

Floating at the Edge: Eco-Crip Perspectives on Disability and Nature in Muhammad Makhzangi's "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea"

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Resumen

This paper explores Egyptian writer Muhammad Makhzangi's short story "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" ("Kāna yuṭāridu farāshatan fī al-baḥr; كان يطارد فراشة في البحر") from his collection *Animals in Our Days* (*Ḥayawānāt ayyāminā; حيوانات أيامنا*) (2006) through an eco-crip lens, examining how it intertwines disability, ecological vulnerability, and interspecies care. The story follows a man who, mesmerized by the beauty of a fish in the Red Sea—described as fluttering like a butterfly—ventures dangerously far from shore. Upon realizing his isolation and exhaustion, he attempts suicide using his harpoon; however, he is left paralyzed from the waist down and loses the use of his legs. The narrative is framed by scenes of the protagonist in a wheelchair, which transforms into a floating chair yet remains confined to the water's edge. This image bookends the story, highlighting the tension between the desire to conquer nature and the constraints imposed by both body and environment. The sea resists romanticization: it is alluring, unforgiving, and ultimately indifferent. Yet, at his most vulnerable moment, the protagonist is saved not by human intervention, but through an unexpected assistance from dolphins, suggesting alternative, more-than-human models of care and survival. Rather than portraying disability as lack or tragedy, Makhzangi's story reconfigures it as a site of ecological revelation. The protagonist's journey critiques the impulse to dominate nature and dramatizes the emotional and physical costs of such hubris. In doing so, the text challenges extractive and ableist narratives, offering a vision of ecological attunement rooted in humility, bodily limitation, and unexpected solidarities. This reading positions "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" as a rare example of eco-crip literature in Arabic, expanding the possibilities for imagining disabled bodies in relation to natural environments, risk, and relational survival.

Keywords: Eco-crip theory, disabled ecologies, posthumanism, Arabic literature, metaphor analysis.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el cuento del escritor egipcio Muhammad Makhzangi "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea," ("Kāna yuṭāridu farāshatan fī al-baḥr; كان يطارد فراشة في البحر") incluido en su colección *Animals in Our Days* (*Ḥayawānāt ayyāminā; حيوانات أيامنا*) (2006), desde una perspectiva *eco-crip*, examinando cómo entrelaza la discapacidad, la vulnerabilidad ecológica y el cuidado entre especies. La historia sigue a un hombre que, hipnotizado por la belleza de un pez en el mar Rojo—descrito como revoloteando como una mariposa—se aventura peligrosamente lejos de la costa. Al darse cuenta de su aislamiento y agotamiento, intenta suicidarse con su arpón; sin embargo, queda paralizado de cintura para abajo y pierde el uso de sus piernas. La narración se enmarca en escenas del protagonista en una silla de ruedas, que se transforma en una silla flotante, pero permanece confinada a la orilla del agua. Esta imagen rodea la historia, resaltando la tensión entre el deseo de conquistar la naturaleza y las limitaciones impuestas tanto por el cuerpo como por el entorno. El mar se resiste a la idealización: es seductor, implacable y, en última instancia, indiferente. Sin embargo, en su momento más vulnerable, el protagonista no es salvado por la intervención humana, sino por la ayuda inesperada de los delfines, lo que sugiere modelos alternativos de cuidado y supervivencia más allá de lo humano. En lugar de retratar la discapacidad como una carencia o una tragedia, la historia de

Makhzangi la reconfigura como un lugar de revelación ecológica. El viaje del protagonista critica el impulso de dominar la naturaleza y dramatiza los costes emocionales y físicos de tal arrogancia. Al hacerlo, el texto desafía las narrativas extractivas y capacitistas, ofreciendo una visión de la sintonía ecológica basada en la humildad, la limitación corporal y las solidaridades inesperadas. Esta lectura posiciona "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" como un raro ejemplo de literatura *eco-crip* en árabe, ampliando las posibilidades de imaginar los cuerpos discapacitados en relación con los entornos naturales, el riesgo y la supervivencia relacional.

Palabras clave: Teoría *eco-crip*, ecologías discapacitadas, poshumanismo, literatura árabe, análisis de metáforas.

