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Nature as a road to integration? A Saudi experience

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ABSTRACT

Well-being through outdoor life and ecolacy are fundamental concepts in sociological research with regard to the question whether nature is instrumental for integration into some Western societies. In this article, we ask if the Saudi Arabian protagonist in Muḥammad Hasan ‘Alwān’s novel, *al-Qundus*, (The Beaver), 2011, becomes a part of, ‘integrated in’, North American society by means of ecolacy. An ecocritical and sociological reading, which takes into account human and non-human communication, shows that the protagonist does not become integrated into the North American society to which he has immigrated by way of his acquired ecolacy. Rather, his steps towards ecolacy seem to lead to self-knowledge and reconciliation with his family members in Riyadh rather than being a conduit to integration.

The language of nature and ethics of human–non-human relationships

Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz maintain that this present epoch requires

the substitution of the “ungrounded humanities of industrial modernity by new environmental humanities that adventure beyond the great separation between environment and society.”¹

In this article our attention is directed towards Ghālib, the protagonist of the prize-winning novel *al-Qundus*, (The beaver), henceforth referred to as *The Beaver*, while he, unaware of the role that he shoulders in adventuring ‘beyond the great separation between environment and society’, bridges the gap between human and nature, human and non-human. This novel, by Saudi Arabian author Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Alwān (henceforth Mohammed Hasan ‘Alwān), was first published in 2011 and shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) 2013.² While referring to eco-critical, sociological and anthropological theories all of which will be treated below, we will explore the question of the role of nature as represented by river fauna and topography in an urban setting in the integration and acculturation process of the protagonist of *The Beaver*, a middle-aged Saudi Arabian national. The question at hand is whether outdoor

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¹Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016), 33.

²In 2017, Mohammed Hasan ‘Alwān (Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Alwān) was awarded the 2017 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) for his novel *Mawt Ṣaġhir* (*A Small Death*). Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Alwān, *Mawt Ṣaġhir* [A Small Death] (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2017 [2016]).

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life, spending time in nature and learning about a non-human member of the environment constitute a path leading towards a successful integration for the Saudi protagonist.

The Beaver is a story about Ghālib and his escape from a middle-class life in Riyadh, to a life in a working-class district in an apartment complex in the USA. Triggered by his father ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Wajzī’s ruggedness and inability to establish a mature, mutually respectful and candid relationship with his eldest son, Ghālib moves to Portland, the largest city in the American, North Western state of Oregon, where he has pursued university studies earlier in life. Later, his recollections during a brief visit to his homestead in Riyadh, upon the demise of his father, show that his relationship to his father has hardly repaired during his absence abroad.

He died while unconscious never having given me a single one of those noble glances, which sons preserve as an evangelical creed and later interpret as they wish.

مات في غيبوبته فلم يترك لي واحدة من تلك النظرات النبيلة التي يحتفظ بها الأبناء مثل
الأنجيل ويفسرونها في ما بعد كيف شاؤوا.³

In what follows our focus will be on the fact that Ghālib adopts certain pastime activities in nature by one of which he actively seeks to become integrated, that of river fishing. The other is a matter of personal interest and involves learning about beavers. While doing this he realises that he needs to become more attuned to the language of nature and its non-human inhabitants, more specifically, beavers. The question is whether these two activities make him feel comfortable and at ease in Portland.

This article is inspired by the concept of ecological literacy in the vein of David W. Orr. We follow his line of argument in as much as that ‘[K]nowing, caring and practical competence constitute the basis of ecological literacy,’ all of which is foundational for our eco-critical readings here.⁴ As explained by Orr, ecological literacy ‘requires a comprehension of the dynamics of the modern world’ and ‘... implies a broad understanding of how people and societies relate to each other and to natural systems, and how they might do so sustainably.’ Guidelines for that which is required of human society to maintain and preserve ecological systems and a healthy environment for humans as well as non-humans as spelled out by Orr are included in the concept of ecological literacy here.⁵ In addition, we consider Amy Cutter-Mackenzie’s and Richard Smith’s outline of ecological literacy, which states that ‘... ecological literacy primarily constitutes “knowing, caring and practical competence”.’⁶ Setting out from Orr’s theory of ecological literacy, they reshape the term *eco-literacy* ‘in order to appropriately encapsulate (*measure*) both ecological literacy (complex knowledge) and environmental (*eco*)

³Arabic quotations are given as rendered in the Second Impression of this novel, 2012. Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Alwān, *al-Qundus* [The Beaver]. (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqi, 2012 [2011]), 312.

⁴The ecologically literate person ‘understands the dynamics of the environmental crisis, which includes a thorough understanding of how people (and societies) have become so destructive.’ David W. Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education in the Transition to a Postmodern World*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 92–93.

⁵To think in ecolate fashion presumes a breadth of experience with healthy natural systems, both of which are increasingly rare. It also presumes that the persons be willing and able to “think at right angles” to their particular specializations, as [Aldo] Leopold put it’ (Orr, *Education in the Transition to a Postmodern World*, 87, 92–93).

⁶Here Cutter-Mackenzie and Smith coin the term ‘eco-literacy’, based on Orr’s concept ‘ecological literacy.’ Amy Cutter-Mackenzie and Richard Smith 2003. ‘Ecological Literacy: The “Missing Paradigm” in Environmental Education (part one)’, *Environmental Education Research*, 9, no. 4 (November 2003): 497–524 (502).

philosophy (belief) indicators.⁷ In other words, the implications of this theory is the idea that the individual who is ecologically literate, eco-literate or ecolate, also acts ecologically in practice.⁸ This is supported by Eileen Bobeck-Thoresen who reasons that the ecologically literate (ecolate) individual 'has the knowledge necessary to comprehend interrelatedness, and an attitude of care or stewardship,' ecolacy being the '... optimal quest for corrective measures to solve our current crisis of ecological illiteracy.'⁹

A sociological stance from which we set out is informed by Ebba Lisberg Jensen and Pernilla Ouis specializing in human ecology, human–environmental relations, value conflicts, integration and outdoor recreation. They concluded that outdoor recreation in the Swedish context emerged as a social project with moral and political imperatives such as linking outdoor recreation to health and well-being. Nature should be taken advantage of not only to 'promote public health' but is also seen as 'a way for extra-Scandinavian immigrants to become more integrated into Swedish society.'¹⁰ This reasoning also worked reversely. The researchers observed that '[I]mmigrants may choose outdoor recreation as one strategy for acceptance in the Swedish society', a way to meet Swedish nationals, practice the language, acquire a Swedish lifestyle and orientate oneself in the near environment.¹¹ Lisberg Jensen found that the dividing

⁷Cutter-Mackenzie and Smith, 'The "Missing Paradigm" in Environmental Education', 502.

