as directly, increasingly and negatively consequential ..." [16] in the present context.

5.2 More Musings

Back to Mark Terry and his musings on Covid-19. The lines in Appendix 3 are more direct and outright in describing some of the outcomes of the pandemic and in contrasting the city to the country. In the city, there is an "unnatural" silence – except for "the sirens' telling moan." There is "inmate chatting in the city, but it is mediated and their "drones" – dull and monotonous humming and murmuring - are all about Covid-19 issues such as "to wear a mask" or to go without one.

It seems like forever in confinement and hope seems to vanish. In the country, on the other hand, there are the "sounds of uninfected life," of animals and birds, not confined within borders, gates or walls. The silence of the city and the noises in the country may connect at last in an "ecological union" with "the planet as a whole" when humans start to see their roles. There is still hope that these two worlds, these two environments, will together "whisper tales of time to come" after the long confinement.

One man's meat is another's poison, as it were. Elsewhere in the musings, Terry thinks that, while people are dying because of Covid-19, "the health of the planet is surging again." Pollution and waste are diminishing while "industry closes and economies slumber." Nature needs "to take a break" from abuse and disregard, she tells humans.

Terry's musings indicate another aspect of ecocriticism/ ecolinguistics not treated in this article; namely, that it is bound to be **multimodal**. Two poetic lines on a whole page – "I feel brave to go outside/ I feel scared to watch the news" - appear against a dark background, interrupted by a bright crescent, a little hope. "I feel" is written in yellow in both cases – indicating sunshine and hope as well as egoism and madness; the rest of the lines in white. The other musings are foregrounded against, or accompanied by, natural scenery.

Ecopoetry is about nature and the environment, which are inherently multimodal, combining sounds, movement, gesture, color, space and other modes of expression and signification.

Covid-19 came with a lot of uncertainty, distress and fear and humanity has been torn between hope and despair, "hope and desperation in pandemic times" in Terry's words – a tension indicated by the white crescent amidst the overwhelming darkness.

5.3 ... Said An Ant

In the poem *qaalat namlah* ("...said an Ant") by the Egyptian academic and poet Ahmad Nabawi (Appendix 1), it is not nature or the environment boasting their triumph over humans; it is an ant. The heart of the poem is an intertextual link to the story of Solomon in the Holy Qur'an, in the Ants Chapter (Sura). There are some five textual-cultural environments where the word *namlah* ("an ant") occurs: in the poem, in the Qur'anic story, in the Arab-Egyptian culture, in addition to its meaning in the dictionary. It is a *namlah* because of its restlessness and its tiny legs. It is also known for its hard work and industriousness. In the minds of Egyptian people, ants are known for their tininess to the point of insignificance. Someone who does something too big for his age or body is *qadd innamalah wi-ṣyimid ṣamalah* – Lit. "as small as an ant and he would make/ do so big things." In the Qur'anic story, verse 18, an ant instructs its colony members to get back to their abode lest they should be trodden upon by Solomon and his soldiers.

The bridges between the poem and the story include **vocabulary** – e.g., *minsaḥah* ("stick"), *junuud* ("soldiers") – **participants** in the story – Solomon, an ant, a hoopoe and an *efreet* – **sentences** – *ḥidkhal maskanaka* ("get into your home") – the anthropomorphism or **personification** of the ant and the hoopoe, and the military metaphor of a virus as an army leader. The power relationships and the roles in the story are dramatically reversed in the poem.

In the Qur'anic story, King Solomon was in control of birds and animals as well jinns. All belonged to his army. He knew the language of birds, mountains were ordered to echo his hymns, iron was made elastic and easy to mould for him, and so many other skills and competences. Late in his life, he used to use a walking stick. He died, but never fell down until some ants/ worms gnawed his stick.

Now, with Covid-19 reigning and forcing human life into an **anthropause** - a hiatus - the whole relationship is reversed. The hoopoe no longer

brings news to Solomon and the jinns – "effreets" - already got empowered. This is an instance of proximization, although the old relationship between Solomon and the creature surrounding him is reversed. It is time humans should get back to their homes, because they cannot afford to face Corona(virus) - now an army leader - and "its soldiers." The military metaphor has been there in talking about Covid-19, e.g., in the WHO Director General's remark "using the available weapons to fight this virus" (Feb. 11, 2020, <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/>).

It is time, the ant believes, to bring humans to justice for all their abuse of other humans and of the natural world, and for their prejudices and racism, for being so **anthropocentric**. It is time for retaliation. A creature far tinier than an ant is now in control. Humans are being humiliated, their faces slapped and their hands cuffed, invaded, dragged down, not knowing where to hide. They have to pay for their tyranny and transgression. They are locked down while animals and birds are free – quite similar to the situation in Terry's "musings". It is surprising how far humans have gone in their technology and science and how helpless they are facing a mere virus. Tables are turned. The environment is rancorous and antipathetic and humans are helpless. In Terry's *Pandemic Poetry*, nature and the environment need "to take a break" in order to "heal".