Introduction and Theoretical Underpinnings

In recent years, the environmental humanities have increasingly turned toward bodies marked by vulnerability, impairment, and interdependence, foregrounding the ways ecological crises disproportionately impact those rendered fragile by social, political, or material structures (Clare 15). This intellectual shift, crystallized in eco-crip theory and crip ecologies, questions long-standing assumptions that frame disability as an individual deficit and nature as a domain of purity or health. Disability is indeed profoundly ecological: it emerges from toxic environments, colonial infrastructures, and extractive systems that degrade both landscapes and bodies (Chen 15). At the same time, disability illuminates relational forms of survival and care that unsettle dominant imaginaries of self-sufficiency or mastery over the natural world (Taylor 62; Kafer 150). These perspectives have opened a field in which ecological entanglement and embodied vulnerability are thought together, generating what theorists now call disabled ecologies (Chen 202; Kafer 25; Taylor 3). Despite the rapid development of eco-crip studies in North American and European scholarship, its application to Arabic literature remains remarkably limited. Whereas overall studies of ecological thought in Arabic fiction have grown in scope, addressing desert imaginaries, water scarcity, animal narratives, and posthuman motifs, such as Sharif S. Elmusa's reflections on Bedouin environmental ethics in Arabic culture, Haneen Ewaidat's ecocritical reading of 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī's *al-Ard* (*The Land*) (2020), and Ebtihal Mukattash's analysis of ecological displacement and transnational environments in Fadia Faqir's *My Name Is Salma* (2022), disability rarely appears as an ecological category or as a critical lens for reading human-nonhuman relations. Indeed, in emergent work on disability in Middle Eastern and North African contexts, impairment is often shaped by war, environmental degradation, infrastructural inequality, and social stigma rather than by the institutional ableism emphasized in Western crip theory, as portrayed in assessments such as *Disability in the Arab Region: An Overview* (2018).

Nevertheless, the literature of the Egyptian physician-turned-writer Muhammad Makhzangi appears as a singular voice within this paradigm, emerging from a life shaped by precarious ecologies and vulnerable bodies and reframing these

dynamics by shifting the origin of disability away from social or medical structures and situating it within an encounter with the natural world.¹ In doing so, it opens space for theorizing Global South disability ecologies that do not neatly map onto Western concepts of access, cure, or technological mediation. Born in Mansoura in the Nile Delta in 1950, trained as a doctor, and later specializing in psychology and alternative medicine in the Soviet Union, Makhzangi lived in Kiev during the Chernobyl disaster, an event he would later reconstruct in his memoir *Memories of a Meltdown* (1998). The experience of witnessing bodies altered by radiation, infrastructures collapsing under invisible forces, and the daily uncertainty of inhabiting a contaminated landscape marks his writing with an acute sensitivity to the fragility of life. His decision to abandon medicine for journalism and fiction after 1986 suggests a shift from treating bodies to narrating their entanglement with damaged environments. Across his work, Makhzangi repeatedly returns to the question of what it means to live, and survive, within unstable ecologies. During his years in the Soviet Union, and later through his travels documented in *Southward and Eastward* (2011), Makhzangi observed extensive fish exploitation, industrial fishing zones, and fishponds in China, where the illusion of controlling aquatic life was intertwined with environmental degradation and the commodification of marine species. His recent book *The Smell of the Sun* (2025) continues these concerns, depicting the intensive fishing of sharks and portraying the sea as a liminal, transformative space in which humans merge with the environment, momentarily dissolving the boundary between body and nature. These experiences form a conceptual thread running through his writing, that is the repeated spectacle of humans trying to master the sea and its creatures, and the equally repeated revelation that the sea remains an autonomous, resistant, and often unforgiving force. In this context, the short story "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea," which appears in the collection *Animals in Our Days* (2006),² can be read as a distillation of Makhzangi's lifelong preoccupation with bodily vulnerability as an ecological condition. The story's narrative arc—a man enchanted by a Red Sea fish, drawn into danger, and ultimately surviving through a spinal injury that leaves him paralysed—reflects not only the moral paradoxes he witnessed during Chernobyl, but more broadly his sustained encounters with human attempts to dominate, manage, and rationalize

¹ Critical scholarship on Makhzangi remains relatively limited but has approached his work from several perspectives. Monica Ruocco examines his animal narratives as a contemporary reworking of the classical Arabic tradition of writing about animals, with particular attention to *Ḥayawānāt ayyāminā* (*Animals in Our Days*) (Ruocco 371–88). Ferial J. Ghazoul situates Makhzangi within the broader "greening" of contemporary Arabic literature, considering his work in relation to ecological consciousness and the transformation of inherited motifs in postcolonial discourse (Ghazoul). More recently, M. Litvin has examined Makhzangi's representations of Ukraine across his 1986 and 2022 writings, extending scholarship on the author toward questions of travel, memory, and post-Soviet space (Litvin). While these studies demonstrate growing interest in Makhzangi from ecological, animal-studies, and transnational perspectives, his short story "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" has received comparatively little sustained critical attention, and its representation of disability has not, to my knowledge, been examined through an eco-crip framework.