⁸As I have explained in my article 'Ecological literacy in an Egyptian short story' (in press 2019), this reasoning has been contested by Elizabeth R. DeSombre (2018a). In fact, DeSombre finds that in the face of huge global environmental problems, people can come to see themselves as powerless. Information 'about the dangers of environmental problems' and their contribution to creating them may then backfire and the response could be to push them out of their minds (Elizabeth R. DeSombre, *Why Good People do Bad Environmental Things*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018b), 2). Elizabeth R. DeSombre, 'How (Not) to Save the Environment.' Faculty lecture, Founders Hall 120, June 8 (Wellesley: Wellesley College, 2018a).

⁹To think in ecolate fashion presumes a breadth of experience with healthy natural systems, both of which are increasingly rare. It also presumes that the persons be willing and able to "think at right angles" to their particular specializations, as [Aldo Leopold put it] (Orr, *Education in and the Transition to a Postmodern World*, 87, 92). Quoting Garret Hardin (1985) Eileen Bobeck-Thoresen underlines that ' [C]autious and humility are the hallmarks of the ecolate attitude toward the world.' A further clarification from Bobeck-Thoresen and with reference to Garrett Hardin's three 'filters that are essential to our ability to process any information' is that '[E]colacy may just be the most important filter as this is the optimal quest for corrective measures to solve our current crisis of ecological illiteracy' (Eileen Bobeck-Thoresen, 'Ecological Literacy: Global Planetary Stewardship is Everyone's Responsibility' (Master of Liberal Studies Theses, *Rollins College*, Rollins Scholarship Online, 2012), 14–15). <https://scholarship.rollins.edu/mls/26/> (accessed February 3, 2018). Cf. Garrett Hardin, *Filters against Folly: How to Survive Despite Economists, Ecologists, and the Merely Eloquent* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 21–25 (on the three 'filters,' 'literacy,' 'numeracy' and 'ecolacy' and consult pp. 53–54 for his observations on some consequences of lack of ecological awareness).

¹⁰Ebba Lisberg Jensen and Pernilla Ouis, 'Contested Construction of Nature for City Fringe Outdoor Recreation: The Arrie Case', *Urban Forestry and Greening* 4, no. 7 (2008): 171–182 (pp. 1–22 in printout): 171–182 [pp. 9–10 in printout]. The concept of outdoor activities as a conduit for integration in the Swedish context is not unique. Cf. Charlotte Lundh (2015) who concludes that newly arrived students (from Somalia and Afghanistan) may benefit from outdoor activities health-wise and towards integration. Such activities may also introduce them to Swedish 'culture and traditions', as expressed in the Abstract of her Teachers' exam paper on newly arrived pupils in Swedish secondary school coming from Somalia and Afghanistan. https://dspace.mah.se/bitstream/handle/2043/6602/Arrie_UFUG.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y (accessed August 2, 2018). Charlotte Lundh, *Nyanlända elever erfarenhet och uppfattning om friluftsliv* [Newly arrived students' experiences and views on outdoor activities]. A qualitative study with newly arrived students in secondary school from Somalia and Afghanistan. Examensarbete, lärarprogrammet (Degree paper, teachers' program). (Karlstad: Karlstads universitet, 2015), 1–37. <http://kau.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:827548/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed August 1, 2018).

¹¹182 [p. 10 in printout]; Ebba Lisberg Jensen and Pernilla Ouis, *Det gröna firrummet* [The Green Sitting Room] (Stockholm: Carlssons, 2014), 167 and Ebba Lisberg Jensen, 'Gå ut min själ. Forskningsöversikt om hälsoeffekter av utvistelser i närmatur' [Go out my soul. Research overview on health effects of being outdoors in fringe nature] (Östersund R: Statens folkhälsoinstitut (The Public Health Institute), 2008), 10. ISSN: 1651–8624. ISBN: 978–7257–529–5. https://muep.mau.se/bitstream/handle/2043/6583/R200810_Ga_ut_min_sjal0806-1.pdf?sequence=1 (accessed December 18, 2017), 15. A central idea promoted by the responsible authority was that organizing outdoor activities and projects in a nature reserve called Lake Arrie in the southern Swedish province of Scania (Skåne) would facilitate integration of immigrants to Sweden into the mainstream community. Ouis also suggests that Swedes seem to be 'most open to immigrants' when they display a positive attitude to Swedish nature, take part in open-air activities and 'environmental contexts.' Consult Pernilla Ouis, 'Grusade förhoppningar:

line between ecological literacy and illiteracy did not run between ethnic groups but along the parameters of urban and rural lifestyles an urban lifestyle representing 'modernity' in which an understanding of 'natural systems' had been lost.¹² As we shall see presently, the Saudi Arabian protagonist of *The Beaver*, an emigrant from the big-city environment of Riyadh, adopts a position framed by the concept of outdoor activity as a conduit to acculturation in his endeavours to blend into white, middle-class, urban, Portland society.

As a consequence of the reasoning above on nature as a vehicle for integration in the Scandinavian context, Swedish society invests heavily in projects related to the cultural integration of immigrants by way of encouraging outdoor activities.¹³ In other words, an underlying idea for promoting tax-funded creation of fringe nature in Swedish near city environments and suburbia is that native Swedes from different social backgrounds, who (presumably) are fond of outdoor activities and newly immigrated Swedes, who choose outdoor life, are provided with an opportunity to meet and socialize on an equal basis in nature.¹⁴

In the North-American context, Lisberg Jensen and Ouis suggest that environmental awareness is a factor to be taken into account regarding immigrant status and acculturation. They observe that non-Western immigrants may adopt values embracing environmental concern during the integration process in order to acquire of either a North American or a northern European identity.¹⁵ More specifically on questions of social integration in North America, social and cultural historian Sharon Wall studied the increasingly popular idea of returning to nature in a historical framework of urbanization in early twentieth-century Ontario.¹⁶ She found that the democratic rhetoric of that day was employed by camp directors to promote summer camp as a domain in which children from different ethnic groups and social classes in society would be able to mix and become acquainted with one another.¹⁷ In reality, though, '[P]rivate camps, like elite suburbs ... provided yet another escape from heterogeneous class mixing; they provided no escape

Friluftsliv som integration i Arrie' [Thwarted hopes: Outdoor life for integration in Arrie], in *Närnaturens mångfald*, ed. Per Hillbur (Malmö University Publications in Urban Studies 3, 2009), 170–193, 191. Lisberg Jensen, 'Gå ut min själ'.

¹²Ebba Lisberg Jensen, 'God har varit givmild här: Friluftsliv, etnicitet och ekologisk läskunnighet i Arrie' [God has been generous here: Outdoor life, ethnicity and ecological literacy in Arrie], in *Närnaturens mångfald* [The diversity of fringe nature], ed. Per Hillbur (Malmö University Publications in Urban Studies 3, 2009), 197–217, 201, 210–212, 215–216.

