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The Intersection Of Ecological And Identity Loss Trauma In Heather Raffo's 9 Parts Of Desire: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Analysis A Part Of A PhD Dissertation Entitled Intersection Of Power And Ecology: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Analysis Of Selected Contemporary Plays

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تقاطع الصدمة البيئية وصدمة فقدان الهوية في مسرحية "٩ أجزاء من الرغبة" لهيذر رافو: تحليل نقدي بيئي ما بعد استعماري

جزء من أطروحة دكتوراه بعنوان: تقاطع السلطة والبيئة: تحليل نقدي بيئي ما بعد استعماري لمسرحيات معاصرة مختارة

استاذ مساعد سناء سعيد مرزا
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المستخلص

تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلًا لتداخل الصدمة البيئية وفقدان الهوية في رواية "تسعة أجزاء من الرغبة" لهيذر رافو. وتعتمد الدراسة إطارًا نقديًا بيئيًا ما بعد استعماري، مع التركيز على شخصية مولايا، التي ترمز إلى الصلة بين التدمير البيئي والتآكل الثقافي. تُجسد مولايا دور النائحة على الدمار البيئي وفقدان الهوية الناجمين عن القمع السياسي والعنف في العراق. وتُقدم مناجاتها المطولة وطقوس حدادها على تجفيف الأراضي الرطبة وتحويل مجرى النهر منظورًا مؤثرًا للصلة بين التدهور البيئي وفقدان الهوية في سياق ما بعد الاستعمار. وبالاستناد إلى النظريات البيئية لتيموثي مورتون وروب نيكسون، والنظريات ما بعد الاستعمارية لهومي بابا وإدوارد سعيد، يُحلل البحث كيف تتفتت هويات الشخصيات بفعل العنف ما بعد الاستعماري والتدهور البيئي، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على شخصية مولايا. منهجياً، تستند الدراسة إلى قراءة نصية متأنية وتحليل العناصر الدرامية (الصوت والرمزية) لبيان كيف يُفاقم التدمير البيئي (المتمثل في تجفيف المستنقعات وتحويل مجرى النهر)، فضلاً عن الدمار الناجم عن الصراع السياسي، من صدمة الشخصيات.الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة البيئية، التفتت، المستنقعات، التجفيف، فقدان الهوية.

Abstract

The current study presents an analysis of the intersection of ecological trauma and identity loss in Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire. It employs a postcolonial ecocritical framework, focusing on Mullaya, who symbolizes the connection between environmental destruction and cultural erosion. Mullaya serves as a mourner of ecological destruction and identity loss stemming from political oppression and violence in Iraq. Her long monologues and ritual mourning of marshland drainage and river's diversion provide an effective perspective of the connection

between ecological and identity loss in the context of post-colonialism. Drawing on the ecological theories of Timothy Morton and Rob Nixon and the postcolonial theories of Homi Bhabha and Edward Said, the analysis examines how the characters' identities are fragmented by postcolonial violence and ecological degradation, with particular focus on Mullaya's character. Methodologically, the study is based on close textual reading and the analysis of the dramatic elements (sound and symbolism) to show how the ecological destruction (manifested in the form of the marshland's drainage and the river's diversion), as well as the devastation caused by political conflict, compounds the characters' trauma.Keywords: Ecological trauma, fragmentation, marshland, drainage, and identity loss.

1. Introduction

9 Parts of Desire (2003) is written and performed by an American-Iraqi playwright and actress, Heather Raffo. The text is a collection of monologues by nine Iraqi women that address varied aspects of Iraqi society under the rule of Saddam Hussein, the Gulf War, and the American invasion. Their narratives convey a strong sense of existential insecurity amid the destruction of the war. By using monologues and dramatic soliloquies, Raffo effectively creates an uncanny impression, allowing nine women to express openly their terror, anxiety, and trauma, which are the results of the consequences of political oppression and war that lead to ecological devastation. In turn, their monologues create a certain sense of unease in the audience (Awad Allah, 2019). Some of these women are still in Iraq, and others are exiled due to political, social, or personal challenges they face in Iraq. The women are; Mullaya[1] who is a traditional mourner lamenting ecological loss and cultural erosion; Layal is an artist torn between the pressures to leave Iraq for safety and her attachment to the homeland that shapes her identity, lost her life and paintings in a missile strike during the Gulf War, her character is drawn from the famous Iraqi artist Layla Al-Attar; Amal is a Bedouin woman searching for peace and freedom while navigating the expectations of family and tradition; Huda is an intellectual exile in London who reflects the complex identity of Iraqis displaced; The Doctor is a medical professional grappling with the devastating effects of war, including genetic damage and ecological collapse; Iraqi Girl is a young girl who lost her father to Saddam's enforcers; The American is a young diaspora woman in the U.S. who observes the war on television; Umm Ghada is a survivor and a grieving mother who lost her children in the U.S. bombing of the Amiriyya bomb shelter; Nanna is an elderly saleswoman who has lived through numerous revolution. They are nine women from diverse professions, ages, and backgrounds, including a professional mourner, a painter, an artist, a physician, a mother, a street vendor, a schoolgirl, and an exile, in a society affected by dictatorships, economic blockade, and the consequences of American invasion. Their narratives, in the form of poetic monologues, individually constitute portraits of Iraq's history, geography, and collective trauma, thereby framing Iraq's fragmented national identity. Raffo chooses number 9 as a direct reference to the famous Islamic quotation of Imam Ali ibn Abu Taleb[2] that "God ... gave nine parts [of desire] to women and one to men"(Raffo, 2003, p.9), exploring the immense and repressed desire of Iraqi women not just for sexual, but for freedom, free expression, education, safety, belonging, and survival. The nine parts of desire, when viewed together, create a complete depiction of a collective national yearning for a unified identity and dignity that remains unattainable. To gather reliable narratives, Raffo spent a decade conducting interviews with both relatives and strangers. Her dual identity as an Iraqi-American played a crucial role in gaining access to these women's narratives. Her Iraqi roots helped establish initial connections, while her American identity nurtured openness and trust throughout the interview process. The play examines their struggles by sharing their narratives, revealing the profound impact of environmental degradation on their sense of self as they struggle to preserve their heritage and confront forces attempting to erase it (Ali, 2021).Structurally, the play blends nonlinear poetic monologues, theatrical elements, symbols, and allusions to Iraq's history, including Saddam Hussein's rule, the Gulf War, and its aftermath. Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* is based on a 1993 visit to Baghdad that deepened her artistic and personal investigation into the complexities of identity. Despite having Iraqi roots, Raffo felt alienated in her native country throughout her visit.In her Author's Note, Raffo describes how Iraqis perceived her as an "other", excluding her from the "Arab" queue, illustrating the complexity of identity and belonging in the context of displacement. This disconnection is especially acute when she remembers the words of one of the military officers who, after checking her passport, says"[w]elcome to your father's country; we hope you pass- take back a good impression of the Iraqi people…; please be at home here and when you return tell your people about us [foreigner]" (Raffo, 2003, p. ix). Raffo feels alienated as a result of her being excluded from the communal identity of an Arab despite her descent from Iraq. This exclusion underscores the fluidity and ambivalence that Homi Bhabha identifies in the colonial context of "otherness", where the other is both integrated into and marginalized from broader societal narratives, mirroring the dynamic,

