

RESISTANCE AND RECLAIMING IDENTITY: READING RUQAYA IZZIDIEN'S WATERMELON BOYS IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS ECOCRITICISM

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Abstract

The current study aims at investigating the importance of traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, and spiritual connections with land in a contemporary Iraqi novel, *Watermelon Boys* by Ruqaya Izzidien, through the lens of indigenous ecocriticism theory. Indigenous Ecocriticism emphasizes the role of tradition, heritage, and ecological knowledge in reclaiming the voices and the land of indigenous and marginalized communities. This study adapts a qualitative approach to study the impact of colonialism and extractive industries on land, cultural heritage, and traditional knowledge of the indigenous Iraqi peoples. By foregrounding Indigenous ecocritical perspectives, the analysis reveals how Izzidien's narrative challenges dominant colonial histories and ecological exploitations by centering the voices and lived experiences of Iraqi characters navigating displacement, war, and cultural erasure. The novel's depiction of the land—both as a site of conflict and a symbol of rootedness—serves as a powerful medium for reclaiming Indigenous identity and resisting imperial ecological domination. This study argues that *Watermelon Boys* not only critiques environmental and cultural colonization but also offers a vision of healing and autonomy through the restoration of Indigenous relationships with place, memory, and community. *Watermelon Boys* portrays the impact of colonization on indigenous Iraqi people and how they adhere to their heritage, land, and traditional knowledge that was passed to them from their ancestors in order to preserve their identity and resist the Ottoman Empire and British colonization. Ultimately, the study articulates the vital role of adhering to heritage, tradition, and land in confronting colonial legacies, and reclaim their homeland and cultural identity.

Keywords: traditional knowledge, identity, cultural heritage, colonization, *Watermelon Boys*

1.1 INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS ECOCRITICISM THEORY

Indigenous Eco-criticism theory focuses on the relationships of three realms: the environmental, spiritual, and human worlds of indigenous people, as well as their beliefs regarding their traditional, ritual system, and relatedness system, which includes caring for various aspects of nature, all of these making their "closeness" to nature very clear. Several indigenous societies worldwide rely heavily on the ecosystems in which they live, as evidenced by their deep familiarity with biodiversity (Sangha et al., 2015). As a discipline, indigenous ecology centers on the study of traditional knowledge, the ecological knowledge associated with specific places, and the interactions between nature and culture in indigenous thought. Throughout the history of indigenous people worldwide, they have paid more attention to ecological issues that revolve around the importance of understanding nature, agriculture, ecological knowledge, and spiritual connection with the land (Coates, 2004).

Indigenous ecology has emerged through the intersection of eco-criticism and Indigenous studies, explored by many scholars. Joni Adamson is the first one who accounts for this intersection between Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies as it has developed from discussions that started nearly fifteen years ago in Adamson's 2001 book, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice and Eco Criticism: The Middle Place*. Joni Adamson is considered the first ecocritical scholar who discussed the significance of indigenous oral and written traditions that challenged Euro-American ideas of "nature" and "place" through her monograph. Adamson brings decolonization, environmental justice, and indigenous peoples' rights to the attention of ecocriticism. The 21st century has seen the development of Ecocriticism, from its initial emphasis on Euro-American nonfiction nature writing to the inclusion of the voices and struggles of marginalized minorities, particularly the suffering of indigenous communities worldwide (Adamson & Monani, 2017).

Many eco-critics have enhanced Adamson's work through their studies, like Kyle Whyte, whose work, *Indigenous Environmental Justice Anti-Colonial Action through Kinship*, looks at how indigenous familial practices and

ethical connections to nature present strategies for resolving sustainable development, and how indigenous people have long-standing familial customs that are important in appreciating sustainable development. The fight for sustainable development among indigenous peoples is anti-colonial (Whyte, 2020). Another study by Fikret Berkes (2018), *Sacred Ecology*, investigates the knowledge systems of indigenous and rural peoples globally, exploring how we might get insights and benefit from their knowledge. Berkes emphasizes the value of indigenous and local knowledge as supplementing ecological research, as well as the cultural and political importance of native communities on their own (Berkes, 2018).