¹³Lisberg Jensen and Ouis, 'Contested Construction of Nature', 171–182; Ouis, 'Grusade förhoppningar', 192 and Lisberg Jensen, 'Gå ut min själ'.

¹⁴The regional administrative authority of Scania (Skåne) had in mind to provide the inhabitants of three Malmö-regions in southern Sweden with vast class-differences, incomes and ethnic backgrounds possibilities to enjoy outdoor life, meet with each other in a relaxed fashion and ultimately, to create an environment and atmosphere encouraging integration between native and new Swedes, immigrants. One of the objectives for the recreational areas formulated by the County Council of Scania was specifically cultural integration expressed in a set of anticipated goals that could be reached by constructing a nature reserve for city fringe outdoor recreation. The political goals of the County Council are to plan for outdoor recreation in order to promote not only health aspects, but also ... cultural integration ...' (Lisberg Jensen and Ouis, 'Contested Construction of Nature', 171–182 [p. 10 in printout]; Ouis, 'Grusade förhoppningar', 190).

¹⁵Lisberg Jensen and Ouis, *Det gröna firrummet*, 167.

¹⁶Here, as elsewhere, Wall states, one aspect of modernity meant changed space. 'Urban parks,' she observed, 'offered bits of cultured nature' and summer camp emerged as an escape from the 'clutter of telephone cables, streetcar wires, and an ever-increasing number of automobiles' in burgeoning cities being transformed by technology. Sharon Wall, *The Nurture of Nature: Childhood, Antimodernism, and Ontario Summer Camps, 1920–55* (UBC Press, 2010). ProQuest Ebook Central: (Wall, *The Nurture of Nature*, 26, 28). <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uu/detail.action?docID=3412652> (accessed June 15, 2017).

¹⁷Wall, *The Nurture of Nature*, 63.

from modernity, and certainly not from its class cultures,' as explained by Wall.¹⁸ In summary, outdoor life in the form of summer camps in the North American context hardly lead to social integration and dislodging of class structures.

Theories on communication and ethical coexistence with respect to the relationship between the human and non-human frame our discussions on the protagonist's endeavours to learn about the characteristics of an animal species central to this novel. A beaver, indeed the animal state symbol of Oregon, residing in the Willamette River, represents this non-human individual. Christopher Manes' exhortation to humans to come to terms with nature by 'breaking the silence of nature' comes to the fore in the protagonist's efforts to learn the language of a Willamette beaver so as to befriend this non-human character.¹⁹ The protagonist takes a step towards 'breaking the silence of nature' in his efforts to learn about beavers, while approaching a specific beaver on its own terms. He learns to listen to, understand and communicate with a non-human representative of nature in the vein of Manes. Emphasizing the reasoning of Manes are recent findings of Don Kulick who argues that research interest on human–animal communication has shifted from questions about human–animal difference to ethics, how we can live with non-humans in non-abusive and mutually beneficial ways.²⁰

Besides his walk towards eco-literacy, while practicing outdoor activities and cultivating a special interest in the ethology of the beaver, Ghālib participates in other social activities such as frequenting the local bars, barbecuing with his neighbour and joining a course for lifestyle guidance. In order to make future guests feel comfortable in his home, he chooses a downtown apartment, which he has decorated by a professional interior designer.

He is also made aware of other behavioural patterns to be considered in his new environment. One such subtle tradition, which he has not adopted, is that Portlanders do not carry an umbrella with them every time they step outside for a stroll despite what in his eyes appears as a generally rainy climate. This climate factor prompts him to carry an umbrella when he leaves his home as a precaution for a possible shower.²¹ The protagonist carries his umbrella 'too often' to be regarded as a native Portlander. He is aware that this behaviour sets him apart from the majority.

¹⁸The result of this idealized 'escape to nature' in summer camps as a means to erase class differences was that '[Q]uite simply, the fees charged at many private camps ensured that only the wealthy, or at least, financially comfortable, would consider them' (Wall, *The Nurture of Nature*, 65, 68).

¹⁹A viable environmental ethics must confront "the silence of nature"—the fact that in our culture only humans have status as speaking subjects,' Manes explained in 1996 (p. 26). Cf. Ramsay 2014: 151, where I argue that the novel, *Nazif al-hajar*, by Libyan author Ibrahim al-Koni (Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī) illustrates an example of how breaking the silence of nature may take place in a literary work expressing an environmental counter-ethics and urge for present-urbanized, global, consumerist society to re-evaluate its lifestyle in the vein of Manes (1996). Christopher Manes, 'Nature and Silence', in *The Ecocriticism Reader* eds. Cherryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 15–29. Gail Ramsay, 'Breaking the Silence of Nature in an Arabic Novel: *Nazif al-hajar* by Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī', in *Orientalia Suecana*, eds. Tal Davidovich, Ablahad Lahdo and Torkel Lindquist (2014), 149–172. <http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:767831/FULLTEXT03.pdf> (accessed June 17, 2019).

²⁰While Manes maintains that 'environmental ethics must confront "the silence of nature"; Kulick has recently observed a new theoretical tendency in research on human-animal communication. This tendency implicates 'a conduit to re-thinking fundamental conceptual, practical and ethical issues, such as ... the capacity that humans have to empathetically engage with life "beyond the human"' (Kulick 2017: 358, 370). Don Kulick, 'Human-Animal Communication', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 4 (2017): 357–78.

²¹The city of Portland has a reputation for rain which Portlanders refer to as mist. This reputation may be misleading since a meteorological weather-site offering statistics based on historical records from 1982 to 2012 informs that 'Portland, Oregon has a Mediterranean climate with dry warm summers and mild winters.' <https://weatherspark.com/averages/30477/Portland-Oregon-United-States> (accessed March 6, 2017). The stamp which brands the protagonist and foreign is the umbrella. This may be compared with the use of rubber boots in the Swedish environmental context. Lisberg Jensen and Ouis relate an anecdote in which an immigrant to Sweden describes her rubber boots, which she purchased after having lived in Sweden 10 years, as her token of integration into Swedish society. Lisberg Jensen and Ouis, *Det gröna finrummet*, 170.

Every time I went out to take a walk, carrying with me my umbrella, everyone would know that I did not belong to this place.