shifting nature of identity. In his *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha describes "otherness" as a shifting, fluid, and dynamic process in which the identities of the marginalized groups are continually shaped and reshaped through their interactions with the dominant group. Raffo explores her sense of being "other" in her contemplation of the Gulf War, noting how this experience changes her self-perception. Raffo articulates,

I am an American, but I became aware of myself as an Iraqi—had a sense of myself as "the other"—for the first time during the Gulf War. . . . I'd walk down the street and overhear people saying, "Let's go fuck the Iraqis." I realized from that point on that my cousins in Iraq—family whom I loved—would be viewed by many Americans as dark and dirty. I also realized that the only difference between my cousins and myself was the accident of where we were born (Romanska, 2010, p.213).

Raffo's realisation aligns with Edward Said's view of otherness as described in the book, *Orientalism* (1978), in which Western discourses tend to depict people of the East, especially the Iraqis, as inferior, exotic, and dehumanised, thereby perpetuating a feeling of Western superiority.

While visiting Baghdad, particularly at the Saddam Arts Centre, Raffo comes across Al-Attar's portrayal titled *Savagery*. This experience significantly inspires her to create Layal, an artistic character who reflects Layla Al-Attar's life and work. Her painting "Savagery" depicts a nude woman clinging to a barren tree, symbolising themes of survival and loss (Mahadi & Muhi, 2012, p. 91).

During preparation for its premiere, the "stage became a reflection of various layers of Iraqi society, blending ancient and modern elements like crumbling tiles, mosaics, books, carpets, and sandbags. At the center of the production was a river, symbolizing Iraq's heritage as the cradle of civilization" (Raffo, 2003, p. 66). The set design comprises three distinct areas: a small pool of water represents a river; an open space represents four sites: Layal's studio, a child's room, a doctor's office, and an expatriate's dwelling; and a pathway adjacent to a side wall serves as the bombed Amiriyah shelter's site (Colleran, 2012). By intertwining metatheatrical techniques such as rituals, traditional songs such as Che Mali Wali and Chal Chal Alayya, call to prayer (Adhan) , names, symbols such as river and abaya, real references to place, and dual languages (Arabic and English), Raffo avoids traditional writing styles to introduce multiple perspectives into her work (Abbass, 2020). This approach in writing, as Taiwo asserts, allows the audience to engage with "the play on two levels, both as affectation of reality and as an unreal piece of dramatic fiction" (2014, p. 147).

In 2023, Raffo adapted her play *9 Parts of Desire* into a film titled *9 Parts*, which premiered in 2025. The film centers on mourning the death of the female protagonist's father (Elnaggar, 2025).

It is also noteworthy that Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* shares its title with Geraldine Brooks's *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1995). This nonfiction study examines the lives of women in the Middle East, particularly how their experiences are shaped by culture, religion, and politics. Brooks's work offers a human- centered perspective on the broader social and environmental issues affecting Oriental women (Brooks, 1995).

2. Methodology

This study employs a postcolonial ecocritical framework to examine the intersection of environmental trauma and identity loss trauma in Raffo's play *9 Parts of Desire*. Drawing on the postcolonial theories of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, and the ecotheories of Rob Nixon and Timothy Morton, this study explores how environmental degradation, manifested in the draining of wetlands and the diversion of rivers, caused by political repression and violence, leads to identity loss trauma.Textual analysis, specifically a close reading of *9 Parts of Desire*, is a key methodological tool in this study. Through a close study of Mullaya's monologues, which vividly illustrate the intersection of environmental trauma and identity loss trauma, and the dramatic techniques employed, this study offers a profound understanding of how Mullaya's identity and sense of self are exacerbated by environmental devastation in Iraq, including the effects of political instability and war. By incorporating ecological trauma into the analysis, this study seeks to explore how environmental destruction in Iraq exacerbates the identity crisis faced by Melia, as environmental trauma is an integral part of her grief. The loss of her ancestral land and the environmental destruction she has witnessed have deepened her struggle to maintain her sense of belonging and identity.

