
THE LEMON TREES AND THE SYRIAN HOMELAND: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF ZOULFA KATOUH'S AS LONG AS THE LEMON TREES GROW

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Abstract	Article Information
<p><i>This descriptive qualitative study aims to analyze Zoulfa Katouh's As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow from an ecocritical perspective, focusing on how the natural environment is central to the narrative. By applying ecocriticism, this paper demonstrates how the novel's themes of home, identity, and survival are deepened, particularly in contemporary war narratives. The enduring presence of the natural world encapsulates the overarching message of the novel: hope—like nature—is resilient. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that during times of war, human trauma is not the only impact; the environment is significantly affected as well. As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow highlights the complex relationship between nature and human resilience in wartime, emphasizing that the survival of the land is intertwined with the survival of its people. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel's ecological dimensions and the broader implications of nature's role in shaping human experience amidst conflict.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow, ecocriticism, war literature, Syrian civil war</i></p>	<p><i>Received:</i> Jun 27, 2024</p> <p><i>Revised:</i> Jul 27, 2024</p> <p><i>Accepted:</i> Jul 28, 2024</p>

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the natural world in literature goes beyond seeing it merely as the backdrop for human history and narratives. Literature expresses, in complex and profound ways, that human activities not only shape the natural world but are also shaped by it. The natural world holds cultural significance in human life, deeply reflecting and shaping our sense of identity (Glotfelty, 1996). Nature should be seen as an active participant in human's life—not as a separate entity. It is a force whose well-being is both influenced by and influences human behavior and decisions.

As previously mentioned, nature and humanity share a complex relationship, and conflict and war often further complicate this dynamic. Both in real life and in literature, war frequently devastates natural landscapes, showing how weapon-related conflicts reshape the environment, not for the better, but to mirror the destruction of societies. War alters both humanity and the environment, reflecting the complex consequences of human-inflicted violence on the natural world (Pearson, 2012, p. 117).

In many literary works with the theme of war, the environment is often portrayed as a victim whose suffering is sometimes long-lasting or irreparable. The natural world bears the scars of violence as a result of war—becoming barren, tainted, displaced, or destroyed. Despite the consequences that nature endures in the aftermath of conflict, it is often overlooked compared to the tragedy and suffering experienced by human victims (Hupy, 2008). The destruction of the environment, especially in war-related situations, should also be taken seriously, as it not only affects the natural ecosystem but is also linked to the long-term survival of humanity.

War undeniably brings devastation, and war literature often reflects this in its entirety. Both the environment and humans experience deep, scarring traumas in the face of war. War literature frequently explores how the destruction of the natural world mirrors the physical, emotional, and psychological trauma of the characters (Oktaviani, 2022). The loss of resources reflects the loss of homes, while the collapse of the natural world symbolizes the breakdown of human connections during times of conflict, and more. This parallel between the devastation of nature and human suffering highlights the interconnectedness of both.

Despite the devastating effects of war, some war narratives portray the natural world as a symbol of endurance and continuity (Hupy, 2008). The use of natural elements in these literary works represents a sense of home, even amid the painful aftermath of war. These types of narratives simultaneously highlight both the fragility and resilience shared by both humans and nature. One such work that reflects this dual portrayal is the contemporary young adult novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, written by Zoulfa Katouh.

Set amid the harrowing realities of the Syrian civil war, *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* follows the story of Salama, a young pharmacist living in a conflict zone. Salama faces the daily trauma of being forced to provide medical care to war victims. As the violence intensifies, she is confronted with agonizing choices: stay in her small hometown out of loyalty to her people and country or flee her war-torn homeland for the sake of her safety. Her sense of duty compels her to stay, despite the life-threatening conditions she faces every day. However, the prospect of escaping to preserve her own life becomes increasingly pressing. These difficult decisions lead to emotional and psychological conflict, and witnessing her homeland gradually turn to ruins slowly takes its toll on her mental well-being.

The themes of grief and trauma play a significant role in Salama's narrative as she navigates the horrors of war. Salama's mind becomes its own battlefield—not only must she endure the heartbreaking reality of losing her loved ones, but she also grapples with the immense responsibility of saving lives. The conflict has deeply impacted her mental state, and this is one of the novel's most important messages: how war affects people both physically

and psychologically. The narrative highlights not only the toll the civil war takes on the protagonist but also the broader Syrian community as a whole.