كلما خرجت لأمشي حاملاً مظلتني عرف الجميع أنني لا أنتمي للمكان...²²

Ghālib, rendered as a middle-class Saudi Arabian male immigrant to a Western society has become disillusioned with Saudi Arabian society and severed relationships with his family. One of his challenges is to find a means for societal integration into his new surroundings. Other goals are to come to terms with his family members and find a satisfactory relationship with a member of the other sex. We will relate Ghālib and his endeavours towards integration into mainstream, North American, urban society, to his process of familiarization with the natural environment, including a non-human individual in the shape of a beaver residing in the Willamette River. This process includes learning the official rules, which regulate contact with, and exploitation of the near city natural environment and its resources in the form of flora and fauna.

This Saudi Arabian immigrant in his early middle age performatively takes up outdoor activities that he understands are popular among the local inhabitants in order to make contact with them and blend in. Among such activities are spending time by the Willamette River, fishing and learning the state regulations as well as subtle, covert but nonetheless important rules guiding river fishing. Activities such as these represent steps towards becoming ecologically literate, ecolate.

I begin by observing the protagonist's steps towards acquiring eco-literacy as he learns how to communicate with and befriend the non-human individual of a Willamette beaver. He also learns of the necessity to be considerate of nature by abiding with the rules regulating river fishing. We ask whether these two factors brought together, that of challenging the situation that 'only humans have status as speaking subjects' and showing an interest in spending time in urban fringe nature, emerge as a conduit to successful integration into the society to which he has emigrated. Thereafter, I highlight some of the factors exhibiting the protagonist's psychological complex in his family relations. His problematic relationship with his father, upon which he meditates throughout the story while familiarizing himself with the beaver is specifically in focus. Although an in-depth psychoanalytical analysis of the novel is called for in order to be conclusive, I suggest that while learning about and acquainting himself with the beaver, he reaches a state of personal equilibrium and harmony of sorts with himself and his family.

Finally, I wish to clarify that I present quotations from the *The Beaver* with some liberality in order to enhance the overall picture of the protagonist's life situation, his thought-life, aspirations and psychological complexes. The present author has translated all Arabic quotations from the original novel unless stated otherwise. These quotations have been selected with respect to the question at hand: is nature a conduit for integration for the protagonist? The novel's many other problematics and themes affiliated with the protagonist's life and psychology such as his relationship with Dāwūd, the son of his wet-nurse, his romantic affair of long standing with Ghāda, a married Saudi Arabian woman, his friendship with his Filipino neighbour Conrado, his restaurant round-ups with heavy drinking ending in casual affairs with unfamiliar women and his complex over his facial appearance as a result of a severe car accident are all left out of the discussions in what follows.

²²: Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 119.

Acquiring eco-literacy

'What does "beaver" (*qundus*) mean?' the writer's son is said to have asked his father, author of *The Beaver* and the novel under discussion here, in an essay titled *Insisting on a Crucible of Love and Self*, under the heading 'The appeal of the Title' (*Ghawāyat al-'unwān*) on the cultural literary site *Jasad al-Thaqafa*.²³ This situation seems to reflect the extent of the Saudi Arabian protagonist's awareness and knowledge of this particular species. However, despite not being informed about it previously, Ghālib, in due time, comes to terms with and befriends an individual beaver residing in the Willamette river. He learns the ways of beavers better than even a caretaker of penned up beavers in the city centre. He accustoms this beaver to share his expensive, especially imported, Saudi Arabian dates with him and both protagonist and beaver end up as a couple of old friends of sorts, relaxing side by side, on the bank of the river as explained in the following terms.

He [the beaver] finally returned to my matt and we would spend most of our time together.

عاد [القندس] أخيراً إلى بساطي وصرنا نقضي أغلب الوقت معاً.²⁴

Having registered that resorting to nature for relaxation and reinvigoration is something that Portlanders commonly do during their spare time, the protagonist affiliates his ambition to integrate into his new society with the outdoor activity of spending time by the river. His curiosity is roused after having caught sight of a beaver by the river and learning about the centrality of this animal in his new city of residence. The protagonist sets out to study and acquaint himself with it.

What on earth could this thing be? My first thought was that it must be one of those animals with water in its name, like a water rat or a water vole, although with such unique features, it deserved a distinctive name of its own. Could it be that I'd never seen such a creature before? I must have missed that episode of Mustafa Mahmoud's show in my youth. Otherwise, I would not have been sitting there on the bank of the Willamette, unable to identify this creature that had taken my date then disappeared.²⁵

ما اسم هذا الشيء يا ترى؟ فكرت أنه واحد من تلك الحيوانات التي تحمل أسماءً منسوبة للماء: كلب الماء أو ثعلب الماء، رغم أنه يحمل ملامح فريدة تستحق اسماً لا شريك فيه. هل يعقل أنني لم أر مخلوقاً مثله؟ فانتنتي حلقة من برنامج مصطفى محمود في يفاعي بالتأكيد وإلا ما جلست اليوم على ضفة ويلامت عاجزاً عن معرفة اسم هذا الذي أخذ تمرتي واختفى.²⁶

²³<http://aljsad.org/forum29/thread3715864/> (accessed February 2, 2018). Cf. Lisberg Jensen and Ouis, *Det gröna finrummet*, 162. This situation could illustrate how a Swedish-born child may have a large vocabulary for phenomena in the Swedish natural environment whereas the children of immigrants may not know one 'single word', something which may cause segregation, as expressed by Liserg Jensen and Ouis.

²⁴Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 28.

²⁵Egyptian medical doctor Mustafa Mahmud (25 December 1921–31 October 2009) made a career as philosopher and author whose prolific *œuvre* covers a wide range of subjects in science, philosophy, religion, politics and society besides fictional writing and travelogues. The translator (Paul Starkey 2011) has chosen to translate the Arabic expressions *kalbu al-mā' 'aw tha 'labu al-mā'* (كلب الماء أو ثعلب الماء), usually signifying 'otter', as 'water rat or a water vole.' Paul Starkey, trans., 'An Excerpt from the Novel "The Beaver"', in *Banipal Magazine of Modern Arab Literature* (2011). <http://www.banipal.co.uk/selections/82/261/mohammed-hasan-'Alwān/> (accessed February 15, 2018).

Despite being baffled by the appearance of this creature, the protagonist senses a bond of friendship between himself and this non-human individual even in their first encounter.

The very first time I saw the beaver, I felt a connection. He must have felt the same way too, or he wouldn't have climbed up the rocky bank and started messing around with my basket and blanket. I looked at his two front teeth, which were tinged a pale orange colour from gnawing too much oak and willow bark.²⁷

عندما رأيت القندس أول مرة شعرت بالألفة. ولا بد أنه شعر بذلك أيضاً وإلا ما تسلق الضفة الحجرية وراح يعبث في سلتني وبساطي. تأملت سنّيه البارزتين اللتين اكتستا لوناً برتقالياً شاحباً من فرط ما قضم من لحاء البلوط والصفصاف...²⁸

It is during an annual beaver festival held in Portland that the protagonist is offered a first instruction as to how to act in the company of beavers. At first, he is amazed by the multifarious depictions of beavers on banners, t-shirts and posters with which he is confronted. Next, he finds a couple of live beavers displayed in a cage situated in the city centre. Without any previous experience of or even knowledge about this animal, the protagonist tries to befriend the caged beavers.