1.3 Literature Review:

In her play *9 Parts of Desire*, Raffo presents a powerful and multifaceted portrayal of the trauma experienced by Iraqi women as a result of gender-based violence, political repression, and war. While numerous studies have explored the trauma inherent in Raffo's work, particularly in relation to identity and cultural trauma (which are addressed in this study), they have largely overlooked the ecological dimension of trauma, making this study a

valuable contribution to the field.Among these diverse studies is Romanska's study, *Trauma and Testimony: Heather Raffo's Nine Parts of Desire* (2010), which examines the play from the trauma and testimony perspective, focusing on the experiences of Iraqi women amidst historical and political upheaval. It explores the psychological repercussions of oppression, war, and occupation, highlighting the profound effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on the characters. Furthermore, the researcher investigates the cultural and personal tensions within the play's narrative, considering Raffo's dual cultural identity and how her dual perspective influences both the play's form and content. Her analysis underscores the interplay between personal and collective trauma and the process of constructing narratives aimed at healing.Mahadi and Muhi's study, *Shahrzad Tells her Stories in Raffo's Nine Parts of Desire* (2012) focuses on Raffo's portrayal of Iraqi women's lives and trauma. It underscores the profound psychological and physical suffering caused by war, addressing themes of survival and violence, and the complex relationship between oppression and freedom. The study also explores how Raffo uses her play as a platform for Iraqi women to tell their own stories, transcending traditional approaches of narration and giving a voice to the marginalized who are often overlooked in discussions of war and its aftermath.Al-Sawy's study, *Heather Raffo's Solo Performance 9 Parts of Desire: The Traumatic Story of War* (2019) focuses on themes of memory, trauma, survival, and the consequences of war, exploring how each woman's personal experience of loss and violence is intertwined with the broader social and historical context of the turmoil that has engulfed Iraq. The analysis examines various aspects of trauma theory and its theorists, such as Cathy Carruth and Shoshana Felman, to discuss how Iraqi women's trauma is experienced, witnessed, and represented in performance.In the same vein, Başak's study, *Traumatized Iraqi Women: A Psychoanalytic Analysis of Nine Parts of Desire by Heather Raffo* (2019) examines the Iraqi women's psychological trauma from a psychoanalytic perspective. The study explores how women suffer psychological trauma as a result of repressive regime, war, and patriarchal values. Başak studies the emotional and psychological effects of these circumstances on these women, illustrating how their traumas intertwine with the societal constraints and the violent history of Iraq.While Gamaz AR's study, *An Analysis of Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire from the Theories of Identity, Race and Gender* (2023), presents an analysis of the play from a different perspective. It examines themes of identity, gender, and race, highlighting the struggles of Iraqi women in the play to preserve their identities and achieve liberation under the constraints of patriarchal social norms and the impacts of war. The study employs theoretical frameworks of Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and Julia Kristeva to study how cultural identities are constructed through the female characters.1*Raffo's Nine Parts of Desire and Doug Wright's I Am My Own Wife* (2020) also studies the role of trauma in two contemporary monodramas, Raffo's *Nine Parts of Desire* and Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife*, exploring how these plays utilize trauma as a means of exploring identity, relief from repression, and healing, and how they interact with cultural, social, and political issues.While Suzanne M. Elnaggar's study, *CARRY IT WITH YOU: Trauma and Identity in Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire and Noura* (2022) analyzes Raffo's works, exploring trauma theory, its various forms, and the relationship between cultural, personal, and historical trauma as manifested in her female characters' stories. It also highlights how these two plays engage with issues of identity, displacement, and the impact of war, shedding light on the lived experiences of Iraqi women and their diverse voices.After reviewing previous studies of the play, we explore how most studies have offered valuable insights into trauma theory and its personal, cultural, and political dimensions experienced by Iraqi women, neglecting environmental trauma and its important role in exacerbating the characters' suffering, and the erosion of their identity, particularly Mullaya. To address this gap, this research offers a unique perspective by incorporating environmental trauma as a crucial factor in the formation of identity. This study demonstrates that environmental and identity loss trauma are interconnected, offering a profound, more nuanced understanding of the complex traumatic experiences encountered by the women in Raffo's play.