In the face of war, it is important not only to focus on human suffering but also to consider the significant impact of conflict on the natural world. Wars alter the environment, and this alteration is never for the better. Therefore, it is important to look beyond the physical and psychological trauma experienced by human victims and acknowledge that the environment is also a "silent" victim in such situations. Therefore, an analysis of war narratives should also touch the subject of its impact on the natural world.

An ecocritical analysis can offer a fresh perspective on the reading of war literature. This approach should include a close examination of the impact of war on nature—how it destroys landscapes and ecosystems—emphasizing the overall consequences of violence on the non-human world. Such an analysis deepens our understanding of war's lasting damage to the land that sustains life. By applying an ecocritical perspective to war literature, readers can develop empathy not only for human victims but also gain greater awareness of the environmental consequences of war. Ecocriticism allows readers to explore how war disrupts the relationship between humans and their environment, often leaving behind ecological devastation that parallels human loss.

Applying ecocriticism to a contemporary work such as *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* offers a deeper understanding of how environmental destruction plays a critical role in the lives of both the characters and the conflict-stricken community. Set against the backdrop of the Syrian civil war, readers witness how the conflict brings widespread devastation to homes, landscapes, and ecosystems. This destruction is intricately tied to the loss of community, identity, and culture. It underscores the fact that environmental degradation is a central issue in social and political conflicts like civil wars. Beyond human suffering and countless deaths, war has the potential to destroy the very soil, trees, and land that have shaped people's histories and livelihoods.

Salama's emotional journey is closely tied to her connection with her homeland and its natural environment. Nature becomes a symbol of stability, home, and continuity for her, especially in times of crisis. Through this idea, the novel emphasizes that nature is more than just a passive backdrop for a shattered community; it is an integral part of their survival, offering the comfort of home and a sense of belonging. Despite the destruction surrounding Salama, the presence of the Syrian landscape—and its former glory—symbolizes hope and resilience, encouraging her to hold on to her identity and roots. This paper aims to specifically analyze Zoufka Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* from an ecocritical perspective; focusing on how the natural environment is central to the narrative. It demonstrates how ecocriticism can deepen the understanding of the novel's themes of home, identity, and survival; especially when applied to contemporary war narratives or works of literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecocriticism: On Human and Nature

The relationship between humans and nature in literature is explored through the lens of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism allows readers to delve deeper into the portrayal of nature within literary texts. One of its main purposes is to challenge the assumption of human dominance over nature and highlight how nature is often "silenced," even in literature. Ecocriticism calls for a fairer treatment of nature, viewing it as an active participant in human history, rather than merely a passive backdrop for humanity's stories. (Glotfelty, 1996)

In addition to positioning nature as an active participant in human stories, ecocriticism challenges the traditional human vs. nature dichotomy, breaking down the division that places humanity in opposition to the natural world. It allows readers to critique the exploitation and destruction of nature caused by human actions, while advocating for a more harmonious and balanced relationship between people and their environment. As Love (2003, p. 26) argues, a nature-conscious and nature-validating approach to literature and criticism provides a necessary corrective by giving proper recognition to the nonhuman world. Whether implicitly or explicitly, this perspective encourages a deeper respect for nature's intrinsic value, reminding us that human stories are inseparable from the ecosystems in which they unfold.

As previously mentioned, ecocriticism emphasizes the inseparable bond between humans and the natural world, challenging the notion that humans exist outside or above nature. Literature often reflects the idea that while humans shape the environment, nature also shapes human culture and history. This includes the fundamental premise that human cultural activities, such as literature, are inherently interrelated with the natural world that surrounds them (Love, 2003, p. 38); highlighting how nature influences human actions and emotions. Therefore, discourses in science and literature must be read both with and against each other to fully grasp this complex relationship (Buell, 2005, p. 19). This interconnectedness provides a more comprehensive understanding of the world, where humans are part of a broader ecological system, reliant on and shaped by the natural world.

The destructive impact of human actions on the environment is also explored through the lens of ecocriticism. In literary works, themes of industrialization, urban expansion, and environmental degradation highlight how humanity's drive for progress often comes at the expense of nature. Ecocriticism critiques these portrayals of human dominance over the natural world, showing how literature can reveal the consequences of environmental exploitation—such as polluted rivers, deforested landscapes, and extinction of species. One of the harmful outcomes of anthropocentric models of knowledge, which describe nature either as a lifeless mechanism or as a mere textual construct, is the capitalization of local ecosystems in the name of economic progress (Oppermann, 2014, pp. 22-23). This examination encourages readers to reflect on real-world environmental crises and the ethical responsibilities humans have toward nature. Also, ecocriticism often examines and reveals how environmental degradation is closely tied to broader social and political issues, such as colonialism or war as one of the examples of human exploitation of nature.