I tried to stretch out my hand to one of them through the small openings in the cage but one of the keepers advised me to refrain from this so that I wouldn't be exposed to a painful bite ... I drew away from him finally repeating the name of the animal, which the keeper of the cage had pronounced for me precisely.

حاولت أن أمدّ يدي إلى أحدها من خلال فرجات القفص الصغيرة فنصحني أحد الحراس أن أمتنع عن هذا لئلا أتعرض لعضة مؤلمة... ابتعدت عنه وأنا أردّد اسم الحيوان أخيراً بعد أن نطقه حارس القفص بوضوح.²⁹

This experience makes the protagonist feel secluded, ignorant and a stranger; he does not even know the name of this animal, indeed the central figure of the ongoing festivities. Simultaneously, he makes a note of the fact that since his arrival in his new setting, nobody except waiters and sales-people have greeted him and that during this festival everyone is more fascinated by this particular animal, of which he has no previous knowledge, than by him.

Since I arrived, I have only been greeted by waiters and sales-people and silence has almost glued my teeth together since I haven't found a suitable time for conversation or small talk with anyone. Now, everyone is making noise about this kind of an animal rather than me.

منذ وصلت إلى هنا لم يلق عليّ التحية سوى النادل والباعة حتى كاد الصمت أن يلصق أسناني ببعضها وأنا لا أجد فرصة لآنقة للحديث والثرثرة مع أحدهم. الآن يضجون جميعاً بحيوان كهذا دوني.³⁰

²⁶Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 7.

²⁷Starkey, trans., 'An Excerpt from the Novel'.

²⁸Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 5.

²⁹Ibid., 25–26.

³⁰Ibid., 26.

Lacking experience with the river fauna generally and beavers specifically, his first encounter with a beaver in the wild is a failure. It ends in disunity and misunderstanding the result of which is that his sense of estrangement and disappointment with himself are fortified.

I felt that I must have somehow fallen short in my hospitality, prompting his departure, or else that he had fallen short in his gratitude and had left shame-faced. I threw a stone at him but it missed. I turned to inspect the tear in my blanket, trying not to think how rude he'd been to leave without saying goodbye, even after we'd shared these dates together and a few precious moments of this fine Oregon spring.³¹

شعرت بأنني قصرت في قِراه فتركني أو أنه قصّر في شكري فرحل مضرّجاً بالخجل. رميته
بججر فلم يبلغه. رحت أفحص ثقب بساطي محاولاً ألا أفكر في فظاظة رحيله دون تحية رغم
اقتسامنا التمر معاً والدقائق القليلة من ربيع أوريغون البديع.³²

During the beaver festival, Ghālib learns that the beaver is the animal state symbol of Oregon and called 'beaver', as carefully pronounced by the caretaker of the caged beavers. This is also when both factors, his sense of social estrangement and isolation, as well as his ignorance of an important representative of the local fauna, bring him to take action by deciding to learn about beavers. He takes the task of studying the life and behaviour of beavers seriously; he turns to the library in order to search out literature from which he may acquaint himself with them and learn about their habits so as to be able to foresee what movements may be expected from the beaver, which he has encountered by the river. He expresses this aim to the point and in no unclear terms.

I searched, at the public library, for that which would enable me to predict his behaviour the next time he halted on my mat and ate my dates.

فتشّدت في المكتبة العامة عما يمكنني من التنبؤ بسلوكه في المرة المقبلة التي يعرّج
فيها على بساطي ويأكل تمرّي.³³

Kulick, to whom I have referred in the introductory section above, argues that an emerging line of research in human–non-human communication is driven by the search for an ethical relationship between humans and animals rather than by exploitive intentions. The protagonist's movements from ignorance about beavers to his search for knowledge and ultimately, establish a two-way communication with one of them, serve as an illustration to Kulick's theory. Initially, the protagonist is angered with the beaver for not instantly befriending him after having been offered exotic, expensive dates. On the contrary, he scratches Ghālib's mat with dirty claws and leaves in an ill-behaved manner without 'taking farewell' properly. Despite having first hurled a stone after the beaver, he later takes the decision to learn about how to approach it for an improved rapport. In fact, the reader understands that Ghālib becomes better informed about beavers than most of his fellow Portlanders, a beaver befriending him and both spending time together on his blanket, spread out on the riverbank of Willamette.

³¹See note 27 above.

³²Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 7.

³³Ibid., 26.

At this point, it becomes clear that the protagonist befriends the beaver after having learned about how to approach this non-human individual on his own terms. In fact, his observations and studies enable him to enjoy the company of the beaver and it seems that the relationship is 'mutually beneficial' as expressed by Kulick. The beaver is made to feel content and confident beside his human friend and both share contemplative moments of a friendship of sorts by the river while enjoying delicious dates. This evolution of a friendly rapport between the Saudi Arabian protagonist and the non-human individual of the beaver emerge as an expression of Kulick's observation that the tendency of cultural discourse is towards finding ways for humans and non-humans to exist in a 'non-abusive mutually beneficial way'.³⁴

River fishing and alienation in the *ghurba*

While picking up my stuff and getting ready to leave the river I became convinced that I had pursued exactly that which I didn't need in this growing alienation: a self-development course to develop my personality and fishing excursions to destroy it ... I do not believe that spending all that time by the river will provide me with a list full of good friends and nice women.

تأكد لي وأنا أجمع حاجياتي استعداداً لترك النهر أنني مارست تماماً ما لا أحتاج إليه في هذه
الغربة الناشئة: دورة لتطوير الذات ورحلات صيد لتدميرها... لا أظن أن المكث طويلاً أمام
النهر سيمنحني قائمة حافلة بالأصدقاء الطيبين والنساء الكريمات.³⁵

Another activity involving outdoor life and experiences of nature is fishing in the Willamette River. Since locals spend time sitting patiently with their fishing rods while waiting for their catch, the protagonist concludes that if he were to do the same, that is, procure fishing gear and spend time doing the same as the locals, this would enhance his chances of integration in his new society. As was the case with the beaver, he finds that he has much to learn about how to go about this intervention in nature. Fishing is regulated by severe rules about which he is not aware. When he pulls up fish that are not large enough to be taken from the river, he is fined heavily with 200 dollars. After this experience, which he finds humiliating, he purchases a wooden measure with which to measure the fish that he catches to avoid making such a mistake again.³⁶

The question here is whether his advancements in becoming ecologically literate regarding river fauna conservation and protection help him to become integrated. As made clear in the lines from *The Beaver* quoted above, Ghālib has severe doubts about the usefulness of river fishing for becoming included in the social life of Portland and befriending its inhabitants. Consider the following passage in which he reasons from the vantage point of having learned about this popular leisure activity and having taken the necessary measures to carry out fishing by the river according to the official, regulative rules of this sport. He has also spent a considerable amount of time waiting for the fish.