² The story was originally published in Arabic by the Cairene publishing house Dar al-Shorouq in 2006 and later translated into English by Chip Rossetti in *Animals in Our Days: A Book of Stories* (2022).

nature across different cultural and geographical contexts. Because this study focuses closely on metaphor, sensory imagery, and ecological language, the analysis relies primarily on the Arabic original in order to preserve the semantic and figurative nuances of Makhzangi's prose. I provide my own translation for the majority of quotes from the text. Rossetti's translation is used for selected longer quotations in English and is cross-referenced in the works cited list with his name first to clearly distinguish this source from the original.

Thus, this article brings together eco-crip theory and multispecies studies to analyse how Makhzangi's "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" reimagines embodiment as relational, permeable, and ecologically embedded (Alaimo 2). Eco-crip theory provides the primary conceptual frame, as the story opens and closes with the protagonist seated in his wheelchair at the water's edge; an image that positions disability as the interpretive vantage point through which the narrative's ecological relations become visible. Alison Kafer's relational and political understanding of disability directs attention to how bodily states emerge from interactions with material environments (62). Sunaura Taylor's theorization of crip interdependence informs the study's focus on how embodiment, assistive technologies, and ecological settings co-produce forms of dependence and agency (150). Ria Cheyne's work on wonder and disability in speculative fiction provides a vocabulary for considering how bodily transformation can function as a catalyst for shifts in perception and ecological understanding (2).

Multispecies studies form a second methodological pillar, offering a framework for analysing how human-nonhuman interactions structure the narrative. Drawing on Donna Haraway (262) and Kirksey and Helmreich (1), this approach treats the fish, the dolphins, and the sea not as symbolic elements but as actors whose presence and behaviour contribute to the story's ecological dynamics. A multispecies methodology enables the analysis to explore how relations across species boundaries might be depicted, how agency may be distributed, and how survival, vulnerability, and care are configured within these interactions. This perspective also aligns with Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality (2), which emphasizes the permeability of human and nonhuman bodies and the material exchanges that occur between them.

Thirdly, the textual analysis, particularly of metaphors of luminosity, dissolution, machinery, and engulfment, reveals how ecological and embodied dynamics are encoded at the level of narrative form. In Makhzangi's story, disability emerges through a sensory and affective encounter with the sea: an overwhelming moment of wonder triggered by a butterflyfish draws the protagonist into environmental rhythms that exceed bodily control, reframing impairment as a new mode of ecological attunement rather than a moral or personal failure. At the same time, the narrative dismantles fantasies of autonomy and technological mastery by showing how the protagonist's imagined body-as-machine collapses when confronted with the scale, force, and opacity of the marine environment. The sea itself appears as an indifferent yet agentive presence whose pressures and temporalities

reshape the swimmer's body without intention, exposing the limits of anthropocentric perception, which has "been too exclusively oriented towards humans (Latour 19) and the fragility of human control. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology starts from the "liberty of indifference" (Merleau-Ponty 36) to show how "meaning inhabits the word" (224). Within this ecology of indifference, the dolphins' intervention introduces a contrasting mode of environmental agency: not benevolent or symbolic, but relational and co-present, enacting a form of survival dependent on multispecies coordination rather than human strength. Central to this study is metaphorical analysis, drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's understanding of metaphors as conceptual frameworks that structure perception rather than decorative language. In Makhzangi's story, metaphors of light, dissolution, machinery, and predation do not merely embellish the narrative but actively shape the reader's experience of ecological agency and bodily vulnerability. Following Eve Sedgwick's insistence that minute textual textures can reveal entire affective and epistemological structures, this method attends to sensory density, rhythm, chromatic shifts, and focalization in order to trace how narrative performs the dissolution of human-environment boundaries. Caroline Levine's theorization of form as a system of constraints and affordances further illuminates how the text's imagery organizes ecological relations.

Within Makhzangi's oeuvre, "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" stands out as a compact yet profound meditation on the limits of human control, the costs of environmental misreading, and the potential of multispecies care. It extends the ecological sensibility of his earlier Chernobyl writings into a different register: from nuclear disaster to marine awe, but with the same attention to the fragile, permeable boundary between body and world. At the same time, the story is deeply rooted in the ecology of the Red Sea itself, a space historically imagined as both abundant and dangerous, where dazzling biodiversity coexists with strong currents, coral formations, predatory species, and increasingly intensified forms of human exploitation through tourism, fishing, and extraction. Makhzangi mobilizes this marine environment not as an exotic backdrop but as an autonomous ecological force whose beauty, opacity, and indifference reshape human embodiment and perception. In this sense, the story offers a contribution within contemporary Arabic literature and environmental humanities alike: a narrative emerging from a specifically Arab marine ecology that imagines disability not as marginal or metaphorical, but as central to ecological understanding.