1.4 Theatrical Techniques In Exploring The Ecological And Identity Loss Trauma In Heather Raffo's *9 Parts Of Desire*

In *9 Parts of Desire*, Raffo employs several dramaturgical devices, such as sound, song, and symbolism, to explore the connection between identity loss and ecological degradation. These devices collectively underscore the connection between identity loss and environmental degradation, illustrating the impact of the colonial legacy and postcolonialism. These dramaturgical devices enable Raffo to illustrate the fragmentation and reconstruction of identity under an oppressive regime, political conflict, and ecological devastation. The play opens with a direct stage, "[t]hroughout the play the woman uses an abaya, a traditional Iraqi black robe-like garment, to move from character to character. Some wear the abaya traditionally and others use it as a prop"(Raffo, 2003, p.9), to illustrates the close, immediate, and direct connection between the sole performer, Raffo, who embodies all the

characters, and the audience. Raffo seamlessly transitions between characters onstage before the audience while remaining onstage, utilizing an abaya to symbolize nine Iraqi women. Raffo addresses the audience directly without a 'fourth wall," and her transformations occur in plain sight. Raffo completes the earlier direct stage with, "[t]he first sound we hear is the dawn call to prayer. In Muslim countries the call to prayer is heard five times a day... The call to prayer is heard five times in the course of this play"(Raffo, 2003, p.9), to emphasize that the play is structured around five sequential calls to prayer (Adhan) that take place from dawn to nightfall. These designated prayer periods serve as the narrative's natural clock, which helps the audience follow the progression of time. Moreover, the use of prayers as an auditory device gives the play a profound connection to a particular religion and culture. Consequently, it draws the audience into that realm, enabling everyone (characters and audiences) to experience the time together, sharing the same rhythm and the same day within the narrative.This soundscape highlights the complex relationship between the loss of identity and the degradation of the environment. The Adhan, which is recited five times in the play, is a common call to prayer for the five daily Muslim prayers and is closely associated with the religious and cultural identity of Iraq. In the context of war, and especially during the time of the American invasion, this auditory device loses its spiritual meaning of unity and becomes a painful reminder of fragmentation and destruction. The Adhan, which has been used as a call to spiritual peace, becomes intertwined with the sounds of bombing, the army action, and airstrikes, symbolizing the disintegration of Iraq's religious and cultural unity. Comparably, the term "Allahu Akbar", meaning "God is the Greatest", which has traditionally been used as a prayer call, undergoes a tremendous transformation in the context of warfare and bloody situations.Unfortunately, the term has been exploited by extremists over the last few years, especially after the attacks of September 11, 2001, as a symbolic pre-empt of violent actions, such as bombings. It is considered a slogan and has been mistakenly associated with terrorism despite its heavy spiritual and religious connotation in the Islamic world. Such manipulation has created misunderstandings and negative stereotypes that distort its true meaning in Muslim culture, as seen in the case of Iraq (Ghazanfarila et al, 2019). So, the previously powerful declaration of religious and cultural belonging and spiritual unity is now stained, denoting sectarian violence, terrorism, and warfare as the extremists took advantage of the phrase to legitimize terrorist activities during the American invasion of Iraq. This perception aligns with what Iraqi Girl says later that "suicide bombings/ [are] not just for Baghdad but all over Iraq" (Raffo, 2003, p. 27). Her comment brings into the spotlight the rising violence and killings based on identity that have spread in Iraq since the occupation. The societal fragmentation, as a result of the war where division replaced unity, has exacerbated insecurity within the country. This shift exposes the profound social and political consequences of the occupation, which have intensified sectarian tensions and led to widespread instability in the country. In conjunction with the rise of sectarian violence, what was once a symbol of collective identity, becomes a synonym of division and tension, particularly between Shia and Sunni communities. This tragic situation alarmed Huda, who predicted the civil war that erupted between 2004 and 2007, particularly after the 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Shrine (Aljazeera net,2006), stating that "the worst thing... is civil war" (Raffo, 2003, p. 39). In her comment, Huda reveals her fears of breaking out the sectarian violence between Shias and Sunnis, or between extremist terrorists and followers of other religions and ethnicities. It is self-evident that the change in the symbolism of the phrase "Allahu Akbar", meaning "God is the Greatest", represents a broader collapse of the fabric of Iraqi society, where divisions have replaced unity along ethnic, religious, and national lines. Thus, in contrast to Iraq, which was known as a unified country, where, as Huda claims, "people [Iraqis]... have been living together in this area for thousands of years" with "no segregation sort of thing"(Raffo, 2003, p. 40), the country has become increasingly fragmented and divided since the American occupation.Nanna's line, 'what your first name/you must be Shi'a/ you must be Sunni' (Raffo, 2003, p.42), along with the line '[o]ur history is finished/ Sunni, Shi'a, Kurd,/Christian even, Jew -/If they take what we share' (Raffo, 2003, p.43), highlights the deep divisions within Iraqi society. Moreover, the reference to the individual's first name also reveals how personal identity is formed by sectarian labels, thus illustrating the propensity of people to be identified mostly by their religious or ethnic backgrounds in a fractured society, aligning Nanna's claim ""what your first name/you must be Shi'a/you must be Sunni" (Raffo, 2003, p. 42). This fragmentation has fractured the once-unified national identity, as these shattered groups struggle to gain access to political power and independence in the aftermath of war and foreign intervention. In the same context, it is important to reveal the significant consequences of the American invasion of Iraq, which included the forcible displacement of specific ethnic and religious groups for demographic purposes in 2014, as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the spread of religious extremism led to the forced migration of Iraqi Christians and Yazidis from other parts of Iraq to the Kurdistan Region. Consequently, the perception of a unified national