Ecocritical Studies of War Literature

Ecocriticism has played a significant role in the analysis of war literature by examining the impact of war on the natural environment. As the physical environment is where wars and weapon-related conflicts occur, it inevitably bears the scars of these destructive events. Warfare, by its very nature, is a deeply destructive human activity, leaving behind battlefields scarred by the violence. Whether in the form of park-like memorials of past battles or contemporary landscapes still bearing remnants of war, these areas remain physically altered. Not only do the weapons used in warfare cause direct environmental damage, but the broader activities associated with war can also severely strain and disturb the natural world (Hupy, 2008, p. 406). This perspective helps to reveal the often-overlooked environmental costs of human conflict in war literature.

The disturbance in the physical environment has indeed been the recurring themes related to wars. Hupy (2008, p. 417) also adds that “the only aspect of wartime that has changed is that weapons and armies become ever capable of creating disturbances that continue to increase in magnitude, type and, perhaps, frequency.” The impact of war on the environment has always been profound—landscapes are altered, wildlife is destroyed, rivers are polluted, and in many cases, the damage is permanent. Like humans, nature suffers the violence of war, yet it is often overlooked as a victim, with more focus typically given to human trauma. This oversight positions the natural world as a silent casualty in human conflict, despite the reality that humans are not the only actors affected by combat. Moreover, as Pearson (2012, p. 123) highlights, the role of nonhumans in warfare remains “under-researched and under-theorized”, leaving a significant gap in understanding the full scope of war's consequences on the environment.

Pearson (2012) also adds that like any other human activity, the conduct of war cannot be divorced from the environmental context since the battlefield is a dynamic landscape—where both humans and non-humans are forced to be involved in the heat of a battle. Unfortunately for the natural world, before it becomes a battlefield, it is a home for many—providing a place of belonging, collective memory, and cultural identity. In the case of war, the natural environment is often transformed from a sanctuary into a site of destruction. This loss of familiar landscapes not only disrupts ecosystems but also erases the cultural and emotional ties that people have with their environment (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015). As forests are flattened, rivers are polluted, and wildlife is driven out or killed, both human and natural identities are threatened. The environmental damage becomes a physical manifestation of the broader cultural and personal losses endured during conflict, making nature not just a backdrop but an active victim in the tragedy of war.

The scope of investigating war literature should extend beyond examining only human suffering. As previously mentioned, during war, the environment is often portrayed as a passive backdrop to human trauma. However, incorporating an ecocritical perspective allows for a deeper exploration, where nature is not just a silent observer but an active participant and victim of the destruction. Through ecocriticism, the analysis of war literature can broaden to encompass the environmental toll of human conflict, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the devastation war inflicts. This approach is particularly relevant

in works that explore themes of displacement or exile, where the destruction of the natural environment parallels the loss of identity and homeland, further enriching the narrative of war's impact on both human and ecological systems.

Existing Analysis of Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*

As previously mentioned, the analysis of Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* primarily focus on the effect of the war trauma towards the main character's psychology. In a study by Marantika and Litaay (2024), the analysis is focused to the portrayal of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) experienced by the main character, Salama. The study highlights the symptoms, causes, as well as the effect of PTSD caused by the on-going conflict as well as loss of loved ones.

This study, however, offers a different lens by analyzing this work using an ecocritical perspective. Rather than focusing on the psychological trauma of war, this study explores how the natural environment plays a central role in the narrative. It delves into how the themes of home, identity, and survival are intertwined with the depiction of nature in the novel. By employing ecocriticism, this analysis will demonstrate how the natural world is not merely a backdrop but a significant participant in shaping the characters' experiences, particularly within contemporary war literature. This approach broadens the scope of understanding the novel, showing how the environment can deepen readers' comprehension of trauma, displacement, and resilience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a descriptive qualitative study, focuses on a close reading of a contemporary work of literature. The selected object of the study is a novel entitled *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, written by Canadian author Zoulfa Katouh, published in 2022. This study explores the connection between human and nature in the context of war literature, with the focus of Syrian civil war in line with the setting presented in the novel. Furthermore, this paper aims to highlight how ecocriticism can deepen the understanding of the novel's themes of home, identity, and survival; especially when applied to contemporary war narratives or works of literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow follows the life of the main character Salama Kassab, a pharmacist living in the amidst the on-going Syrian civil war. Syria has long drawn international attention due to its conflict, yet attempts at peace led by various international organizations—such as the United Nations, Arab League, and Gulf Cooperation Council—have yielded little success. These efforts have either collapsed midway or failed entirely (Bin Othman Alkaff & Binte Yussof, 2016). While the narrative centers on Salama's psychological trauma as the result of loss caused by the conflict, an ecocritical reading of the work proves a vital role of nature in the narrative—especially in the topic of nature and human relationship in the context of war literature.