Disability as Ecological Event

"He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" constructs disability as an ecological event, a bodily transformation produced not by pathology or moral failure but through a direct, sensory, and affectively charged encounter with the natural world. Makhzangi announces this from the very first paragraph, which stages disability not

as a narrative afterthought but as the central lens through which the marine environment is perceived. The story opens:

At the water's edge, at a time when the beach was empty of people, in the early morning toward dawn, when the sea had receded to its lowest ebb, I paused to watch the man in his wheelchair as he pushed its wheels with the remaining strength in his arms. He left two deep tracks, parallel and separate, imprinted in the wet sand [...] The chair seemed as though it would gently sink beneath the rising tide, but something surprising swelled up from below the seat and made it float like a raft rising and falling on the water: the man had equipped his chair with an inflatable cushion [...] The chair bobbed on the water as he directed it where he wanted to go [...] the two wheels beneath his hands were transformed into both rudders and propellers together. (Rossetti 25-26)

This quiet yet meticulously rendered scene introduces three core elements that structure the story's ecological logic: disability as framing perspective, disability with the subsequent transformation, and environmental temporality.

Firstly, the disabled body is not isolated but visibly entangled with tidal rhythms: the wheels mark the sand, the tide fills and empties their tracks, and the chair's flotation depends on the precise timing of the right moment. Rather than depicting disability as lack, Makhzangi shows the man as an active environmental reader, someone who enters the sea by aligning himself with its cycles. His mobility device itself becomes a tidal technology, a "crip" apparatus in Taylor's sense, who uses the term "crip" to refer to specificities of time, that is "crip time," based on different abilities we may have (18) whose function is activated only in relation to the sea's movement. The disabled body and the marine environment co-produce the scene: neither is fully intelligible without the other. Indeed, the vocabulary of the sea in the previous paragraph ("ebb," "tide," "beach," "water") finds an explanation only in the vocabulary connected to disability ("wheelchair," "tracks," "inflatable cushion," "chair," "wheels"). Immediately after establishing this ecological frame, the story pivots into memory: "Now he is riding on the surface of the sea, but he isn't going far out from shore—rather, he is going deep into the memory of a day that he once told me about... a day when he would go out into the sea on two living, healthy legs [...]" (Rossetti 26). This transition is crucial: the narrative makes explicit that the disabled present self is the narrative subject, while the able-bodied past self exists only as a remembered state whose disappearance must be explained. Furthermore, the mediating third-person narrator creates a distance between body and discourse that mirrors the ecological distance the story explores between humans and the nonhuman world. In this sense, the narrator functions less as an authoritative voice than as a listener attempting to translate an embodied ecological experience that exceeds language, through a witnessing narrator who observes the disabled man at the shore and later recounts his story through memory and narration. Disability is therefore not the crisis to be solved; it is the starting point of perception, experience, and ecological attunement. The analeptic movement into the past is triggered by the physical act of floating, suggesting that memory itself is ecological: the tide lifts him, and memory rises as well; a memory that is filtered through the awareness of the disabled present self. The origin of the disability is then revealed: "But that day he

noticed it in the water. A surprising shudder and warmth overcame him; his conscious mind went blank as the water grew turbulent" (Rossetti 26). Here, disability emerges from wonder, not from catastrophe in the conventional sense. The protagonist's paralysis originates in a moment of aesthetic arrest, an overwhelming attraction to the sight of the vivid yellow butterflyfish. In the original Arabic, this moment is even more sensorially charged, literally: "the butterfly [...] the butterfly of the sea."³ The repetition underscores that what he perceives is not merely a fish but a cross-species aesthetic metaphor: something fragile, bright, and airborne, made marine. This structural choice resonates closely with Cheyne's theorization of disability and wonder, where bodily transformation often arises from moments that suspend or disarm the subject's perceptual routines.

Secondly, the narrative structures time through ecological rhythms associated with the protagonist's disability. The structure moves from: (1) disabled present → (2) remembered able-bodied past → (3) disabled present restored. This cyclical rhythm mirrors tidal movement: approach, withdrawal, return. The disabled body is narratively synchronized with environmental cycles in ways that the able-bodied past self was not. When young and able-bodied, he enters the sea at the wrong time; misreading the calm of low tide as safety, he fails to perceive ecological signals. The disabled present self, by contrast, acts in harmony with the sea's patterns: he arrives "towards dawn" (25) enters only during the lowest ebb, and leaves before the beach fills. Disability, therefore, becomes a state of ecological attention, a form of knowing the environment through physical limitation. The ecological consequences of this disorientation are articulated through a broader figurative and sensory system in which color, light, and bodily perception mark the protagonist's loss of environmental orientation. As he swims after the butterflyfish, the sea is rendered not as a backdrop but as an agential medium that absorbs and transforms the body. The underwater world appears as "blue and green suffused with light" (24), a chromatic saturation that overwhelms his senses and prevents him from accurately perceiving distance, depth, and direction. The colors are therefore not merely decorative; they register the breakdown of ecological perception itself. Because the protagonist can no longer interpret the marine environment correctly, he misjudges his position, exhausts his body, and becomes increasingly vulnerable to the forces of tide, pressure, and water. This sensory disorientation produces material ecological consequences: panic replaces orientation, self-rescue becomes impossible, and the body loses its capacity to respond effectively to the environment. The later flash of "white, then green, then red" (24), marks the culmination of this perceptual collapse, transforming sensory overwhelm into bodily injury as the harpoon pierces his spine and permanently alters his relation to the sea.

