
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Letter to Agatha Christie: Digging in the Eco-colonial Heritage of the East

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Nostalgia

“Dear Agatha, I extend my warmest greetings from Mosul. Although the opportunity for a personal encounter was never afforded to us, I assure you that I can vividly imagine observing your endeavours while sitting on the surface of a hole, excavating the historical sites of Nimrud and Arbachiya alongside your husband. It was the beginning of the 1980s when I first started reading your masterpieces, which took me to the world of mystery. It was the summer holiday, and I was a teenager in Intermediate School. The holiday sounded long and boring because I was with my two elder sisters, Nadia and Muna, who were in the Preparatory School and did not take the final exam under the General Exemption System implemented by the Ministry of Education in Iraq. My youngest sister, Najalaa, was in Primary School. How to spend the long summer days? It was during this time that reading emerged as a profound solution to our ennui. Our mother played a pivotal role in shaping our literary journey, often acquiring children’s literature, short stories, novels, and texts spanning various disciplines in Arabic—a precious gift during our school years. The bookstores along Al-Najafy Street in Mosul served as the departure point in our journey with you. The translated copies of your crime fiction books were in the queue at that time: “Appointment with Death”, “The Sparkling Cyanide”, “The Mysterious Mr. Quin”, and “Death in the Clouds”. I remember the covers of these books, which were mystery-leading, featuring intriguing designs that served as gateways into the world of crime fiction during my formative years. Yes, Agatha, I recall the cover pages of these books, featuring intriguing designs that acted as gateways into the world of crime fiction at an impressionable age.

Oh, for that silence, quietness, and order in our house! I remember gathering at the kitchen table. It was a nun-like meeting in the monastery, waiting for Dad. Everything moved smoothly, even the way we played together as girls. Well, you were our household guest for years, and your fiction converted the rules of the house into suspense, adventure, travelogue, crime fiction, and chaos full of fun and joy. Despite being situated in a region rich with archaeological and cultural significance, epitomized by Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley Civilization—which continues to intrigue scholars, orientalists, and tourists alike—I have yet to experience travel to any part of the East, particularly Egypt. I could view the East; however, in your works, they allowed me to traverse these landscapes through the imagination. Your literary presence became a cherished element of our domestic landscape. So, the “Who’s the killer ?” game found its way into our daily routine. Because of the lengthy, detailed, and mysterious books your creative mind presented, reading them was not easy for Najlaa and me at the time. Muna attempted to spill the beans about the killer in a book she had finished reading quickly, saying, “Do you know who the killer is?” We shouted, “No, no, please! We did not finish reading!” It was joyful chaos – unforgettable indeed! As young readers, we were digging in your lines to unearth the eminence of style and imagination that we need as talented writers in our schooldays.

Years went by, and I realized my dream of launching a volunteer project with the TREEPEN TEAM, a group of students from the Department of English at the College of Arts, University of Mosul, where I graduated and began my academic career. The opening day of the project was April 29th, 2019; a pioneering project devoted to sustainability, growth, and development. Guess what? I was digging to unearth students’ skills and their ways of representing Mother Nature in their handmade works; among the group, Ayman, a second- year student, was a professional painter. We are pleased to welcome you as a guest once again, this time in our university class. In a very distinguished artwork fixed in one of the halls in the department, you are close to Shakespeare’s portrait. I chose you along with Shakespeare, Austen, and Swift, recalling my memories from literature classes, and the “Who is the killer?” game with my sisters from 39 years ago.

Now what for Devon, your hometown, Agatha? Well, don’t be surprised by my news. Two months later, on June 3rd, 2019, I was invited to participate as an honoured delegate to the international gathering in the UK, Evolving the Forest (June 19-21 2019). Oh God! Decades after the summer holiday evenings in childhood, having you as a guest in my home city, Mosul, I travelled virtually to yours, Devon, England, exactly in STUDIO 1, on Friday, June 21, at 11:30 - 13:00, in a video presentation: “Are Storks Back to Nests? Trees as a Resource in the Academic and Non-academic Mousli Heritage” trying to figure out the environmental scars of my home city -the very city that you had once described as “a brown dusty world”(). It is not a coincidence that once I made up my mind to write to

you and began digging into your bio, I knew that your birthplace was Torquay, a seaside resort town on the southern coast of Devon, on September 15, 1890. Unsurprisingly, I could imagine the lush greenery of Devon, just like any space in England, before surfing the internet! Yet, it is in danger now, Agatha! Could you believe it?

Let me quote Prof. Richard Povall's wording (the Conference Co-Convenor and Director, art.earth and Visiting Research Professor, UNIST, S. Korea), who sent me the invitation:

"This important event features speakers, performers, artists, and film-makers from around the world exploring ideas around forestry and its role in the next 100 years of environmental and ecological development"(R. Povall, personal communication, April 2019).