These studies highlight the significance of the trend utilized by ecocriticism and environmental humanities in the fields of indigenous studies, postcolonial ecology, and environmental justice during the 21st century (Adamson & Monani, 2017). Moreover, indigenous knowledge, traditional practices, rituals, cultures, and spiritual connection with land are the main focus attributed to indigenous ecocriticism. As well, indigenous ecocriticism focused on its emphasis on decolonization and the rights of indigenous peoples and the use and inclusion of traditional knowledge, cultures, and customs in the works of literature by indigenous authors (Heit, 2022). Therefore, Traditional knowledge is considered a central point of indigenous ecocriticism and a component of the humanities and the heritage of indigenous peoples. The content and system of knowledge that emerges from the collective acts of indigenous people are regarded as part of traditional knowledge (Popova-Gosart, 2009). Traditional knowledge is taken from accumulated experiences and events found in stories that emphasize memories with accurate details and were kept through oral tradition (Steeves, 2020). Indigenous knowledge is experiential, taking its social views, meanings, and explanations from personal observations and the inner workings of the individual (Dei, 2002). Indigenous knowledge is derived from personal experience and acquired through direct interaction between an individual and the natural world. A society's cultural, social, and spiritual values shape this indigenous knowledge.

Traditional ecological knowledge, or indigenous ecological knowledge, is included in the larger definition of indigenous knowledge in the case when knowledge belongs to ecology (Berkes, 2018). Traditional ecological knowledge refers to the knowledge, information, and understanding that indigenous peoples have about their ecosystems, which have been passed down through the centuries. As one member of the Mohawk, Jameson Brant has defined indigenous knowledge as “a body of information about the interconnected elements of the natural environment which traditional indigenous people have been taught, from generation to generation, to respect and give thanks for” (Menzies, 2006, p. 6). The term “traditional ecological knowledge” describes how local indigenous and tribal people use the structure and function of the natural ecosystems in their area to understand the world surrounding them and use it for human well-being (Debbarma, 2022).

Similarly, in the Iraqi context, the Marsh Arabs, the indigenous people of the Marshes, kept a close connection within the marshlands. They created a distinctive lifestyle that closely connected them to their surroundings. They have been involved in sustainable traditional resource management for millennia, establishing a distinctive lifestyle that closely connects them to their wetland environment. Traditional resource management techniques have protected biodiversity in multiple cultural landscapes, which evolved from the close connection between environmental changes and stewardship methods rooted in traditional ecological knowledge. Traditional resource management involved the seasonal burning of reeds, multi-species management (including reeds, fish, waterfowl, bird eggs, and rice), the controlled burning of aged vegetation to promote new growth, the spatial and temporal regulation of fish harvesting during spawning, and the management of landscape patches. These management techniques enhanced reed growth and biomass output, sustained various patch dynamics, and augmented microhabitat diversity (Fawzi et al., 2016).

Across the world, traditional ecological knowledge plays a role in preserving cultural heritage by intertwining deep connections between culture and the environment. TEK does not serve as a resource management tool. But as a way of life that blends ecological wisdom with spiritual beliefs and cultural principles (McGregor, 2004). Cultural heritage connects the past and the present, enabling individuals to understand their origins. The idea of giving people a sense of identity and purpose in our culturally varied society revolves around the preservation of cultural heritage (Munodawafa et al., 2018). Whyte (2020) states in his work, *Indigenous Environmental Justice: Anti-Colonial Action through Kinship*, that indigenous peoples possess distinct cultures. Their culture includes linguistic, artistic, ceremonial, religious, and philosophical traditions. It is a culture that is unique compared to other civilizations.

Cultural heritage is closely related to land, as indigenous customs, practices, and identity are shaped by the physical environment. Indigenous scholars such as M. Battiste and J. Henderson (2000) emphasize that cultural heritage involves the customs, values, and knowledge passed down through the generations and has a profound connection to the environments in which these people live (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). The Spiritual connection of land can be defined as a close relationship between people and the natural environment without any separation. The concept of spiritual connection with land refers to all elements of the natural world, including plants, animals, ancestors, spirits, and natural features, as well as the environment, such as air, water, and minerals. Additionally, this concept can refer to regional notions and genuine places, which are considered the central term stemming from Indigenous knowledge and teachings (McDonald, 2023).