The Nature, “the Lemon Trees” as Symbols of Home and Stability

When being directly mentioned in the narrative, nature is often portrayed to show Salama’s direct connection to her Syrian roots, her family, and her homeland. The nature represents hope and continuity, contrasting with the condition of the destruction caused by the war.

In the following passage, Salama asserts her connection to her homeland, linking her own resilience to that of the lemon trees that have been growing in Syria for centuries. The lemon trees here serve as a potent symbol of endurance, deeply rooted in the land, much like Salama’s own unwavering sense of belonging and identity.

I nod slowly. “This is the price of a future with freedom, Khawf. It’s a price Hamza pays every day. But I’m Syrian. This is *my* land, and just like the lemon trees that have been growing here for centuries, spilled blood won’t stop us. I have my faith in God. He’ll protect me. I’ve been force-fed oppression, but I will no longer swallow its bitter taste. No matter what.” (Katouh, 2022, p. 219)

Salama’s reference to the lemon trees parallels her strength and resistance against the oppression she faces during the Syrian civil war. Just as the lemon trees have weathered centuries of change and hardship, Salama sees herself as part of this enduring natural and cultural legacy. The phrase “spilled blood won’t stop us” signifies how deeply tied she is to her homeland, where both nature and people suffer under the violence of war. Yet, despite this suffering, the trees, much like Salama, remain resilient. By aligning her personal struggle with the survival of the lemon trees, Salama highlights how nature becomes a symbol of hope, continuity, and defiance. The trees have witnessed generations, growing strong and unyielding, and this is a reflection of Salama’s own faith and determination to overcome oppression.

The following quotation shows how the lemon trees once again become a symbol of home, memory, and continuity for Salama. Here, the lemon trees are more than just a source of nourishment; they represent a connection to a peaceful past, before the war, and to her family, particularly her mother.

The lemons are still growing, flowering, nourishing the revolution. I remember the lemonade Mama used to make for me during the summer. I can almost taste its cold, sour-sweet flavor, and my mouth waters at the thought. My heart craves those freshly picked lemons and Mama’s loving glance when she handed me the lemonade. I shake my head, banishing that longing-away. (Katouh, 2022, p. 223)

The image of the lemon trees “still growing, flowering, nourishing the revolution” juxtaposes the natural world’s persistence with the human struggle for freedom. Even amid the chaos of war, the lemon trees remain steadfast, offering sustenance not only in a literal sense but also symbolically to the revolution. They are tied to the broader fight for liberation, symbolizing hope and endurance for Salama and her people. Salama’s memory of her mother

making lemonade draws her back to a time of safety and love. The sour-sweet taste of lemonade evokes nostalgia for her childhood, a time untouched by war and destruction. This memory is not merely a longing for a past moment, but for the stability, care, and security that once defined her life. Her heart craving the lemons reflects a deeper emotional longing for the family connection and sense of home that has been fractured by the war. The lemons, therefore, stand as a bittersweet symbol of both the past and the perseverance needed to push forward in the revolution. They embody a duality of continuity (through growth and nourishment) and loss (through Salama's yearning for what has been disrupted by war).

Salama's internal conflict over leaving Syria and seeking safety is deeply intertwined with her sense of identity and connection to her homeland. Though the possibility of escape offers physical safety, she recognizes that leaving behind the land she associates with home, memory, and her roots would leave her spiritually and emotionally fragmented.

“Daisies... Da-daisies... sweet... sweet smelling—” My voice breaks and tears drip on the floor beside my feet as a horrible realization dawn on me.

I may escape from Syria. My feet could touch European shores, the waves of the sea lapping against my shivering legs and the salt air coating my lips. I would be safer.