Thus, disability in the story functions as an ecological mode of embodiment shaped by tidal rhythms, sensory transformation, and environmental vulnerability. By framing the narrative through the disabled present self, Makhzangi redefines

³ "فراشة...فراشة البحر" (Makhzangi 23; my translation).

disability not as rupture or deficiency but as ecological attunement. In doing so, the story dissolves anthropocentrism: the human body is no longer the stable center of the marine world, but a vulnerable organism dependent on nonhuman rhythms, forces, and temporalities beyond its control.

Human Hubris as Ecological Ignorance

The story's systematic dismantling of human hubris is articulated through the protagonist's overconfidence in his own physical power, sensory perception, and technological augmentation. Whereas the previous section traced the ecological emergence of disability through wonder and sensory immersion, this section addresses a different dynamic: the protagonist's belief that he can command the sea through effort, intention, and mechanical force. Makhzangi embeds this hubris in the metaphors the swimmer uses to imagine his own body. From the moment he begins to pursue the butterflyfish, he frames his limbs not as organic, fallible members but as mechanical parts capable of propulsion and control. His legs beat the water "like the propellers of a pursuing boat,"⁴ and his strokes cut the surface with the force of engines, until his movements resemble "the ploughing of a tracked vehicle across a terrain whose hardness and softness intermingle."⁵ These metaphors do not simply exaggerate his strength; they encode an anthropocentric fantasy in which the human body becomes a self-sufficient machine, insulated from the vulnerabilities and contingencies of its environment.

This fantasy becomes the conceptual core of his hubris. He imagines the sea as something his mechanical body can traverse, overcome, or outpace, treating its waters as passive material rather than active medium. What he misrecognizes is not simply the butterflyfish's allure but the premise that human propulsion, muscular or technological, can dominate an element whose scale, rhythm, and force far exceed the limits of human physiology. Makhzangi gradually reveals the instability of this fantasy by allowing the protagonist's metaphors to turn against him. The more he imagines his limbs as engines, the more he exhausts them; the harder he presses his mechanical body forward, the less responsive it becomes. His overreliance on mechanical logic blinds him to ecological cues: the shifting currents, the rising tide, the cold that begins to constrict his muscles, the distance he has already traveled. In this sense, hubris is not merely arrogance but misalignment: a cognitive and sensory failure to recognize the sea's agency.

The narrative articulates this misalignment not through sudden catastrophe but through a slow, accumulating process of spatial disintegration. After paralysis, disability emerged through an ecological temporality; his body becoming synchronized with tides, ebb and flow, and cyclical rhythms, as disability merges with

⁴ "كرفاصات زورق مطاراد" (Makhzangi 25; my translation).

⁵ وكان زحفه عائما على الماء قد استحال إلى حرث عربة مجنزرة، لأرض تختلط "قسوتها باللين" (Makhzangi 25; my translation).

ecological temporality. By contrast, the dismantling of human hubris unfolds through the erosion of spatial certainty. The first sign of collapse is not pain or injury but the disappearance of orientation: when he turns back, the shoreline has vanished, replaced by an unbroken field of water that offers no coordinates, no depth cues, no directional anchors. This loss of spatial reference is the beginning of the end of mastery, for the machine-body he imagines cannot function without a knowable grid, without stable points in relation to which propulsion makes sense. The sea refuses to provide such structure. What follows is a cascading series of bodily and environmental breakdowns: saltwater entering the breathing tube, cold numbing his limbs, strokes losing force, breath faltering. As spatial certainty dissolves, the metaphors shift accordingly. Images of engines and vehicles give way to metaphors of organic struggle: gasping, choking, sinking. The narrative no longer describes his actions through mechanical analogies because the body itself no longer behaves like a machine but like something porous, vulnerable, and unmoored. Therefore, hubris dissolves not through moral revelation but through spatial and physiological evidence: the human body requires orientation to act, and orientation is an ecological gift the sea can withdraw at any moment.