But could you believe that the Orient (Mosul) you were digging in, and the Motherland (Devon) are on the same boat? The event welcomed ideas about forestry for the next 100 years; my video presentation highlighted the destruction of Mother Nature, including woodlands and forests. It was not a random choice to be selected with my storks in the gathering. These birds are symbols of peace, migration, and return. This is part of the ecological heritage of Mosul. I plan to bring it to an international gathering in Devon exploring the future of the global forest. Please, Agatha, notice that the Orient is a spoiled wasteland of barren landscape full of dust, which is just an illusion. On the contrary, the Orient (Mosul) has a living, breathing green heritage that belongs to global ecological conversations. It is Prof. Richard Povall who writes:

"We selected 'Are Storks Back to Nests? Trees as a Resource in the Academic and Non-academic Mousli Heritage' from more than 250 applications from around the world, ..." (R. Povall, personal communication, April 2019).

So, dear Agatha, I would love for us to start our own excavation together. Let's gently dig into the beautiful pages you wrote during your time in my part of the world, the Orient. This time, not for the sake of a mysterious killer, I'm eager to explore the thoughts and emotions that shaped your experiences with the citizens, their habitats, and the atmosphere in the East. I want to reflect on the moments that inspired you during your journey to describe what you catalogued as "flies" and "dust" in sites from which you took pottery, stories, and history to England. Two of your books sound promising to be explored in this article: Death in Mesopotamia(UK Publication: July 6, 1936, by the Collins Crime Club) and Death on the Nile (UK Publication: November 1, 1937, by the Collins Crime Club).

As I read between the lines of the two aforementioned books, I have to stop for a while and inquire directly, Agatha: could it be that in the midst of your craft, as the Queen of Mystery, you were simultaneously documenting our world, the Orient, down? Well, Agatha, an apology, I observed in your description of the Orient that you subconsciously, I

would say, catalogued biodiversity, including man, nature, insects, and other items, in these two books, not just as atmospheric details.

In my eco-linguistic lens, it is the beginning of eco-colonial stories that I need to unearth. Let's keep in mind that what a tourist sees as a mere scene of decaying space—the flies, the dust, the mud, the hot weather—is truly a systematic way of writing the East down as inferior to the West.

Oriental Ecosystem From Memoir

However, it wasn't only the fiction in your stories, Dear Agatha, that was stunning for fiction fans; for me, I had a long stand with one aspect: the eco-colonial perspective was evident, too. Upon reading your autobiographical work, Come, Tell Me How You Live (1946), I noticed how your keen observation documented the ecosystem in the Oriental community. Your personal, documentary gaze is accountable for creating the subconscious eco-colonial narratives that I figure out in my forthcoming discussion. Nailing this truly shifts my evidence from your fiction to your direct, real-world observations as a Western traveler and excavator in the region.

Evidence 1: The Kurdish Women and the “Exoticized Landscape”

“A party of women are coming from the distance towards me. By the gaiety of their coloring they are Kurdish women. They are busy digging up roots and picking leaves. They make a beeTime for me. Presently they are sitting round me in a circle. Kurdish women are gay and handsome. They wear bright colors. These women have turbans of bright orange round their heads, their clothes are green and purple and yellow. Their heads are carried erect on their shoulders, they are tall, with a backward stance, so that they always look proud. They have bronze faces, with regular features, red cheeks, and usually blue eyes”(Christie, 1946, pp.69-70).

In this part, it seems to me, Agatha, you unearthed the imperial mindset that flows subconsciously through your pen, acting not as a recorder of human life in the East, the northern part of Iraq, as a case in point, but as an imperial paintbrush that squashes a living society into a static, lifeless canvas. Your, I am afraid, colonial gaze describes the Kurdish women through purely sensory descriptors— “gaiety of their colouring,” “bright colours,” and “bronze faces.” Their labour is completely de-contextualized. You viewed them from a distance of detached privilege, sitting in a self-described “pleasing coma” among the flowers. By filtering their existence, she enacts a subtle form of environmental violence.

What about considering this part together, Agatha? Don't you believe that your transformation of humans, as agents in the ecosystem, into mere natural botanical decorative objects, is eroding the Oriental? As a case, Iraqi Kurdish women are depicted in a natural scene, as picturesque fixtures of the landscape, moving across the horizon to entertain the Western observer. They are rendered as passive rather than agents in a complex society thriving in its own homeland. Your choice of vocabulary, “digging up roots and picking leaves”, covers this agency of its vital, native intelligence. To a homegrown community, this digging is a sophisticated, historical practice of sustainable agriculture, botanical knowledge, and medicinal survival—a deep partnership with the earth. Clearly enough, Agatha, your de-humanization through naturalization treated local women as if they were just part of the natural

scenery—no different than the palm trees, the camels, or the dust. The locals lose their human identity and are viewed merely as quaint objects that make the landscape look more “exotic” to both a British Orientalist and a reader.