But I won't have survived. (Katouh, 2022, pp. 116-117)

The mention of "daisies" in this passage brings forth another layer of nature symbolism. Daisies, often representing innocence and purity, contrast sharply with the devastation of war. Salama's emotional breakdown as she recalls these flowers signals her realization that fleeing Syria would mean severing her connection to the environment that has been a part of her life and identity. Nature, represented by daisies here, becomes a symbol of both her past life and the loss she would experience by leaving it behind.

Salama's acknowledgment that "I would be safer, but I won't have survived" highlights the idea that survival is more than physical. For her, survival means staying connected to her land and her identity as a Syrian. While Europe represents safety, it also represents a foreign and alien environment, one that lacks the familiarity and emotional resonance of Syria's landscapes, such as the lemon trees and daisies. The broader significance of this passage lies in the way it connects nature to personal and national identity. Salama understands that leaving Syria, while providing physical security, would strip her of the deeper aspects of her identity tied to the natural world and cultural heritage of her homeland.

In a different passage, Salama's co-worker speaks about life and death during the Syrian civil war, emphasizing that life should not be halted by the threat of death. While the mention of lemon trees is not direct here, the context connects to the broader symbolism of nature, including lemon trees, as a source of hope and continuity amid the chaos of war.

“Salama,” she says, smiling. And with the sunlight pouring from the cracked door caressing her face, she looks like she did in the old days. Rosy cheeks and ocean blue eyes sparkling with life. “It doesn't hurt for you to

think about your future. We don't have to stop living because we might die. Anyone might die at any given moment, anywhere in the world. We're not an exception. We just see death more regularly than they do." (Katouh, 2022, p. 96)

The imagery of sunlight pouring through the cracked door mirrors the persistence of life in the face of destruction, much like the lemon trees in the novel, which symbolize home and stability. Even in a war-torn environment, the natural world continues to offer moments of beauty and hope. Just as the sunlight in this scene suggests warmth and life, the lemon trees throughout the novel serve as a reminder of Salama's Syrian roots, anchoring her to her family and homeland, despite the ongoing violence around her. This contrast between the fragile human condition in war and the resilience of nature reinforces the idea that, like the trees, the desire for life and stability remains, even under constant threat. Nature becomes a symbol of endurance, helping characters like Salama contemplate their future, even when surrounded by death.

Nature and Cultural Identity

In the narrative, the Syrian landscape serves as a cultural marker that connects the characters to their heritage. The memories of pre-war Syria's physical landscape evoke a deep sense of loss, symbolizing the characters' attachment to their homeland. The once vibrant and thriving land now stands as a reminder of what has been taken away by conflict, reinforcing the emotional and psychological toll that war imposes on both the environment and the people.

In the following passage, Salama and Kenan reflect on the symbolic significance of Damascus, not just as a physical location but as a cultural and historical emblem. The line "victories for our ancestors throughout history are embedded in her soil" connects the landscape directly to the legacy and identity of the Syrian people. This cultural marker—Damascus—is presented as a place where the land itself carries the weight of past struggles and victories, reinforcing its importance beyond geography.

...Damascus is the capital. Every decision made there has effects that ripple all over the country. She is their stronghold. Victories for our ancestors throughout history are embedded in her soil. But she belongs to the people who are laying down their lives to free her. (Katouh, 2022, p. 108)

From an ecocritical perspective, this shows how the natural environment in Syria serves as a vessel for collective memory. The soil, described as holding the triumphs of ancestors, acts as a powerful symbol of the people's deep connection to their history and their homeland. The mention of Damascus belonging "to the people who are laying down their lives to free her" reveals how this cultural identity is under threat from the conflict, highlighting the emotional and psychological toll that war has on both the land and the people. Nature, in this context, is not just a passive background but a critical piece of cultural identity that evokes feelings of pride, resistance, and belonging. Through this lens, the war-torn Syrian landscape becomes more than a battlefield—it transforms into a reminder of what has been lost and what is still being fought for.

The following passage shows the time when Salama reflects on the color blue; once a symbol of beauty and serenity, now transformed into a representation of decay and loss. Layla's painting of a "quiet sea and gray clouds" evokes a pre-war Syria, a time when the natural world, through the color blue, carried feelings of calm and inspiration. The memory of this unique shade connects Salama to the thriving landscape that once symbolized peace, creativity, and life. However, the war has corrupted this imagery. Now, blue is associated with "frostbite and hypothermia," highlighting the physical and emotional devastation that the conflict has caused. The once-vivid colors of nature, which represented life and cultural identity, have become muted and lifeless, mirroring the destruction of both the environment and the people who inhabit it.