identity began to fragment, resulting in greater community isolation (AlKhazar, 2019).In addition to Adhan and the sound of the bombings, the dramatist incorporates two traditional Baghdadi songs: “Chi Mali Wali” sung by Mullaya as she approaches the stage, and “Chal Chal Alayya” performed by Nanna, "modernized by the popular singer Ilham al-Madfa"(p.70). These two traditional songs serve as auditory pillars, enhancing their aesthetic role as effective instruments for exploring ecological and identity loss traumas. Through these two songs, Raffo evokes metaphorical images of the environmental and cultural destruction inflicted on Iraq's history by years of occupation and war; for instance, the song "Chi Mali Wali" (p.9) reflects the country's turbulent past and portrays its environmental degradation. Terms such as "Wali" (ruler or protector) (p.71) and "battah w siditini" (a duck and you hunted me)(p.71) are used metaphorically to depict Iraq's loss of sovereignty and the entrapment of its people seeking independence and freedom. Furthermore, the metaphorical expression "tiksir janahi" (break my wings)(p.71) illustrates the catastrophic impacts of conflict and the erosion of Iraqi sovereignty to highlight the intertwined trauma experienced by the nation and its people. In the same vein, the song “Chal Chal `Alayya `l-rumman, Numi fiza`li" and its opening line "(the pomegranate [branches] have engulfed me and lemons have come to the rescue. I do not desire this beauty, just take me home!)" (p.70) summarizes metaphorically Iraq’s turbulent history during World War I (p. 70), offering a metatheatrical commentary on the cyclical nature of trauma in Iraqi history. The two songs metaphorically create a continuous narrative of loss and resistance rooted in turbulent historical events, reflecting the ongoing traumas of environmental destruction and the erosion of identity. Another theatrical technique Raffo employed in her play to illustrate the intersection of ecological trauma and loss of identity is symbolism. Among the most important of these symbols are the abaya, worn soles, and the river. In the play, Raffo wears the black abaya, a traditional Iraqi garment, in various styles to transform from one character to another, as "some wear [it] traditionally and others use it as a prop" (p.9), highlighting the diversity of their personalities. Abaya, "a traditional Iraqi black robe-like garment" (p.9), has acquired significant symbolic importance across generations within the broader context of Arabic cultural identity. It, a long, loose-fitting garment, is traditionally worn by Arab women in adherence to principles of modesty that persist despite increasing modernization in Islamic and Arab countries. . Its persistence in the face of modernity physically identifies it as “a symbol of traditional Arab social and religious conventions” (Al Saud, 2025, p.40).This stability contrasts with environmental degradation, which positions the traditional garment as a stable symbol of cultural identity amid the ecological turmoil. The play presents the abaya not through Western interpretations of exoticism (Marsden, 2023) or gender oppression (Lootens, 2024) but as evidence and a symbol of struggle to preserve cultural identity. The varied ways of wearing the abaya, whether in traditional, loose, or unconventional attire, reflect the dispersion and transformation of identity in post-conflict Iraq, where culture and environment are both threatened. Continuing to wear the abaya, even in different ways, fundamentally signifies the ongoing struggle in Iraq where personal and collective identities are being reshaped amid ecological and social traumas caused by war and environmental collapse (Colleran, 2012).Another symbol that Raffo uses in the play is "old shoes" (Raffo, 2003, p. 10), which Mullaya "carries [in] a great bundle on her head./[and] empties… load of shoes into the river." (Raffo, 2003, p.9). The symbol of "old shoes" represents the fragmentation of identity caused by displacement and ecological degradation resulting from an oppressive regime and war. The battered soles and old shoes symbolize the ongoing trauma that people experience, showing how identities are becoming more and more scarred as the ecology is destroyed and the upheaval of war. Just as old shoes are eroded in shape and function due to constant use, the characters' identity is eroded by displacement caused by violence and environmental destruction (Abbas, 2020). From an ecocritical perspective, old shoes do not, on their own, symbolize ecological trauma, but they can become traces of human suffering caused by environmental destruction, such as the drying up of marshlands. As worn objects, they bear traces of human experiences resulting from displacement, migration, and the grief of losing land, history, and identity. Thus, they serve as silent witnesses to the psychological trauma caused by ecological damage, embodying the sorrow associated with land loss. The river is another symbolic element that has multifaceted meanings. It plays an important role, both literally and metaphorically, representing the ongoing flow of life in Iraq. Because of the difficulty of presenting a river physically on the stage, the dramatist creatively uses water in "a bowl or another vessel" to evoke the powerful image of the river's presence (Raffo, 2003, p. 67). The two rivers are the Tigris and the Euphrates. They have sustained Mesopotamian culture for millennia, shaping the nation's historical and cultural identity. They are not merely topographical features of the land but have a profound impact on the development of ancient civilizations, fostering trade, urbanization, and agriculture. They contribute to the rise of one of the earliest advanced civilizations in the world and serve as the sustenance for many generations. However, the river’s deterioration, as illustrated by Mullaya's throwing old and

worn shoes into the water, the draining of marshes, and the diversion of its course due to political conflicts, signifies ecological trauma. Through these evocative theatrical elements, Raffo turns the stage into a space where the audience can engage with the personal and collective traumas the characters experience as a result of ecological deterioration.With these devices, she subverts the conventional boundary between performers and audiences, breaking down "the fourth wall" and encouraging spectators to actively explore the parallel relationship between environmental degradation and identity loss (Abbass, 2020).