The Eco-colonialism lens: From travelogue to fiction

Let's set aside your travelogue for a moment, dear Agatha, and explore how this same subconscious pen has flowed in your renowned fiction. But just a moment, please, before pursuing: How could someone deeply cherish the dead pottery and ancient history of a land, while simultaneously reducing its living people and ecosystems into a nuisance of “flies” and “dust”? The ultimate eco-colonial paradox, mixed with ecological issues, anchors the rest of my letter. It views the Orient as a space of biodiversity failure.

Evidence 2: De-humanization of the local Iraqi inhabitants

“I could see little black figures moving about it like ants. As I was looking, they suddenly began to run all together down the side of the mound”(Christie, 1936, p. 30).

The novel primarily utilizes eco-colonial themes, depicting the Iraqi landscape and its native people as mere passive scenery, not as active agents or disorderly factors in need of Western intervention and exploration. Nurse Amy's first impulse was to liken the local Iraqi workers to “ants,” which indeed diminishes their unique human identity. They are unnamed, generalized aspects of the environment, serving solely as inexpensive labour to retrieve artifacts for Western museums.

Evidence3:Mud

“ It took us about four hours to get to Hassanieh, which, to my surprise, was quite a big place. Very pretty it looked, too, before we got there from the other side of the river— standing up quite white and fairy-like with minarets. It was a bit different, though, when one had crossed the bridge and come right into it. Such a smell and everything ramshackle and tumbledown, and mud and mess everywhere”(Christie, 1936, pp.24-25).

This time, it is the land, Agatha! What motivated me to quote the aforesaid lines is the way your pen described Iraqi land, as “mud and mess”, which repeatedly reduces Mesopotamia's ancient heritage. Terms like “mud,” “mess,” and “dirt” create a clear ideological divide in the sense that the local ecosystem is inherently deteriorated, and value is only apparent when European or American experts excavate, clean, and catalogue its buried rich history. This unending dismissal of the land—considered the cradle of civilizations—as merely “mud and mess” represents Iraq as a blank, mistreated wasteland. It is supposed that there is no place for dust, mud, and mess in the infrastructure of Iraq in the era of colonialism. The narrative suggests that the land belongs to those who can extract value from it; in this context, it is the Western archaeologists who present themselves as superior to the Iraqi natives and have the right to dig into the heritage of the land with undeveloped infrastructure. This proposes a tragic comedy, right, Agatha?

Evidence4:Local Egyptians' Erasure

“If there were only any peace in Egypt, I should like it better,” said Mrs. Allerton. “But you can never be alone anywhere. Someone is always pestering you for money, or offering you donkeys, or beads, or expeditions to native villages, or duck shooting.” “It is the great disadvantage, that is true, said Poirot” (Christie, 1937, p. 79).

In another part of the East, Agatha, I feel the local population was neglected again. Your lines recommend that Mrs. Allerton travels to Egypt for the sake of experiencing its “history” and “sunny skies”; Egypt is picturesque for her with no population. In a colonial perspective, she enjoys “peace”, a term that connotes her desire for the local population to become invisible. So Agatha, do you really treat the Egyptian people as an environmental nuisance, similar to bad weather or crowded insects? You subconsciously present the Westerner as having the right to enjoy Egypt’s landscape while remaining completely unmindful of the economic realities and survival struggles faced by its native inhabitants.

The language of degradation, reducing an ancient culture and its local economy to a list of cheap, transactional items: “donkeys, beads, expeditions, or duck shooting,” obliges the reader to view the local population as mere transactional pests rather than as human beings with a legitimate claim to their own ecosystem. I am sorry to say that Agatha, your wording illustrates an eco-colonial paradox dangling between the wish to enjoy a foreign landscape as an infertile aesthetic while reducing the native population to a mere ecological disturbance.

How tragic, dear Agatha, that your fiction can bring to life ancient fragments from the East, a millennium ago, yet leave the living biodiversity of that very soil as nothing more than an irritating collective presence. While the ancient past may find a welcoming home in your museums, the living present is not yours to diminish.

So, you see, dear Agatha, while you were wittingly busy crafting brilliant red herrings to puzzle your readers around the globe, your pen unintentionally unveiled traces of eco-colonial clues that you never intended to share. You did catch the killer on the Nile, but through the sharp lens of ecostylistics, it is the subtle, subconscious mechanisms of the British Empire that become fully exposed.

In the end, you, Agatha, the most meticulous queen of crime fiction, unsuspectingly commit the perfect ecological murder in the East.

With the sharpest regards of my own “little grey cells”,

Huda Halawachy

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