"I used to dream about the color blue... Layla had painted a shade so unique I thought it would bleed into my hands. It was a painting of a quiet sea and gray clouds. I've never seen a color like that before in my life..."

"...Now it's tainted with sadness. There's no blue here, not one that inspires anyway. Just the one that decays the victims' skin from frostbite and hypothermia. All the colors are muted and dull and there's no life in them."
(Katouh, 2022, pp. 151-152)

The transformation of the color blue signifies how war strips away the richness of cultural heritage, replacing it with desolation. This loss of vibrancy in the natural world parallels the emotional and psychological toll on individuals like Salama, whose memories of beauty are tainted by the ever-present reality of conflict. The colors of nature, once a source of inspiration and connection to the past, now reflect the bleakness of war, reinforcing the deep sense of loss that permeates both the land and the people.

Salama and Kenan reminisce about a Syria that no longer exists—a Syria full of life, beauty, and abundance. The vibrant imagery of "an endless bed of green," "lemons golden as the sun," and "plums ripe and glittering like rubies" paints a picture of a thriving landscape, deeply connected to their cultural identity. The lush greenery, fertile lands, and fruit-laden trees symbolize not just the physical beauty of Syria but also the prosperity, peace, and connection to nature that once defined their homeland.

We go back to talking, trying to focus on something that isn't the cold.
We reminisce on our old life. Visualizing our Syria and painting a description
of one we'll never see.

A Syria we'll never know.

An endless bed of green covers the hills, where the Orontes carried life into the ground, growing daisies along his banks. Trees bear lemons golden as the sun, apples firm and sweet, and plums ripe and glittering like rubies. Their branches are low, coaxing us to pluck the fruit. Birds sing the song of life, their wings fluttering against an azure-blue sky. (Katouh, 2022, p. 349)

This vision of pre-war Syria is idealized, serving as a stark contrast to the war-ravaged land they now inhabit. The Orontes River, which once "carried life into the ground," now likely symbolizes a land drained of vitality. The phrase "a Syria we'll never know" underlines the deep sense of loss and disconnection. The war has severed their ties to this idyllic landscape, transforming the land into something unrecognizable. The memory of these natural elements becomes a source of both comfort and sorrow, as it reminds them of what has been irretrievably lost. The lush, pre-war imagery serves as a poignant reminder of what has been taken away, reinforcing the profound impact that environmental destruction has on identity, memory, and belonging.

The Destruction of the Environment as a Reflection of War's Impact

In wars, the natural environment also suffers as a victim. The devastation of war reflects the erosion of hope for society, mirroring the collective trauma experienced by its people. Just as human lives are shattered, the landscape is scarred. As the environment deteriorates, it further deepens the despair of those who depend on it for survival, reinforcing the cyclical relationship between human suffering and environmental damage.

The narrative emphasizes how the destruction of the physical environment in Syria mirrors the psychological and emotional devastation experienced by its people during the war. This is proven several times throughout the story.

"For the past year," I begin slowly, "Syria was gray. The destroyed buildings and roads. The ashy faces of the starving. Sometimes the skies. Our life literally became monochrome, alternating with a harsh red. While some were able to see past it, I forgot other colors existed. I forgot happiness was a possibility..." (Katouh, 2022, p. 340)

The "gray" Salama speaks of symbolizes the lifeless, bleak reality brought on by conflict. The destroyed buildings and roads, alongside the "ashy faces of the starving," reflect not just physical destruction but a broader loss of vibrancy, hope, and joy. The "harsh red" she mentions further evokes the violence and bloodshed that punctuate the dreary grayness, representing the trauma and constant threat of death that the war brings. This alternating monochrome world reinforces the emotional numbness and despair that war instills in the characters, and by extension, society. Salama acknowledges how the war has stripped life of its variety and beauty. The destruction of both the environment and human spirit is intertwined—just as the Syrian landscape becomes barren and monochrome, so too do the emotions and lives of the people who inhabit it.

Khawf, Salama's hallucination, reinforces the idea that the destruction of the environment mirrors the emotional desolation caused by war. Khawf particularly uses the term "wasteland", not only to refer to the physical ruins of Homs but also to symbolize the profound sense of loss and despair that has engulfed Salama's world.