1.5 Exploring The Intersection Of Ecological And Identity Loss Trauma In Heather Raffo's *9 Parts Of Desire*

The convergence of ecological and identity loss trauma profoundly affects communities that face environmental deterioration. Ecological trauma and identity loss trauma are different, although frequently overlapping forms of profound emotional and psychological distress. While both involve deep emotions of grief, anxiety, and existential despair, they mostly differ in their causes and the fundamental nature of loss. Ecological trauma denotes the emotional and psychological distress encountered by individuals and communities as a result of the tangible loss of ecosystems, environmental deterioration, or climate change. This type of trauma has far-reaching effects on society, encompassing loss of identity, the dismantling of social institutions, and displacement (Das & Sircar, 2025). While, Identity loss trauma is a significant emotional and psychological disturbance that arises when a traumatic event resulting from displacement, cultural disruption, or significant changes disrupts personal identity, cultural identity, or social duties. This trauma occurs when individuals lose connection with their familiar roles, cultural situations, and communities, creating a deep sense of confusion and alienation in the attempt to rebuild their identities in disorienting situations. Combining these two types of emotional trauma is catastrophic, particularly when environmental degradation causes forced migration, making people lose their homeland, identity, and sense of belonging (Schwartz, 2023).Drawing on a postcolonial ecocritical framework, *9 Parts of Desire* explores the intersection of identity loss and ecological ruin, showing how women's sense of self is fractured by both political conflict and war. These traumatic experiences, influenced by internal regimes and foreign invasions, result in an intertwined loss: the ecological destruction and the erosion of identity. Although nine Iraqi women endure suffering in the play, the analysis will specifically focus on Mullaya, for whom the intersection of ecological and identity-loss trauma is clear, distinguishing them from the other characters, for whom one of these forms of struggle is clear.

1.5.1 Mullaya as the Mourner of the Marshes and Rivers: Converging Ecological and Identity Loss under Authoritarian Displacement

Mullaya, an essential figure, is "a hired woman who leads call and response with women mourning at funerals" through "her improvised heartbreaking verses about the dead." (Raffo, 2003, p.9). She is a compelling figure; her monologues embody the intersection of cultural and ecological trauma of the marshlands and their inhabitants. Distinct from other characters by her patriotism, she mourns Iraq as a whole in her monologues, embodying individual and collective grief. Mullaya's deep connection to the river and marshes lends a unique context to the play, allowing reflection on the slow and lasting effects of environmental degradation on the psyche and identity of displaced populations, resonating with Nixon's concept of slow violence. Nixon's concept of Slow Violence emphasizes how environmental degradation, such as the gradual draining of the marshes, causes incremental and long-term cultural and psychological damage, which, while not immediately apparent, will manifest itself over time.Beginning and ending with Mullaya's monologues, Raffo highlights the important historical fact that Iraq is a "land of sadness," as a result of the tumultuous history of Iraq. Iraq, famously known as "the land between two rivers", the Tigris and the Euphrates, has faced a lot of conflict in recent decades, including the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein, the devastating human loss of the Iran-Iraq War, the 1991 Gulf War, the harsh international sanctions that followed, the American Invasion, and sectarian Shiite-Sunni violence. The play also analyzes the complex repercussions of the 2003 American invasion, while also touching on the intergenerational effects of exposure to depleted uranium. To transform geopolitical events into a fabric of individual and collective traumas, Raffo weaves these historical moments into personal monologues. Raffo transforms geopolitical events into a fabric of both personal and collective trauma by weaving them into intimate monologues.(Mahadi & Muhi, 2012, p. 94).According to the stage directions, Mullaya, wearing the abaya traditionally, untethered by time and space, is the first character to come onstage with "a great bundle [of worn shoes] on her head" (p.9) that "[s]he empties ... into the river (p.9) while chanting for the lost souls of "dead shoes" (p.10). Mullaya whose hirer is unnamed, does not mourn a specific individual; instead, her poignant monologues are devoted to "the nation as a whole: its past, history, and culture" (M. Romanske, 2010, p.218).The ritualistic action of the Mullaya, who appears in a state of trauma, despair, and grief as she wanders through a devastated landscape caused by war, involves