Crucially, this transformation is not a moral lesson but a reorientation of sensory and ecological perception. The machine-body he once imagined could dominate the sea becomes the disabled body that now moves only in dialogue with it. In this revised ecological and embodied modality, the sea is no longer a site of mastery but a dynamic environment that structures possibility and limitation. The protagonist's disability, rather than marking a fall from capacity, becomes the condition that allows him to inhabit this ecological truth. Through the collapse of the machine-body and the emergence of a relational body, Makhzangi reframes hubris not as an ethical failure but as an epistemological one: a misreading of the world that can only be corrected through the body's encounter with the more-than-human.

Sea as Indifferent Force

The text's construction of the sea as an indifferent, agentive, and inhospitable environment narrates it as a force that resists anthropocentric framing and undermines human claims to mastery. Rather than portraying the ocean as a romantic site of beauty or sublime awe, Makhzangi renders it as an active participant in the protagonist's transformation, a material and affective presence whose rhythms, movements, and pressures shape the narrative's ecological and existential stakes. Through a series of metaphors that depict the sea as predatory, sentient, or consuming, the text positions the marine world not as a passive backdrop but as an autonomous entity that exerts agency in ways the protagonist cannot anticipate or control. Situating this analysis within Arab ecologies also highlights how Makhzangi's narrative emerges from material marine environments that differ sharply from the Euro-American landscapes where eco-crip theory first developed. The Red Sea's unique combination of biodiversity, dangerous currents, and extractive economies—

ranging from industrial fishing to tourist-driven reef degradation—creates a seascape where human–nonhuman encounters are structured by risk, precarity, and sensory intensity. These material conditions shape not only the story's events but the very epistemology through which the sea is understood as a force that resists domestication, destabilizes anthropocentric assumptions, and reconfigures bodily vulnerability. Integrating this marine context brings a distinctly Middle Eastern dimension to eco-crip studies and expands the geographical terrain of Blue Humanities beyond its usual North Atlantic focus.

The most striking metaphor is the depiction of the sea as a gaping mouth: "the sea was open-mouthed."⁶ This metaphor performs multiple operations simultaneously. It animalizes the sea, suggesting a vast organism capable of engulfing or devouring, and it expresses the protagonist's acute vulnerability within this environment. Unlike the earlier metaphors that cast the protagonist's body as a machine, this metaphor emphasizes the animate power of the environment itself. The open mouth is not directed specifically at him; it is not malicious. Rather, its indifference is precisely what makes it terrifying: it does not notice him, does not care, and will swallow anything that crosses its threshold. In this sense, the sea's predatory framing is a device that dramatizes environmental indifference, not intentional hostility. The protagonist confronts a world that surpasses human perspective, revealing what posthuman ecologists describe as environmental agency without intention that operates beyond moral frameworks and human comprehension. As Timothy Morton argues, ecological forces destabilize anthropocentric notions of scale and mastery precisely because they exceed human frameworks of meaning and intentionality (160). Makhzangi's sea operates in this way: not hostile, but indifferent, reshaping the protagonist's body through forces that neither recognize nor prioritize the human. This theme deepens with the metaphor of "water swallowing him."⁷ Here, the protagonist is absorbed into the sea's agency; water acts, he is acted upon. The verbs of engulfment, dragging, lifting, and striking emphasize the one-sidedness of agency: the sea moves, the human body responds. This dynamic aligns with Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality: "Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment" (2).

The protagonist's body becomes a membrane through which ecological pressures pass, saltwater entering his mouth, cold tightening his limbs, waves propelling him in unpredictable directions, as "he found his body growing heavy."⁸ The sea's movements penetrate bodily boundaries, dissolving the illusion of a self-contained, autonomous subject. His very physiology is restructured by environmental contact: breathing becomes swallowing, swimming becomes thrashing, sensation becomes panic.

⁶ "وكان البحر فاعراً" (Makhzangi 26; my translation).

⁷ "والماء يوشك على الابتلاع" (Makhzangi 26; my translation).

⁸ "وجد الجسد يتناقل" (Makhzangi 26; my translation).

If the sea's physical actions reveal its agency, the protagonist's emotional responses reveal its inhumanity. When he experiences "a nonhuman fear" (27) the text suggests a double displacement. First, the fear is described not as his own but as something alien that takes hold of him, signaling the collapse of his psychological defenses. Second, by calling the fear nonhuman, the text grants the environment an affective power that supersedes human categories. Fear becomes a medium through which the sea acts upon the protagonist, producing an affective state that belongs to the environment as much as to the body. His terror is not simply psychological; it is ecologically induced. The sea generates a new, destabilized emotional register that stands outside human comprehension. In this sense, the narrative aligns with posthuman affect theory, where emotions emerge relationally through bodily and environmental encounters rather than solely within the human subject (Massumi 27). The protagonist's fear is ecologically generated through the sea's pressure, movement, and sensory overwhelm, becoming what Alaimo would describe as a trans-corporeal affective experience (2).