... "What happiness can you find in this wasteland? Hm? There's nothing for you here. Your family is gone. And Kenan will only bring you heartache if you continue to develop feelings for him. He won't leave. There's no happiness to scavenge from the wreckage..." (Katouh, 2022, p. 134)

The connection between the ruined environment and the hopelessness Salama feels is clear. Just as the land has been rendered barren and lifeless, Salama's personal ties—to her family and even to Kenan—are framed as futile or doomed to bring heartache. Khawf's words highlight the futility of trying to find joy or hope in a world that has been so thoroughly devastated by conflict. This passage also underscores how the environment is not just a backdrop to human suffering but an active participant in reinforcing that suffering. The “wasteland” is a stark reflection of both the war's physical toll on the land and the emotional toll on Salama.

Personal and Collective Resilience through Nature

In the narrative, the survival and enduring presence of the natural world parallels the resilience of the people and their deep connection to their homeland. The characters draw strength from nature despite the surrounding chaos, finding solace in the familiar landscapes that remain, even as everything else crumbles. Nature serves as a reminder of their identity and roots, offering a sense of continuity amid the upheaval. This connection reinforces their determination to endure and rebuild, reflecting the idea that just as the land persists, so too does the human spirit, despite the overwhelming forces of war and destruction.

This scene where Kenan invites Salama to witness the sunset exemplifies how nature can act as a sanctuary amid chaos. The sunset, a simple yet profound reminder of beauty, contrasts sharply with the devastation of war. Kenan's invitation to “properly” see the sunset, something Salama cannot even recall doing, highlights how the overwhelming destruction has dulled their awareness of nature's enduring presence.

He turns towards me, his smile serene. “When was the last time you saw the sunset, Salama? Properly saw it.”

I frown. “I don't remember.”

“With all the destruction happening down there, it's easy to forget the beauty that's up here. The sky is so beautiful after rainfall.” (Katouh, 2022, p. 178)

The sunset becomes symbolic of hope and continuity, reinforcing the theme of personal and collective resilience. Despite the chaos below, the sky remains beautiful, reminding both characters that there is still something stable and peaceful in their world. This moment not only offers emotional refuge but also signals their capacity to still experience and appreciate beauty, a critical part of their resilience amid war's devastation.

In this another passage, Kenan draws attention to a lemon tree that has stood the test of time, using it as a powerful symbol of resilience and survival in war-torn Homs. The tree, with its twisting trunks and budding leaves, reflects the endurance of both the natural world and the human spirit, even in the face of destruction. Its continued life amidst the surrounding devastation reminds Salama—and the readers—that despite the brittle appearance, there is still strength and vitality.

Then he points to a tree situated at the street's side. Its three thick trunks twist through each other, the branches brittle-looking, a hint of green leaves surfacing through its pores. "That lemon tree's been here forever. I used to climb it all the time when I was younger... There's still beauty, Salama. Still life and strength in Homs." He nods toward the sun. "There's *color*." (Katouh, 2022, p. 179)

Kenan's emphasis on the tree's beauty and the persistence of life symbolizes the resilience of the people of Homs. Just as the tree has survived, so too have they. By focusing on the enduring nature of the environment, Kenan tries to instill hope in Salama. He encourages her to see that—despite everything—there is still life and beauty worth fighting for. This moment reinforces the theme of nature as a source of strength, continuity, and hope, parallel to the characters' own determination to persevere amid hardship.

In a historic city plagued by bombs, life has persisted. I see it in the green vines waking up from their winter slumber, squirming through the rubble. Daffodils blooming, their petals opening bashfully. I see it in Layla, who smiles more, now that I do. When I see these subtle signs of life on my way to the hospital, my heart expands. (Katouh, 2022, p. 181)

Salama also observes the small signs of life that continue to emerge in the midst of the war-torn city. The green vines pushing through the rubble and the daffodils blooming serve as symbols of renewal and resilience. Despite the devastation that surrounds her, these subtle indicators of nature's perseverance offer Salama a sense of hope and strength. The natural world, represented by the vines and flowers, mirrors Salama's own emotional resilience as she begins to smile more and find moments of light amid the darkness of conflict. This connection between Salama's inner emotional state and the natural world around her underscores how nature plays a pivotal role in offering solace and continuity. Just as the plants persist through the rubble, Salama finds the ability to endure and draw strength from these small, yet powerful, symbols of life. This moment emphasizes the enduring power of the natural world to inspire resilience, even in the face of overwhelming hardship.

As the narrative progresses, Salama reflects on the deeper meaning of Syria beyond its physical borders. She emphasizes that Syria is not just the land they stand on, but the memories, relationships, and dreams that define their connection to the homeland. The mention of "lemon trees in Homs" serves as a powerful symbol of their shared identity, representing a piece of home that they will carry with them no matter where they go.