³⁴Kulick, 'Human-Animal Communication', 358.

³⁵Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 178.

³⁶Referring to a study conducted by the Swedish National Board of Forestry (Skogsstyrelsen) Lisberg Jensen and Ouis propose that some communities of Swedes with a foreign background are not aware of and/or integrated in traditions affiliated with Swedish nature and outdoor life, something which occasions a lack of understanding for the importance of nature conservation and landscape protection (Lisberg Jensen and Ouis, *Det gröna finrummet*, 166).

Hours passed by with me convincing myself that fishing is like praying, healing or purification while my reason kept telling me that this was a naïve activity. There's no point in swapping your time for a fish. There's no depth, no hope, neither spiritual exercise, nor small talk.

مرت ساعات وأنا أقنع نفسي بأن الصيد مثل الصلاة والشفاء والطهارة ما زالت نفسي
تحدثني أنه عمل ساذج. لا فائدة في أن تقايض وقتك بسمكة. لا عمق ولا تأمل ولا رياضة
روحية ولا هراء.³⁷

Moreover, the protagonist learns that while certain rules that regulate river fishing may be official, such as the minimum size of a fish that may be taken from the river, others are unofficial or cultural, such as not situating oneself too close to another person who is fishing so as not to risk getting the fishing lines entangled.

This is when I became aware that the man who was worried that our fishing hooks might get tangled, was the first person to speak to me since the eve of this year's Fourth of July. This meant that I had spent two weeks in voluntary, silent estrangement, in the society to which I had emigrated, with the exception of one single night after which I had woken up in the house of an unknown woman. I felt that I was on the verge of a breakdown and that I soon would slide into self-pity.

انتبهت الآن أن الرجل الذي يخشى اشتباك صنارتينا هو أول شخص يحدثني منذ ليلة الرابع
من يوليو تلك. هذا يعني أنني قضيت أسبوعين من القطيعة الاختيارية الصامتة في المجتمع
الذي هاجرت إليه باستثناء ليلة واحدة استيقظت بعدها في بيت امرأة مجهولة. أشعر بأنني
موشك على انكسار قريب وسأنزلق قريباً في الشفقة على الذات.³⁸

Summing up, when he finally is frank with himself, the protagonist finds that fishing is neither useful for befriending individuals in his new society nor does it console him in any spiritual way. Rather, he soberly concludes that he is wasting his time and his chances of making close friends with either sex by spending hours on end, keeping at a proper distance from other anglers while waiting for the fish to bite.

Knowing the beaver, knowing the self

Ghālib's search for a *modus vivendi* in mainstream, North American society while searching for a meaningful, independent existence is at the heart of this story. It is also about conflict and reconciliation with his family members in Saudi Arabia. The question of interest in this section is whether his acquired ecological awareness, as far as communicating with the beaver, learning how to approach this non-human individual on its own terms and 'break the silence of nature' assist in reconciling himself with his own family members in Saudi Arabia.³⁹ In fact, the theme of internal family conflicts, their reasons and consequences emerges as a psychoanalytic line of research well worth a study on its own with respect to *The Beaver*. In what follows, I bring up a few examples of the theme of tense family relationships, which the protagonist has had to negotiate up to his departure, and

³⁷Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 167.

³⁸Ibid., 168–169.

³⁹Kulick, 'Human-Animal Communication', 358. Manes, 'Nature and Silence', 26.

contemplates on in Portland. While not in an exhaustive manner, I aim to show some factors from which can be gleaned that the protagonist reaches a degree of harmony with his family members; he employs the beaver as an explanatory metaphor during a self-treatment through which he seems to find mental equilibrium.

His reasons for leaving Saudi Arabia largely refer to frictions among the family members, particularly between himself, his father and younger, half-brother Salmān, all of whom he likens to beavers with various specific traits after having gained knowledge of this animal in his new homeland. Besides his father's negative attitude towards him and his favouring of Salmān, other factors influence Ghālib to move to Portland. These include incessant conflicts between family members, their struggle to cope with the normative and practical demands of everyday Saudi life. They may also be referred to profound existential questions of how to live in a society rooted in patriarchal traditions, at the same time impressed by rapid urbanization and globalization, a problematic, which I have treated elsewhere.⁴⁰ In the midst of both of these situations—family and societal—46-year-old Ghālib has found himself increasingly isolated, a strange bird in the traditional society of Saudi Arabia, not having settled, married and had children.

Summing up, his psychological complex with regard to his father, his poor relationship to his family members, especially his younger half-brother Salmān and estrangement in his own society, are at the root of Ghālib's decision to pull up his roots from Riyadh. His intention is to begin a new life, 'in search of a new self' – *baḥthan 'an dhāt jadīda*, in Portland, the largest city of the state of Oregon, where he previously has studied without completing his education to the great chagrin of his father, 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Wajzī.⁴¹ Without close relationships to his kin, friends or acquaintances he begins the process of settling in and adapting to his new environment in the USA.

The specific traits of the character of the beaver, whom Ghālib befriends after having emigrated to Portland and beaver-life on the whole, become symbols for various traits of Ghālib's family members and their lifestyle. By studying and learning about the physiology, temperament, traits, talents, behavioural patterns and instincts of beavers, he finds that he reaches significant insights about his family members. He contemplates the fact that it took him more than 40 years to reach this clarity.

I had to wait more than forty years to understand my family while fishing on the bank of Willamette and sharing dates with a beaver.

كان عليّ أن أنتظر أكثر من أربعين سنة وأنا أصيد السمك على ضفة ويلامت وأقتسم التمر
مع قندس.⁴²

The reader encounters a beaver, who on the one hand, becomes a friend of the protagonist and, on the other, is endowed with traits that are neither complementary nor positive. Consider, for example, the metaphorical comparison presented below, made by the

⁴⁰Gail Ramsay, 'Globalisation and Cross-cultural Writing in the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman', in *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective: Vol. 4. Literary Interactions in the Modern World*, 2, ed. Stefan Helgesson (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006a), 241–277. Gail Ramsay, 'Global Heroes and Local Characters in Short stories from the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman', *A Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures* 9, no. 2 (2006b), 211–216.

⁴¹Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 178.