From the sea's ecological indifference, disability emerges not from violence but from misunderstanding. The waters engulfed him not because he failed to recognize that his body, no matter how strong it seemed, was always subordinate to environmental conditions. The sea did not attack; the protagonist misinterpreted its cues, mistook its silence for consent, and entered a domain he could not control. It becomes the agent that breaks his illusion of autonomy and reveals the fragility of bodily control. In this sense, the sea acts as a teacher, not through intention, but through consequence. Philosophically, this dynamic resonates with Bruno Latour's claim that the human is always produced through relations with nonhuman forces, because "without the nonhuman, humans would not last a minute" (Latour 91); in the story, the protagonist becomes intelligible only in relation to the sea's pressure, rhythms, and movements. Likewise, the dissolution of bodily boundaries under water recalls Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, in which the self is constituted through its sensorimotor exchanges with the world rather than through internal coherence (10-11). The sea's indifference thus performs a kind of ontological recalibration: within the Red Sea's ecologically intense and precarious seascape, it demonstrates that the human is not self-enclosed but porous, contingent, and shaped by what lies beyond it.

Crip Multispecies Interdependance

The story's elaboration of multispecies relations represents a counterpoint to human hubris and a central element in the protagonist's ecological and crip transformation. While much of the narrative dramatizes the sea's indifference and the protagonist's bodily vulnerability, the rescue scene, where dolphins intervene to save the injured swimmer, introduces a qualitatively different kind of environmental agency: not hostile, not neutral, but relational. Through this moment, the text imagines a mode of ecological care that exceeds human boundaries and foregrounds

interspecies collaboration as a condition for survival. The dolphins function not as symbols of harmony or romanticized nature but as co-actors within an ecological assemblage. As Donna Haraway argues in *When Species Meet*, lives emerge through processes of “becoming with,” in which humans and nonhumans are constituted through relations of mutual entanglement rather than autonomous existence (16–17). Similarly, Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich’s concept of multispecies relations emphasizes that meaning, agency, and survival are produced through interactions among different forms of life rather than residing within a single species (545–46).

This multispecies intervention gains force precisely because it follows a sequence dominated by human error, human desire, and human misreading of environmental cues. After the protagonist’s harpoon misfires and pierces his spine, disabling his legs, he becomes newly dependent on environmental forces and ultimately on the actions of other animals. The narrative describes his injured state with striking physical immediacy: “he was dragging his dead legs” (my translation). This phrase does not merely describe paralysis; it signals the collapse of the human body’s autonomy and the emergence of a form of embodiment that requires external agents to achieve mobility. The protagonist’s body is no longer a self-contained system but a distributed organism, dependent on the environment in order to move, breathe, and survive. This vulnerability creates the narrative conditions necessary for a multispecies encounter: it is precisely because he cannot save himself that another species enters the scene.

The moment the dolphins appear is rendered through a blend of sensory fragmentation and epiphanic clarity. The protagonist hears “chirping, creaking, whistling”⁹ sounds that he initially perceives as distortions of his own terror. But the text then aligns these sounds with the visual emergence of dolphin bodies. Their arcs, tails, and breaths—materialize gradually, as though his sensory system must recalibrate to register their presence: “He saw the smooth circles following him and saw the eyes; among the eyes, he was surprised by fountains glistening in the light.”¹⁰ This sensory recalibration mirrors his ecological recalibration: he shifts from perceiving the environment as hostile and absorbing to perceiving it as relational and responsive. The dolphins’ movements form circular patterns which contrast with the earlier metaphors of the sea’s engulfing and predatory motions. The circularity gestures toward coordination, choreography, and intentional proximity. The dolphins do not accidentally intersect with him; they adjust their trajectories to lift him. Crucially, the text avoids anthropomorphism. The dolphins’ actions are not framed as compassion, nor as the execution of a moral duty. Their rescue remains within the register of species-specific behavior; protective herding, curiosity, perhaps a response to distress signals, but the effect on the human protagonist is transformative. The narrative positions dolphins as agents who “raise” him (29), emphasizing both their instinctual behavior and the relational effect of that behavior.

⁹ “زقزقة، صرير، صفير” (Makhzangi 28; my translation).

¹⁰ “يرى الدوائر الناعمة تتبعه ويرى العيون، وبين العيون استغرب وجود نافورات تتلألأ في الضوء” (Makhzangi 28; my translation)

This multispecies intervention also reframes the meaning of disability within the story. Instead of marking the protagonist as degraded or diminished, disability becomes the condition that opens him to relational forms of ecological care unavailable to the able-bodied self. His earlier body-as-machine metaphors precluded interdependence; he imagined himself propelled, directional, and solitary. After the injury, however, his embodiment becomes relational: his survival depends on the coordinated forces of dolphins, waves, and human rescuers. This aligns closely with Taylor's theory of crip interdependence, which argues that disability renders visible the webs of support that all bodies rely upon, but that able-bodied ideology conceals. Taylor, citing Paul Longmore, a disability studies writer, indeed argues: "that they prize not self-sufficiency but self-determination, not independence but interdependence, not functional separateness but personal connection, not physical autonomy but human community" (33). Here, the dolphins become part of those webs. They are not "helpers" in a moral sense but co-actors in an ecological assemblage that includes the protagonist, the sea, human rescuers, and the assistive technologies that will later mediate his marine experience.