My heart softens, breaks. "Kenan. Syria isn't just what we're standing on. It's Lama growing up, reaching her teens with her two big brothers right there with her. It's Yusuf getting the highest grades and telling everyone about the lemon trees in Homs. It's you, making sure we never forget our reason to fight. It's you and—" I stop, catching myself before I say something stupid.

Something about a *might* life. (Katouh, 2022, pp. 198-199)

The lemon trees, once again, symbolize stability, continuity, and a sense of belonging, offering comfort to Salama and Kenan as they face the painful reality of having to leave their

homeland. By anchoring their memories to something as simple and natural as lemon trees, Salama reinforces the idea that their cultural identity and personal roots are not bound by geography; they persist in the stories they tell and the memories they cherish. Even in exile, the presence of these symbols allows them to carry a piece of Syria within them, offering solace amidst the immense emotional toll of displacement. This moment encapsulates the resilience that comes from maintaining a connection to one's homeland through nature and memory, even when physically separated from it.

As the narrative reaches to its final, the imagery of the seedlings emerging through the dirt powerfully reflects the themes of resilience and hope. The growth of the seedlings parallels the survival of the Syrian people, despite the overwhelming forces that seek to break them.

My eyes wander over his shoulder to the blue ceramic pot perched directly under the sun's rays. Seedlings have emerged through the dirt, fighting against gravity, and it reminds me of Syria. Of her strength and beauty. Of Layla's words and her spirit. Of Mama, Baba, and Hamza.

It reminds me that as long as the lemon trees grow, hope will never die. (Katouh, 2022, pp. 198-199)

The reference to the lemon trees—symbols of stability and cultural identity throughout the narrative—reinforces that no matter how much destruction the war has caused, the connection to Syria remains unbroken. The line “as long as the lemon trees grow, hope will never die” serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring spirit of the Syrian people and their unwavering connection to their homeland, even in the face of unimaginable hardship. By drawing strength from nature, Salama connects deeply with her roots and memories of her family, allowing her to find hope in the smallest of things. The enduring presence of the lemon trees at the end of the narrative reflects the resilience not only of the natural world but of the human spirit. Just as the trees continue to grow, so too does the hope that one day Syria will rebuild and its people will find peace. This powerful closing emphasizes that, while war may devastate the land and its people, the seeds of hope, strength, and resilience remain firmly planted.

The symbolism of the lemon trees in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* is deeply intertwined with the theme of resilience, echoing the enduring connection between Salama and her homeland. Like the trees, she and her people persevere despite the devastation surrounding them. This sentiment is beautifully encapsulated in the line from Nizar Qabbani's poem that Salama loves: “Every lemon will bring forth a child and the lemons will never die out.”

CONCLUSION

In *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, Katouh explores how the presence of lemon trees represents resilience, hope, and an unshakeable connection to homeland. As Salama navigates the trauma of war and loss, nature serves as a lifeline, reminding her of what is

worth fighting for. Throughout the narrative, the cyclical relationship between the environment and human resilience becomes evident. The landscape, though scarred by bombs and conflict, reveals signs of life—small green vines pushing through rubble, daffodils blooming along devastated streets—reflecting the persistent hope that exists even in the darkest of times. For Salama and others like her, these glimpses of life amid the devastation serve as a reminder that Syria, though battered, still holds beauty and strength. The survival of the land is intertwined with the survival of its people, both enduring unimaginable hardship yet refusing to succumb. This illustrates that nature is more than just a backdrop to human history; it is an integral part of it. As nature endures, so too do humans. This relationship between the natural world and human endurance is most powerfully captured in the imagery of the lemon trees. These trees, symbols of home and stability, appear throughout Salama's memories and moments of reflection, offering a sense of continuity amid the upheaval. The enduring presence of the natural world encapsulates the overarching message of the novel: hope—like nature—is resilient, and as long as life persists, so too does the possibility of a better future. Moreover, during times of war, it is crucial to recognize that human trauma is not the only impact; war also greatly affects nature. *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* highlights this intricate relationship between nature and human resilience in wartime. The recurring imagery of lemon trees serves both as a symbol of the homeland Salama clings to and as a metaphor for the perseverance of the Syrian people in the face of destruction. Ultimately, the narrative reminds readers that even in the darkest times, hope, much like nature, is a force that can never be completely extinguished.

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