But the displacement of indigenous people from both their lands and cultures weakened and damaged their means of understanding and responding to the environment, which led to the negative health results we experience today (McDonald, 2023). Indigenous peoples' spirituality and cultural heritage have been significantly impacted by the colonization of their homeland. Using frequently abusive methods, for example, European colonists tried to force their own religious practices and beliefs on indigenous people for centuries. Because of the oppression of indigenous spiritual practices brought about by this forced integration, people lost their sense of cultural identity and their connection to nature (Biggle, 2024). Thus, the spiritual connection to the land is not just a part of indigenous identity; it is its very foundation. It serves as a significant framework for contesting exploitative and extractive environmental practices and advocating for a comprehensive and revitalized relationship with the natural world.

Protecting the lands from exploitation and misuse by external forces is one of the top interests and issues for indigenous cultures and communities, which rely heavily on their land for survival (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights & International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2017). States, entrepreneurs, and others' economic operations on lands where indigenous people originated have an impact on them all over the world. Because the lands of indigenous peoples contain substantial mineral, oil, and gas deposits, they have attracted governments, colonialism, and the extractive industries, which view them as attractive places for foreign investment and revenue-generating products (European Parliament, 2014).

Within this context, the United States' invasion of Iraq was motivated by a quest for dominance over the country's oil reserves. Oil is an essential commodity that propels worldwide economic expansion, and the United States is among the world's major oil users. The US-led coalition established a new administration that began the privatization of Iraq's oil sector, allowing international companies to participate. This action has profoundly affected Iraq's economy since a significant income from the country's oil reserves is now allocated to international companies instead of the Iraqi populace (Abdelmoumene, 2023). The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States can be interpreted as a version of an ancient colonial theme, but with considerable new repercussions for the American public and the entire world. The historical significance of the Middle East to the West is rooted in geopolitics. The region serves as a strategic land bridge, linking commerce between the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe. The region's direct economic significance increased as oil was used to power an industrialized global economy. Especially Iraq, which has been a significant member of the Middle East since the early 20th century, due to its strategic location and large oil resources (Evans, 2003).

Not only limited to colonialism, but also the consequences of large-scale mining operations on native ecologies and civilizations are unavoidable. Indigenous peoples who live in present or former settler colonies are particularly exposed to the negative effects of mining because of their intimate ties to the land, water, and resources therein, as well as their marginalized social and economic status. These prospects and impacts are influenced by various elements, including the minerals' and the environment's characteristics, the extractive company's strategy, suitable legal frameworks, socioeconomic circumstances, and the reactions of Indigenous groups (Horowitz et al., 2018). This is what happened with Iraq, when US companies profited from the post-war rebuilding initiatives in Iraq, while the effects on the Iraqi economy were negative. The restoration initiatives provided employment and restored infrastructure; nevertheless, they also had negative effects. The arrival of US companies and their staff member resulted in increased pricing for products and services, affecting the ability of ordinary Iraqis to buy things they need. Furthermore, some Iraqis saw the contracts awarded to US firms as unfair, believing that indigenous businesses were being neglected (Abdelmoumene, 2023).

Historically, Indigenous peoples around the world have borne the brunt of the most destructive impacts of extractive industries and imperial expansion. In this context, the present study examines how Indigenous Iraqi communities maintain their connection to tradition, heritage, and land amidst the upheavals of war, and how they strive to reclaim their homeland. Focusing on Ruqaya Izzidien's *Watermelon Boys*, this study employs the framework of Indigenous ecocriticism to explore the novel's depiction of resistance and reclamation during World War I. It investigates how the narrative contributes to broader decolonial efforts by redefining Indigenous identity and reimagining the concept of homeland. Through a close analysis, the study highlights the strategies of decolonization portrayed in the novel and critically engages with its treatment of displacement, dispossession, and the disruption of indigenous lifeways under both colonial and postcolonial regimes.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, textual analysis methodology grounded in the principles of Indigenous ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. By conducting a close reading of *Watermelon Boys*, the analysis focuses on narrative structure, character development, symbolism, and representations of land, identity, and resistance. The study employs an interpretive approach to uncover how the novel articulates Indigenous Iraqi perspectives on colonial violence, environmental exploitation, and cultural resilience. Secondary sources, including scholarly works on Indigenous ecocriticism, decolonization, and Middle Eastern postcolonial literature, are used to contextualize the literary analysis and support theoretical insights. This methodology allows for an in-depth

exploration of how literary texts can serve as vehicles for cultural memory, resistance, and the reclamation of Indigenous epistemologies.