6. CONCLUSION AND REMARKS

This is not all the pandemic poetry written in response to Covid-19 in English or in Arabic. It is a very small sample. However, poetry continues to play its role in encapsulating ethics of reciprocity and caring amongst humans as well as between humans and nature and the environment. Whether transparently or obliquely pandemic poetry continues to help people make sense of their experiences and of the surrounding environment and to cope with tough times. It continues to be a source of comfort and consolation.

Approached from an ecocritical, ecological vantage point, which is inevitably interdisciplinary and, whenever relevant, multimodal, pandemic poetry reveals a lot about humans' values about and attitudes to nature and the environment – which range from deification to careless enjoyment to merciless exploitation. Poetry has never been hostile to nature or the environment. In fact, it has always found inspiration in nature,

has drawn attention to its beauty and its wonders and has depicted parallels and analogies between the human and the natural worlds.

The poems explored in this article, in various degrees of directness, point to the negative effects of human activity on the planet. Covid-19 poetry indicates that nature is an urgent issue of survival, not merely background scenery or pastoral escapades. The poems suggest that human sympathy is in demand – sympathy for other humans as well as for nature and the environment. Only this sympathy can cure the wounds of the planet. Without it, there will be no more peace or safety. Covid-19 has quite strangely tied humans together, though it has set them apart, drawn them very close while distancing them. Covid-19 poetry invites humans to slow down, reflect on their own and other humans' predicament and to reconsider their ways of life - if they have to have any future on the earth.

PHONETIC KEY

ʔ ء voiceless glottal stop; θ ث interdental voiceless fricative; ḥ ح voiceless pharyngeal fricative; **kh** خ voiceless uvular fricative; ḏ ذ interdental voiced fricative; **sh** ش voiceless palatal fricative; S ص voiceless pharyngealized fricative; **D** ض voiced pharyngealized plosive; **T** ط voiceless pharyngealized plosive; **Z** ظ voiced pharyngealized fricative; ʕ ع voiced pharyngeal fricative; **gh** غ voiced uvular fricative; q ق voiceless uvular plosive

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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APPENDICES

A (1)

... said an Ant

Ahmad Nabawi

Your walking stick is down now.
So bad - ants have gnawed its trunk.
Your hoopoe no longer brings you
news of the world, and
your efreet's rebelled,
an' got empowered.
Get back home –
to your shelters;
you, human, cannot afford to face
Corona and its soldiers.

You've killed so many –
Do you remember?
You slaughtered so many,
burned down so many.
You dismissed whomever
you willed, so arrogantly,
humiliated whomever
you willed, so tyrannically,
exalting yourself, thinking
you're the Sole Master
of this universe.

Your own fellow humans
haven't evaded your harm, either;
you have displayed bias
and distinction based
on skin-color –
be it black or white,
yellow or red.

Now, get back home;
one of the tiniest creatures
is humiliating you,
pulling you down,
turning your tables.
It's driving you nuts;
you talk to yourself,
gasping, running, faltering,
drooping into your shell,
not knowing where to hide
your self – which is so inclined
to tyranny and transgression.

Now, it's invading you,
no matter how strong you are,
at the peak of your oppression;
no matter how many your folks are,

قالت نملة

شعر: أحمد نبوي

سَعَطَتْ مِنْسَأَتِكَ
عَفْوًا –
أَكَلَ النَّمْلُ دِعَامَتَهَا
لَمْ يَعُدْ الْهُدُودُ يَأْتِيكَ بِأَخْبَارِ الْعَالَمِ
وَالْعَفْرَيْتُ تَمَرَّدَ وَاسْتَقْوَى
فَادْخَلَ مَسْكَنَكَ الْآنَ
لَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ يَا بَشَرِي بِكُورُونَا وَجُنُودِهِ

هَلْ تَتَذَكَّرُ!
كَمْ قَتَلْتَ
وَكَمْ دَبَّحْتَ
وَكَمْ أَحْرَقْتَ
تَطْرُدُ مَنْ شِئْتَ بِعَطْرَسَةٍ
وَتَذَلُّ بِطُغْيَانِكَ مَنْ شِئْتَ
وَعَلَوْتَ
عَلَوْتَ
عَلَوْتَ
وَأَنْتَ تَطْرُقُ
- وَبِأَلْطُونِيكَ -
أَنْ لَا أَحَدٌ غَيْرَكَ سَيِّدَ هَذَا الْكَوْنِ
حَتَّى نَفْسِكَ لَمْ تَسْلَمْ مِنْكَ
فَمَا لَزِمْتَ
مَا بَيْنَ الْأَبْيَضِ وَالْأَسْوَدِ
وَالْأَحْمَرِ وَالْأَصْفَرِ >