collecting "dead shoes"(p.9) which symbolize the owners' identities, cultures, journeys, and experiences, and throwing them into the river, as a purification and liberation ritual for their souls. This "ritual ablutions" (p.9) evokes the river's religious and mythological significance as a purifier and a symbol of spiritual virtue.Mullaya's coming "early in the morning/... to throw dead shoes into the river" (p. 9) is not linked directly to any specific ritual in Islamic tradition. However, her line can be interpreted from the perspective of symbolic and ritual significance in Islam. Early morning, the time when"[t]he first sound [of the five daily prayers] we hear is the dawn call to prayer"(p.9) symbolizes the time of spiritual awakening, and purification both physically through (ablution or ritual bathing), and spiritually through (prayer and renewal connection with God). While, the act of collecting and throwing "dead shoes"(p.9) and "worn soles" (p.10) which once were closely connected to their owners and now lie neglected and forgotten due to their owners' absence or loss, in the river that symbolizes purification and links metaphorically "heaven and earth…making [it]…deeply holy"(Oestigaard, 2018, p.2), can represent the purification of their souls from past sins, the impurities of life, and the earthly burdens, transitioning them to a new, eternal life. Raffo deliberately uses the word "soles" in this metaphorical context to evoke the word "soul" through their phonetic similarity. This wordplay explains how the sole, which directly touches the earth and bears the burdens of a person's footsteps, can symbolize one's spiritual essence.While she continues to perform her ritual every early-morning, Mullaya sings the folk song "Chi Mali Wali," which reflects Iraq's turbulent history, conveying the cyclical and unresolved nature of trauma. Mullaya's rituals and her song express a profound grief that transcends a single political issue, encompassing the historical conflict among foreign powers vying for control of a fertile land, Iraq, that has long been battleground, where each force has left indelible scar on its people, history, and culture. This sorrow compels her to ask, with genuine conviction, "[w]here is anything they said there would be? We were promised so much" (Raffo, 2003, p. 10), reflecting a profound sense of betrayal. Her question can be interpreted as an allusion to the unfulfilled promises and commitments of international forces, such as Britain's promises of liberation to the Iraqi people, ending centuries of Ottoman rule only to replace it, or American pledge to support the 1991 uprising against Saddam Hussein's regime only to abandon it. In addition to the immense devastation caused by economic sanctions and the American invasion.Mullaya's recurring sorrow embodies a kind of trauma that continually reemerges in the play. This repetition reflects Cathy Carruth's view on trauma in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (2016), wherein she contends that trauma is "a story spoken about a wound in an attempt to reveal a secret." (Mirsal Gabbar Muhammed, 1996, p.57) or an experience that happens unexpectedly, making its full understanding complex.In her book, Carruth posits that trauma intrudes into consciousness, recurring endlessly until the injury is confronted. Mullaya's everyday sorrow, as she consistently comes "[e]arly in the morning/early in the morning/ I come to throw dead shoes into the river"(Raffo, 2003, p. 9), mirrors an endless repetitive cycle of trauma that remains incompletely understood or assimilated.Beyond simply expressing grief, Mullaya's riverside rituals embody the emotional and psychological strain of confronting untreated trauma, where remembering the painful event or wound becomes an endless cycle. This aligns with Carruth's idea that the impact of trauma is intractable, ingrained, and cyclical, forcing those affected to constantly experience their wounds. From an ecocritical perspective, the Mullayas' recourse to the river signifies her belonging to her environment, demonstrating the profound link between environment and identity. This underscores Morton's argument in his *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) that the natural world is inextricably linked to the sense of self and identity. Consequently, environmental degradation not only disturbs the physical environment but also affects the identities of its inhabitants. The profound relationship between Mullaya and the river is revealed in her Mullaya's verse, "without this river there would be no here/there would be no beginning/it is why I come" (Raffo, 2003, p.9), underscoring the river's essential role as the cornerstone of existence and a symbol of the cultural identity and roots that bind the community to their ancestral heritage.The river transcends its physical form as an entity of water, serving as a fundamental aspect of the speaker's life and the source of the Iraqi people's identity as inhabitants of Mesopotamia, reflecting Morton's idea that geography influences identity and belonging.The river's existence is essential to their sense of belonging to the place, and without it, there is no "here," no "beginning"(Raffo, 2003, p. 9). Mullaya's phrase "it is why I come" (Raffo, 2003, p. 9), which ends her previous line, indicates that her closeness to the river transcends ritual and serves as an homage to its significance. Her coming to the river signifies her reconnection with the origins of her existence and identity, while the "diverted, dammed and dried [river]" (Raffo, 2003, p.11) threatens to devastate the ecology and erode their sense of self and belonging. The actions of river diversion, dam building, and the pollution resulting from the casting of "slippers…sandals… boots…old shoes…worn soles" (Raffo, 2003, p. 10) represent both environmental

degradation and the obliteration of individual and communal identity. The tattered shoes symbolize the fractured identities of those compelled to displace due to political violence. The river's transformation into the hue of "old shoes…worn soles" (Raffo, 2003, p.10) highlights the profound connection between ecological degradation and the cultural annihilation of Iraq.Old and worn shoes, as a result of overuse, symbolize the experience of displacement that leads to the loss of personal and collective identity which causes a profound emotional and psychological sense of diaspora due to ongoing violence and the loss of homeland.This aligns with Rob Nixon's perspective in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), in which he argues that ecosystem damage can catastrophically affect its inhabitants, leading to the erosion of their identities and cultures through forced displacement. This justifies Mullaya's grief over the river's diversion and the gradual drain of the marshes.The marshes of southern Iraq are a vital and unique ecosystem that has served as a center of Mesopotamian civilization and has possessed cultural, historical, and environmental value for centuries. These wetlands, stretching across the Tigris and Euphrates river basins, have supported a rich biodiversity for their local inhabitants, including fish, birds, buffalo, and reeds. However, these marshes faced extensive draining in the early 1990s when Saddam Hussein's regime drained large sections of them to punish opponents of his rule during the Gulf War. This environmental devastation led to water scarcity, climate change, and the forced displacement of its inhabitants, demonstrating a close link between the erosion of identity and environmental destruction.By the early 2000s, Madan's population had significantly declined, leaving the communities with an uncertain future and a fragmented identity (Ali & Owda, 2022).Mullaya's verse, "[t]his land between two rivers -/I only see the one/where is the other river...And the other land?" (Raffo, 2003, p. 10), reflects her longing for something lost or erased from a once unified land, probably symbolizing the division caused by the oppressive regime in the nineties. Mullaya likely refers to Mesopotamia, and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which play a pivotal role in shaping the region's cultural and geographical identity. Her question about "the other river" and "the other land" can be interpreted as a metaphor for the Tigris River, which enters Iraq through the Kurdistan Region. A region that has been absent metaphorically from the Iraqi political scene and the unified Iraqi identity as a result of the brutal repression exercised by Saddam Hussein's regime against the Kurds, including forced displacement, the Anfal campaign, and the chemical attack on Halabja. This absence can be deeply traumatic for Iraqis, as it metaphorically represents the loss of a significant part of Iraqi territory.Mullaya returns to emphasize the repercussions of the forced change in her environment. These environmental changes have gone beyond the mere loss of a river and a portion of land due to political conflicts; they have extended to the southern regions, encompassing the marshes that once formed a vital, fertile part of the natural environment. Mullaya's statement, "our marsh lands now are different/they've been diverted, dammed and dried" (p. 11), points to a change in the natural state of the marshes, which were essential habitats supporting biodiversity. This change is a result of human intervention and political violence, which have radically altered the ecological balance, negatively impacting the identity of local communities and the ecosystem as a whole. Malaya's statement powerfully highlights the direct correlation between the diversion of the river and the draining of the marshes, which led to their destruction and the loss of their historical and biological significance, as well as the emotional and psychological effects of identity loss due to forced displacement. The draining process has slow, gradual, and long-term effects on both the land and its inhabitants, underscoring the intertwined relationship between environmental trauma and identity loss.The grief and trauma are not the only feelings that gripped Mullaya. She is also overcome with a profound longing for a return to a time when life was more natural and effortless, a time when she can reconnect with her roots and early experiences. Her line "[b]ring me back the water I was created in/the water in which I woke each morning/...the water in which I swam to school"(p.11) illustrates her deep longing for the return of marshes that represent the foundation of her past, identity, roots, and lifestyle. Marshlands' destruction represents not only the destruction of the ecosystem but also the obliteration of the individual and collective identity of its inhabitants. Mullaua's line is a plea to reconnect with her true origins and to find a sense of belonging in an environment ravaged by political conflicts and human intervention.Mullaya returns to expressing her profound sense of exhaustion and vulnerability in the face of emotional and psychological traumas. Her poetic line, "I have holes in my shoes... in my feet...everywhere"(p.11), can be interpreted as a metaphor for Mullaya's condition, her pain, and the psychological and physical scars resulting from fragmentation and loss of identity. The holes in her "shoes, feet.. everywhere" represent a deeper level of suffering, reflecting the speaker's feelings of emptiness, insecurity, fragmentation, and an inability to move forward. Mullaya's feelings, within a postcolonial framework, align with Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space in his book *The Location of Culture* in which the displaced persons experience insecurity, vulnerability,