⁴²Ibid., 38.

protagonist while he compares the lifestyle of beavers with that of his family members in Saudi Arabia from his new perspective in the USA. While taking a guided tour for tourists on the Willamette river in order to learn about beavers Ghālib finds himself likening his father, an entrepreneur in the building and construction sector, to the beaver. Both, he muses, go about their business and construct their houses in similar ways.

What surprised me most were his dams, which he builds across the width of the rivers ... because he builds his dam in the same way as my father. He changes the course of the river current and alters the forest like my father changes the name of a street, throws doubt on the direction of the *qibla* and expels the neighbourhood's bachelors. He selects the tree trunk himself, as my father chooses bricks and tiles. Both surrender to their instincts, which say that the wrong choice of tree trunk threatens the beaver family just as a treacherous brick may destroy the house and crush its secrets.

أكثر ما يدهشني هو سدوده التي يبنيها في عرض الأنهار... لأنه يبني سده على طريقة أبي. يغير مجرى التيار ومسار النهر وشكل الغابة مثل ما يغير أبي اسم الشارع ويشكك في اتجاه القبلة ويطرد عزاب الحي. يختار الجذع بنفسه مثلما يختار أبي الطوب والقرميد مستسلمين لغزيرتهما التي تقول أن الجذع الخاطئ يهدد عائلة القنادس مثلما أن الطوبة الخائنة قد تهدم البيت وتهتك الأسرار.⁴³

Another example of this kind of representation is made with respect to the protagonist's sister, Badriyya. The reader learns that her buttocks resemble the fat tail of the beaver. In fact, the protagonist's opinion is that she is

... the sister who has been influenced by the most general beaver genes, her buttocks swelling every year.

...الأخت التي استأثرت بأكثر جينات القندس الشكلية ويتضخم ردفها كل سنة.⁴⁴

The protagonist does not hide his fascination with the tail of the beaver. During his first meeting with this animal, he cannot but be intrigued by this spectacular limb about which he reflects in the following terms.

He then went back to crawling on three legs, having satisfied himself that I'd noted his ability to stand on two legs like us—though of course he did have some help from his broad, flat tail. The tail really intrigued me: was it a bone beneath the skin or some kind of hard flipper?⁴⁵

عاد بعد ذلك ليدبّ على ثلاث وقد تأكد أنني لاحظت قدرته على الوقوف على قدمين مثلنا لو لا أنه يستعين في ذلك بذيله المفلطح الذي أثار اهتمامي فعلاً. هل هو عظم مغطى بالجلد أم زعنفة صلبة بعض الشيء؟⁴⁶

His half siblings, Nūra and Salmān, are also likened to beavers, Nūra emerging as 'a very special beaver', being 'very worried, even to the degree that she decided to build her

⁴³Ibid., 39.

⁴⁴Ibid., 63.

⁴⁵See note 27 above.

⁴⁶Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 6.

private dam inside the dam' her father's genes having taken precedence 'while she was in the womb of his new, frightened wife.'⁴⁷ In fact, the whole family is the progeny of a mighty beaver; the protagonist concludes having befriended a beaver and observed his habits while relaxing on the bank of the Willamette river.

I greeted him with a glistening date, which I'd picked out for him from the plastic container I always took with me to the river. His hard claws touching my fingers gave me the feeling that beneath them lurked a history of worry and equivocation. He snatched the date from my hand the way my father grabbed greedily at the fruits of life, forgetting that they grew again every year. He put it in his mouth but spat it out immediately ...⁴⁸

صافحته مستعيناً بتمرّة لامعة انتقيتها من حافظة بلاستيكية أجلبها معي دائماً إلى النهر.
شعرت بأن أظفاره القاسية التي مسّت أطراف أصابعي تخبئ تحتها تاريخاً من القلق
والمواربة. انتزع التمرة من يدي كما ينتزع أبي ثمار الحياة انتزاعاً وكأن نموّها لا يتجدّد كل
سنة. وضعها في فمه ثم لفظها فوراً...⁴⁹

As already exemplified above, it is not only the isolated matter of a poor relationship with his father, which is brought into focus with beaver tropes. Family members, in fact, the whole family, are likened to 'selfish beavers.'

My father made me white-haired while getting grey himself. Then he died and left me alone among selfish beavers who unforgivingly accuse me of disrespect.

شيبني أبي معه وهو يشيب، ثم مات وخلفني وحيداً بين قنادس أنانية، يتهموني بالعقوق ولا
يغفرون.⁵⁰

This kind of symbolism and metaphoric comparison between the Willamette beaver and his middle-class Saudi family bring the protagonist to a reconciliation of sorts with his family members. The movement towards reconciliation begins to surface upon the death of Ghālib's father, beaver-life and behaviour still posited as a useful, explanatory metaphor.

My father lost is voice forever, removed in the great separation, leaving behind a great [beaver] dam and sons loyal to his conduct and rules.

فقد أبي صوته إلى الأبد وانفصل الانفصال الكبير مخلفاً وراءه سداً هائلاً وأبناءً مخلصين
لسلوكة وقوانينه.⁵¹

In the final scene of the novel, we glean a few instances during which the protagonist seems to enter a state of equilibrium and finds harmony of sorts. He cries his heart out by the grave of his father realizing that he 'has to cry a lot in order to regain balance.'⁵² After this experience, the practical business of establishing the inventory of the estate and initiating probate requires his attention.

⁴⁷Ibid., 122.

⁴⁸See note 27 above.

⁴⁹Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 5–6.

⁵⁰Ibid., 313.

⁵¹Ibid., 312.

⁵²Ibid., 313.

Although Ghālib is the eldest son and the judge explicitly turns to him, requesting of him to attend a court meeting alone, his capable and eloquent younger half-brother Salmān sticks to the helm of the family and insists on attending the meeting during which the final settlement takes place. After having heard the judge read the financial statement pertaining to the estate the brothers learn that the vast-landed properties that they had thought they would inherit, in fact, were owned by others as explained in no unclear terms.

He did not own that which we had thought that he owned ... This meant that my father did not own a single meter of the vast area stretching out north of Riyadh along the stretch that Salmān had dreamt of.

إنه لا يملك ما كنا نظنه يملك... كان هذا يعنى أن أبي لا يملك متراً واحداً من تلك الأراضي الشاسعة الممتدة شمال الرياض بامتداد أحلام سلمان.⁵³

Here, it seems that Ghālib has already realized, or at least come to suspect that something like this would take place. Claspng the hand of his younger brother while leaving the court Ghālib explains to Salmān that this situation does not come as a surprise to him.

I told him that I had come to expect something like this from remote news, which had spilled to my ears during the years.