1.3 Indigenous Iraqi Resistance to British Colonialism in *Watermelon Boys*

Ruqaya Izzidien is an outstanding Iraqi-Welsh writer and editor who seeks to convey the correct and sensitive image of Arab and Muslim communities by blending her extensive cultural heritage with a passion for storytelling. She was educated in Lampeter, Wales, and then at Durham University, where she studied modern languages (Spanish and Arabic) with Middle Eastern Politics and French. Her debut novel, *The Watermelon Boys*, won a Betty Trask Award for first-time novelists under 35, and Arabic-language rights have recently been sold.

The Watermelon Boys (2018), the debut novel by Ruqaya Izzidien, is a compelling work of historical fiction that intertwines the sweeping events of World War I in Mesopotamia with an intimate portrayal of familial bonds, love, and loyalty. While it primarily chronicles the military and political upheavals of the era—particularly the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the ensuing British occupation following the Sykes-Picot Agreement—it also delves into the emotional landscapes of its characters, offering a deeply human perspective on colonialism and resistance. Set in 1915, during the waning years of Ottoman rule in Iraq, the narrative explores the impact of imperial partition, as the Sykes-Picot Pact divided the Middle East, placing Iraq under British control. This colonial imposition ultimately provoked widespread dissent, culminating in the 1920 Iraqi Revolt, a significant uprising against British domination (Kadhim, 2020).

Izzidien's prose navigates fluidly between understated humour and lyrical sensitivity, exemplified by passages such as, "I will tell the rivers and the earth, and all the undeserving people on it, that I do not belong to them. I belong to you" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 24). This poetic declaration underscores the emotional resonance that permeates her writing. This novel is told from the viewpoint of an Iraqi writer and family impacted by the Sykes-Picot Pact, presents a unique glimpse into one of the most significant moments in modern Arabic history, and depicts the British occupation of Iraq during the First World War. By employing first-person and third-person narrators, Izzidien emphasises that Indigenous peoples' stories are portrayed on their personal levels rather than through the perspective of colonial powers, reinforcing the pressing need to reclaim their histories and environmental knowledge.

The Watermelon Boys is set during and after the British-led Mesopotamian campaign in the First World War. The influence of European involvement in the Middle East is one of the frequently misunderstood periods of modern history that Izzidien checks, whose results are still being felt now (Hawksley, 2018). The events of the novel take place in multiple locations, ranging from Mosul, Samarra, Baghdad, and Basra, as well as along the River Tigris, to showcase the historical and cultural heritage of these cities. In addition, these cities were surrounded by the attention of colonialism because of their rich resources. Therefore, colonialism wanted to concentrate on them and to control them, exploiting them. Furthermore, the people of these cities were active in their resistance to colonialism. They reject submitting to colonial legacies and hold their heritage, tradition, and land. Additionally, this novel is classified as historical fiction because it attempts to reimagine the 1920 Iraqi Revolution, reconstruct past events, and lend a voice to marginalized perspectives.

The Watermelon Boys begins with a third-person narrator, who describes what happened to Ahmed, the novel's protagonist, who is found on the banks of the Tigris River. He is confused and covered in mud, and is acting strangely as if he has lost his memory. This means that the Tigris River constitutes an important setting for the novel. This reinforces its importance for historical and cultural continuity. It forms the backdrop for the events that Baghdad witnessed during the British occupation and the 1920 Iraqi Revolution. Ahmed's presence near it signifies renewal, continuity, and survival. By opening the novel with the Tigris River is not merely a geographical place, but rather, through it, Izzidien evokes Iraq's rich historical heritage, which the colonizers are trying to exploit. Frantz Fanon asserts that in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip" (Fanon, 1963, p. 210). According to Fanon, colonialism tries to drive out indigenous peoples' knowledge, customs, and self-awareness from their minds in addition to its political and economic domination. That colonial power seeks to "emptying the brain of the indigenous citizen of all form and content" (Fanon, 1963, p. 210), means that it is an attempt to break the colonized's historical awareness, cultural identity, and autonomous intellectual framework. Thus, colonialism includes an attack on the indigenous people's memory, identity, and self-worth in addition to land and wealth in order to weaken indigenous people.