and a fragmented identity caught between two opposing worlds.Mullaya's identity which is encapsulated in "no here", "no... there", is an example of Bhabha's concept of marginalized hybrid condition where belonging is difficult, as she is unrooted in either the past or present.The term "holes" is a transcendent term that encompasses the physical, emotional, and cultural dimensions of lost identity. As people are alienated from their ancestral lands, they will have a fragmentary identity and their attempt to connect their past to the present will be dominated by alienation and loss. This comes through clearly with the metaphors of "worn soles" and "highway of death," which allude to the loss of nation and identity.At the end, Mullaya warns the marsh dwellers symbolically that "one day [they]'ll return/ thirsty, assured it will be there/ but you'll not find - spring, nor river"(p.61), capturing the irreversible nature of environmental destruction in which the once-thriving wetlands will become silent witnesses to the obliteration of a way of life. In her poetic line, Mullaya predicts a future scenario in which the dwellers who once took the marshes for granted will one day return to find the source of life and sustenance gone. Her line highlights the idea that once nature is destroyed, it will never return to its former state. Mullaya continues, "beware of throwing a stone/into the well" (p.61) as a cautionary saying, indicating that once a natural resource like a well is destroyed, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to repair the damage, potentially depriving future generations of these resources. Thus, the depletion of a vital natural resource like water represents a significant rupture in the relationship between the land and its inhabitants, underscoring the unraveling of the emotional bonds that once defined community, concluding that environmental collapse signifies a collapse in human survival and identity.Mullaya emphasizes her connection to the land by saying "all my family is here/same accent/same eyes/same nature,"(p.62) reflecting her strong sense of belonging to her identity, heritage, and community. The shared traits among members of her community extend beyond physical characteristics to encompass an unbreakable emotional and cultural bond with their environment and identity. This highlights an important truth that the alteration of an individual's identity resulting from displacement caused by environmental degradation leads to profound emotional conflict, distorting their sense of self and trapping them between the constraints of the past and an uncertain future.

Conclusion

With a postcolonial ecocritical framework, this study explores how the ecological destruction, namely the drainage of marshlands and the diversion of the fluvial systems, serves as a strong metaphor for collective and individual loss of identity.

Her ritualistic mourning, which is closely connected with the destruction of the marshlands of Iraq, is symbolic, referring not only to the loss of the environment but also to the loss of group and personal identities.

The complex connection between ecological destruction and her identity loss is reflected in Mullaya's deep connection to the river and her painful mourning of its degradation.

Through the application of postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, and ecocritical critics such as Rob Nixon and Timothy Morton, as well as theatrical techniques such as symbolism and auditory and spatial elements, the study demonstrates how the play conveys a deep-seated connection between the marshland setting and identity. Ecological degradation is not only a physical loss but also an assault on both communal and personal sense of identity. In conclusion, the study highlights the crucial role of theatre in depicting the complex traumas people face in a country's war-torn, politically conflicted, and ecologically degraded context.

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1Wainscott (2019) defines Mullaya as a hired woman who performs women-only funerals and grieving rituals, clarifying that she can play an important role, mediating or fostering reconciliation.
2Ali ibn Abu Taleb is "husband of Muhammad's daughter Fatima and fourth caliph of the Islamic world after Mohammed." (Raffo, 2003, p.9).