أخبرته أنني كنت أتوقع شيئاً كهذا من واقع أخبار قديمة تسرّبت إلى سمعي طيلة سنوات...⁵⁴

His younger brother though is taken aback and utterly devastated by this news having worked for and obeyed his father closely while living according to the expected lifestyle of a respectable member of his society. Unlike him, Ghālib has been able to process his relationship with his father and family members from a distance, likening them to beavers and analysing their actions, physiology and not the least, psychology. In other words, he is prepared for this information while Salmān is not. In fact, as it turns out in the final scene the roles have been turned around. It is Ghālib who takes responsibility, guiding his brother away from the court, leading him by the hand, afraid that Salmān may set out to the burial place of their father and exhume him out of rage and disappointment.

Whatever remained of capital in the family father's bank accounts was easily divided and was not even worthwhile quarrelling over, the reader learns. The centrality of the beaver and beaver life in the family reconciliation process is brought to the fore in the final passage of the novel.

Each beaver took his share of food for winter and summer and decided to finally live the life of spring before fall descended upon him.

أخذ كل قندس نصيبه من قوت الشتاء والصيف وقرّر أن يعيش ربيعاً أخيراً قبل أن يدهمه الخريف.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid., 318.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 319.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 319.

Ecology, integration and self-knowing

This section brings together the various activities pursued by the protagonist in order to become accepted by and integrated into the society to which he has immigrated. Of specific interest is the result of his efforts to become ecolate in his new environment.

He has moved into a downtown apartment, has had it decorated by a professional interior designer, has taken to fishing and spending time by the river seeing this to be a principal pastime and form of recreation for the residents. After having become aware that the beaver is the state animal of Oregon he begins to inquire about it and study it to get to know it better. In fact, he even befriends an individual beaver, something that the regular residents, exemplified by a caretaker of caged beavers in the city centre, rarely succeed with.

Unaware, the Saudi Arabian protagonist of *The Beaver* takes on the challenge pronounced by Manes that we question whether 'only humans have status as speaking subjects.'⁵⁶ His efforts to become integrated into the society to which he has emigrated include befriending a non-human character, a beaver. In the vein of Kulick this factor highlights a new tendency in eco-critical (and other) research which may include a (global) focus on how humans can know animals while approaching them on their own terms; 'respect them and live together with them in non-abusive, mutually beneficial ways.'⁵⁷ This kind of mutual respect, as I have argued above and elsewhere, includes a two-way communication between human and non-human. It also illustrates the necessity of listening to and learning about the needs of nature and its non-human inhabitants, expressed by Manes as 'breaking the silence of nature.'⁵⁸

The introductory section of this article offered views and theories on nature as a sphere in which newcomers to an urbanized society may meet nationals on an equal footing and become acquainted with and integrated in its social structures and national lifestyle. As far the North American situation was concerned, a Canadian example showed that the pronounced ambition with wilderness camping during the heights of its popularity was democratization, which was the terminology used then. Summer camps for children, set in natural environments, would lead to mixing of social groups thus facilitating social integration for poor, industrial workers as they made contact with children among the urban elite, it was thought.⁵⁹ However, private camps did not prove to be a means of 'heterogeneous class mixing' nor an 'escape from its class cultures.'⁶⁰ Lisberg Jensen and Ouis suggested that non-Western immigrants in both North American and Scandinavian contexts may adopt values embracing environmental concern in an integration process.⁶¹ They also suggested that ecological literacy is not necessarily a question to which ethnic background the individual belongs but rather whether he or she leads an "urban lifestyle in which an understanding of 'natural systems', ecological literacy, has been lost."⁶² The protagonist of *The Beaver* is, in fact, accustomed to urban ways of living and therefore would belong to a social group in

⁵⁶Manes, 'Nature and Silence', 26.

⁵⁷See note 34 above.

⁵⁸Manes, 'Nature and Silence', 26. Cf. Ramsay, 'Breaking the Silence of Nature in an Arabic Novel', 150, 170.

⁵⁹Wall, *The Nurture of Nature*, 63.

⁶⁰Ibid., 65.

⁶¹Lisberg Jensen, 'Gå ut min själ', 15; Lisberg Jensen and Ouis, *Det gröna finrummet*, 167.

⁶²Lisberg Jensen, 'Gud har varit givmild här', 201, 210–212, 215–216.

which an understanding of such 'natural systems' has been lost, as expressed by Lisberg Jensen.

It is therefore noteworthy that the human character who establishes the friendly rapport with a non-human is not an urbanized Westerner but hails from the conservative society of Saudi Arabia in which he, likewise, is a big-city dweller. In other words, the Western, North-American urban dwellers, emerge as less informed about the fauna of the near environment while the urban, Saudi Arabian protagonist takes on the challenge to break the silence of nature in two specific ways. Most prominently, he learns the language of a beaver whom he befriends at the Willamette River to the degree that they end up 'spending most of their time together.'⁶³ He is also made aware of the vulnerability of nature and the ecological system. Fishing regulations prompt him to purchase a contraption with which he can measure the fish that he occasionally pulls out of the river so as not to catch undersized fish.

The question is whether the protagonist attains the sense of well-being and belonging for which he wishes. As illustrated in the preceding sections, the protagonist tries different methods to shrug off his feeling of alienation, separation and loneliness – *ghurba*. This process we may refer to as actively taking steps towards 'integration' in his new surroundings. On his chosen path towards integration, Ghālib moves towards becoming ecolate. He wants to learn the systems regulating both society and nature. Despite his efforts to make himself comfortable in Portland and melt in by means of taking up activities affiliated with nature, even excelling in his communicative competence with a non-human individual of the local river fauna, he nevertheless, remains estranged. A 'sense of alienation (*al-ghurba*) ... digs its small teeth into the lines of' his face, as spelled out in the following passage.⁶⁴

The sense of alienation (*ghurba*) kept on digging its small teeth into the lines of my face ...
I am aware that these teeth will grow larger and become sharper ...

ما زالت الغربة تمرّن أسنانها الصغيرة على حدود وجهي... أعرف أن هذه الأسنان

ستتمو لتصبح أهد...⁶⁵

In conclusion, by adapting to cultural rules and learning the state laws that regulate activities in the near city green environment, he tries to make his way into the new society. Ultimately, it is the Saudi Arabian newcomer, without previous knowledge of the existence of an animal such as the beaver, before his transfer to North America, who reaches an ethical relationship with his non-human companion by the river. It is Ghālib who breaks the silence of nature and learns how to communicate with and enjoy the company of the beaver. Yet, his ecolacy does not bring him into the mainstream core of the society to which he has emigrated. Rather, by befriendng a beaver in Portland, he is enabled to shoulder his role as the eldest son while visiting his family in Riyadh upon the demise of his father. His efforts to establish an ethical, mutually beneficial relationship with the non-human character of the beaver seem to lead to knowing himself better and reconciliation with his family.

⁶³ Alwān, *al-Qundus*, 28.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.