فَالْآنَ
ادْخُلْ مَسْكَنَكَ
الآنَ
أَصْغُرُ سَكَّانِ الْأَرْضِ
يَذَلُّكَ فِي عَلَيَانِكَ
يَقْلِبُ أَوْرَاقَكَ
يَجْعَلُكَ طَوَالَ الْوَقْتِ تُحَدِّثُ نَفْسَكَ
تَلْهَيْتُ
تَجْرِي
تَتَعَرَّضُ
تَتَفَوَّقُ دَاخِلَ خَوْفِكَ
لَا تُدْرِي أَيْنَ تُوَارِي نَفْسَكَ
تِلْكَ الْأَمَارَةُ بِالْبَغْيِ وَبِالطُّغْيَانِ

هَا هُوَ
يَغْرُوكَ وَأَنْتَ بِأَعْلَى جَبْرُوتِكَ
وَبِطُغْيَانِكَ
وَبِكُلِّ جَمُوعِكَ تَرُوهُ وَعِنَادِ زَمَانِكَ

and how advanced your ammunition.
Now, it enters your body
through your mouth,
through your nose
your eyes,
proudly shackling
your feet, slapping your face,
cuffing your hands.
Now, you're dethroned,
dragged to the ground.

هَذَا هُوَ
يَدْخُلُ مِنْ فَمِكَ وَأَنْفِكَ
مِنْ عَيْنَيْكَ
وَيُصَفِّدُ - مَرُّهُوَ - قَدَمَيْكَ
يُصَفِّعُكَ عَلَى وَجْهِكَ
وَيَكْفُ يَدَيْكَ
وَيُطَيِّحُ بِعَلَيَاتِكَ أَرْضًا

You, human,
your walking stick is down.
Facing a mere virus,
you've become the smallest creature.
Humbled, you beg to escape
its powerful grip.

يَا بَشَرِي
سَقَطَتْ مِيسَاتُكَ
صِرْتَ أَمَامَ الْفَيْرَسِ،
أَصْغَرَ سَكَّانَ الْأَرْضِ
ذَلِيلًا، تَتَوَسَّلُ أَنْ تَنْجُو مِنْ قَبْضَتِهِ

Meanwhile,
the Lady Ant, standing
upon the altar of King Solomon,
says in rancor and antipathy:
get back home –
to your shelters;
you, human, cannot afford to face
Corona and its soldiers.

وَعَلَى هَيْكَلِ ذِي الْعَرْشِ سُلَيْمَانَ
وَقَفَّتْ سَيِّدَةُ النَّمْلِ وَقَالَتْ بِتَشَفٍّ:
يَا بَشَرِي
ادْخُلْ مَسْكَنَكَ الْآنَ
لَا قِبَلَ لَكُمْ يَا بَشَرِي بِكُورُونَا وَجُنُودِهِ.

Farqad Magazine, No. 51, April 1, 2020.
<https://fargad.sa/?p=30072>

مجلة فرقد، العدد 51. 1 إبريل 2020

A (2)

Lockdown

Simon Armitage

And I couldn't escape the waking dream
of infected fleas
in the warp and weft of soggy cloth
by the tailor's hearth
in ye olde Eyam.
Then couldn't un-see
the Boundary Stone,
that cock-eyed dice with its six dark holes,
thimbles brimming with vinegar wine
purging the plagued coins.
Which brought to mind the sorry story
of Emmott Syddall and Rowland Torre,
star-crossed lovers on either side
of the quarantine line
whose wordless courtship spanned the river
till she came no longer.
But slept again,
and dreamt this time
of the exiled yaksha sending word
to his lost wife on a passing cloud,
a cloud that followed an earthly map
of camel trails and cattle tracks,
streams like necklaces,
fan-tailed peacocks, painted elephants,
embroidered bedspreads
of meadows and hedges,
bamboo forests and snow-hatted peaks,
waterfalls, creeks,
the hieroglyphs of wide-winged cranes
and the glistening lotus flower after rain,
the air
hypnotically see-through, rare,
the journey a ponderous one at times, long and slow
but necessarily so.

A (3)

In the city, there's a silence
unnatural in tone.
No cars, no kids, no drunken laughs -
just the sirens' telling moan.

In the city, the inmate chat,
some online, some on phones
to wear a mask or go without
the subject of their drones.

How soon will we go back to work?
When will the layoffs start?
Are we confined forever now?
We are starting to lose heart.

In the country, there are noises
the city seldom hears -
the sounds of uninfected life:
the wolves, the loons, the deers.

In the country, there's much less chat -
just nature mating calls.
The birds and beasts don't stay inside –
no borders, gates, or walls.

Will these two worlds connect at last?
And will we see our role
in ecological union
with the planet as a whole?

The silence and the noises
of these environments
whisper tales of time to come
after our confinements.

- Mark Terry

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Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
<http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/68858>