Conclusion

"He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" demonstrates that Makhzangi's story does far more than depict a disabled character within an environmental setting; it offers an ecological-crip vision in which bodily vulnerability and environmental agency become mutually illuminating. A central contribution of the story lies in its reconfiguration of autonomy, and this becomes most visible when the narrative's two human-facing results are placed in relation with one another. On the one hand, disability emerges as a mode of ecological attunement: a bodily state through which the protagonist learns to read environmental rhythms and inhabit the sea with responsiveness rather than mastery. On the other hand, hubris functions as its conceptual opposite, exposing how fantasies of autonomy, mechanical strength, and sensory certainty distort the human relationship to the environment. As Kafer argues, identities and forms of agency do not pre-exist relations but emerge through them. Coalition is a process in which interests and identities are continually reshaped through encounter and interdependence (151). Makhzangi relocates this collapse to the moment of physical contact with the sea. The protagonist's imaginary machine-body fails not because society prevents him from moving but because the environment reveals the fiction of his independence. Shifts in pressure, luminosity, and depth dismantle his belief in propulsion, power, and control. In this tension between hubris and crip embodiment, the narrative advances a post-anthropocentric frame in which bodies are understood as materially contingent, inherently limited, and dependent on the rhythms of more-than-human worlds. Becoming a crip, in this sense, is not only a sociopolitical identity but an ecological orientation grounded in limit, vulnerability, and interdependence.

A similar complementary tension shapes the story's environmental axis. If disability and hubris represent opposing human positions, indifference and multispecies cooperation represent the dual environmental forces that act upon them. Makhzangi's portrayal of the sea expands eco-crip conversations by imagining a natural environment that is agential without being malicious. The sea disables not because it intends harm but because it is disinterested. This perspective complicates a significant strand of eco-crip scholarship that has emerged through environmental justice frameworks, where disability is often examined in relation to toxic exposure, pollution, and other anthropogenic forms of harm that foreground questions of responsibility and accountability (Kafer 131–32). By contrast, Makhzangi's sea operates outside human moral frameworks. Yet within this ecology of indifference, the dolphins' intervention introduces a reciprocal, contrasting dynamic: multispecies cooperation. Their appearance does not redeem the sea's indifference nor erase its dangers; instead, it offers a glimpse of an alternative ecological logic in which survival becomes distributed across species, bodies, and movements. Their improvised, instinctual intervention transforms the protagonist's relation to the environment, revealing that ecological life is shaped not only by dispassionate forces but also by contingent, affective, and embodied interspecies encounters. While eco-crip scholarship often emphasizes interdependence through social or technological networks (Taylor 25), Makhzangi extends this insight into the marine world, showing how more-than-human agents can become partners in survival not through intention but through ecological proximity and co-presence.

By bringing these paired dynamics into view—disability versus hubris on the human side, environmental indifference versus multispecies cooperation on the ecological side—the story articulates a model in which transformation occurs through tension rather than resolution. More importantly, positioning the story within eco-crip studies highlights the importance of Arabic fiction for expanding the field's geographical and ecological scope. Makhzangi's narrative emerges from the specific marine ecology of the Red Sea, from years of observing human attempts to manage and control nature, and from an authorial trajectory marked by encounters with nuclear disaster, industrial farming, and environmental extraction. In this context, disability shaped by natural rather than industrial environments becomes a means of complicating eco-crip assumptions developed primarily in Euro-American contexts. This contribution invites broader engagement with Global South ecologies, where disability and environment are entangled in ways that resist Western paradigms of environmental injustice or medicalization. Ultimately, "He Was Chasing a Butterfly in the Sea" offers a model of disability that is neither tragic nor inspirational but ecological: a record of environmental force, a recalibration of perception, a critique of autonomy, and a form of knowledge. The protagonist's transformation demonstrates that disability can open onto new forms of environmental attention and multispecies connection, and that ecological understanding often arises precisely when human control collapses. Makhzangi's story thus suggests an eco-crip ethics shaped by limit, responsiveness, and relational

survival. In doing so, it signals a direction for eco-crip criticism grounded not in terrestrial toxicity alone but in marine encounters, sensory vulnerability, and Global South environments—where disability becomes not only something to be represented, but a way of reading and inhabiting the world.

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