Then he woke up and ran through the streets and markets of Baghdad. He was shocked by what he saw, including the sounds and smells of the architecture, the fragrant tea, and the weavers. Ahmed was shocked by the traditional life of Baghdad and collapsed near the northern gate of the city. "He found himself in a narrow street lined with shanasheel oriel windows" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 5). Izzidien gives a full description of the cultural heritage of an ancient Iraqi building, especially in the description of "shanasheel," which is used as a "traditional oriel window." This shanasheel is used not only as a beautiful decoration, which Iraqi people use in their houses, but also as something inherited from their ancestors and culture. In addition to that, this "shanasheel" indicates the great, unique historical buildings of the indigenous Iraqi people. Also, the narrator describes the beautiful sounds and smells of everyday life in Baghdad. The protagonist's response to this smell indicates deep connections between sensory experiences and their ancestors. "Shut his eyes for a moment" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 5), he feels comfort and safety in what he saw and felt. "Gravelly clank of a clay water flask, the tittering of gossip, or wafts of earthy

tea"(Izzidien, 2018, p. 5), indicates that the indigenous Iraqi people have a deep spiritual and experiential connection with their land and heritage. These are considered a source of his strength and aspiration. All these are part of the cultural heritage of the Iraqi people.

According to indigenous scholars Battiste and Henderson (2000), ecological understanding promotes a perception of the living "natural" environment. It conveys a connection with the land, knowledge, and various aspects of views and goals. The indigenous order, awareness, and tradition are influenced and maintained by natural forces and the interplay of their evolving manifestations. This is embodied when Ahmed begins singing well-known tunes, and people make fun of him, except for a woman who approaches him and calls him by his name, Ahmed. Then Ahmed wakes up to the sound of a hoopoe. The whole family gathers, filled with love, laughter, and tenderness. "It was early one morning that Ahmad awoke to a hoopoe's call. It sounded as if it were hooting right beside his eardrum, singing him awake from his pillow" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 10). Izzidien depicts a deep connection of indigenous people to traditional ecological knowledge, which is the main element of indigenous ecocritical theory, which Berkes defines in his book *Sacred Ecology* as "cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings with one another and with their environment" (p. 7). Ahmed woke up or response to the sound of the hoopoe, signifying an intimate relationship between the human and natural world because this bird has profound cultural and ecological importance in many indigenous societies. In indigenous societies, this bird is used as spiritual guidance. It symbolizes wisdom, guidance, and human involvement or connection with nature.

Throughout the novel, Ahmed visited Dawood in his luxurious house, "Welcome, welcome," said Dawood ... his neighbor's house was: wooden shanasheel were dotted around the exterior, and alabaster arches striped with blue led to an inner shaded courtyard, overlooked by a long oak balcony." (Izzidien, 2018, p.15) which is in the form of a traditional Baghdadi building, with Shanashel, Marmaria Arches. This emphasizes architectural elements deeply rooted in regional traditions. All the natural objects in Dawood's house reflect a historical and environmental connection to indigenous building techniques in Iraq. These structures are not only aesthetically pleasing but also functional, designed to regulate temperature and provide shade in hot climates, demonstrating traditional ecological knowledge. As Berkes (2018) mentions that "It is also noted that TEK is a 'way of life'; rather than being just the knowledge of how to live, it is the actual living of that life" (p. 8), which means that not only to live in harmony with nature but also make this knowledge more applicable in daily practices, living and action. Dawood warns Ahmed that the Ottoman army may search for him because of his disappearance.

Moreover, the indigenous Eco critical theory reveals how war and colonialism affect emotional and spiritual connections to the land. For example, Dabria's statement, "I'm so happy that you're back, Ahmad, but I'm always, always afraid that you'll be lost again," (Izzidien, 2018, p. 20) losing her husband can be interpreted as losing land, culture and identity and also this loss is not only personal anxiety but also a broader reflection on the loss of land, culture, and knowledge by indigenous peoples due to colonial and military upheavals. Under these circumstances, Ahmed goes to the palm grove to cry and express his sadness silently without anyone seeing him "Ahmad would go to the forest of palm trees in his garden, weave his way to a place of solace, and when he was sure he was alone..... submitting to the shadows in his soul in a silent weep" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 50). Palm Grove has a powerful setting and symbol of cultural heritage and the relationship between people and their land. The palm trees are deeply tied to Iraqi identity because the Iraqi people care deeply about growing palm trees, which have been passed down to them through generations. Palms symbolize the strength and continuity of the Iraqi people despite war and destruction surrounding them. According to Berto (2014), exposure to the natural environment enhances mood by reducing negative influences, such as stress, thereby reducing negative emotional states while simultaneously enhancing pleasant feelings. Natural environments provide therapeutic effects on three emotional dimensions: pleasant feelings, anger, aggression, and fear. The association between the environment and emotions leads individuals to evaluate natural environments based on their ability to regulate moods.

Meanwhile, Emad and Youssef also fix a guffa (coracle) in an attempt to make Dawood's daughters happy. A guffa (coracle) represents the deep-rooted cultural heritage of Iraq. It was used for centuries along the Tigris and Euphrates, symbolizing the traditional life of Iraqi people before the war. Its presence signifies not only a physical means of transport but also a metaphor for survival and resilience.

Throughout the novel, Ahmed struggles with doubts about independence, but ultimately decides to join the British army in order to liberate Baghdad. On the other hand, Debriya finds comfort in the beautiful nature and finds peace in the difficult circumstances and destruction. When Ahmed goes to fight with the British against the Ottomans, Debriya lights a candle and floats it on the Tigris River every Friday and prays for his safety whenever, "Ahmad was away, Dabriya would light a candle each Friday." (Izzidien, 2018, p. 56-57). Emad meets Debriya at the river while she is performing her rituals. Dabriya, like any indigenous wife, performs rituals when her husband is away. Dabriya lights a candle every Friday and waits for it to float in the Tigris River. This act is an act of spiritual protection, resistance, and healing against colonialism. The act of lighting the candle and placing it in the Tigris River is intended to protect him from the dangers of colonialism. Dabriya uses her ancestral knowledge and spiritual practice to create protection for Ahmed. Dabriya's character is closely tied to the land, as

she embodies the knowledge passed down through generations about survival, tradition, resistance, and preserving the lives of her family members.

Ahmed's primary motivation for joining the British army was to secure a better future for his family and Baghdad's independence. His friend Salim's motivations are more personal; he hopes the war will end quickly so he can marry his beloved Aisha. Aisha is a smart, independent woman. She represented resistance to colonial rule through her deep connection to local natural resources and cultural heritage. One day, she goes shopping for ingredients for her beauty business in Basra. Aisha discusses with the merchant Abdul Majeed how the British colonialists romanticized their city, "YOU'VE HEARD WHAT THE ENGLISH are calling it now?" Ayesha asked, lowering a sack of sugar onto her cart. "The Venice of the East." She sniggered" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 81). Aisha criticizes British colonialism and finds this term arrogant and ridiculous. Aisha's rejection of the nickname "Venice of the East," imposed by British colonialism, is a strong rejection and criticism of the colonial policies that reshaped the local landscapes and cultures of Iraq. As the British impose a foreign identity on the city and consider it a tourist city, they create a cultural superiority for themselves. Her irony and resistance distinguish Aisha as an indigenous person who appreciates her indignity and the heritage of her people and rejects the policies imposed by colonialism on her homeland, and this is what the indigenous ecocriticism focuses on.

After the battle between the Ottoman and British armies, Ahmed feels sad about the death of his friend Salim in the failed battle of the Arab Revolt. Ahmed faces resistance when he wants to bury his friend Salim and the rest of his comrades and Ottoman enemies. After that, Ahmed buries his friend Salim silently and somberly. "AHMAD FACED MANY PROTESTS WHEN he insisted that the dead on both sides be buried, and more still when he insisted that any of the enemy's individual keepsakes be salvaged and returned to the Ottomans to identify their dead" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 111). Ahmed's insistence on burying the dead from both sides is a form of resistance, cultural preservation, and moral commitment. This practice is deeply rooted in indigenous and local traditions. Ahmed, as an indigenous person, could not leave the dead unburied, but rather acted according to the customs and traditions rooted in his blood and insisted on burying the dead and valuing them. This behaviour is considered a form of resistance to the colonial policy that aimed to strip the indigenous person of his customs, traditions, and dignity, and which did not give importance and value to the dead in order to remove their cultural identity. Additionally, this action reflects that, according to indigenous people, land is something sacred, where the souls are preserved to rest, rather than being a passive space, which is a key concept in Indigenous Eco-critical theory.

Ahmed deeply regrets his participation in the violence in Baghdad with the British. He also regrets his belief in the British promises of independence for the Arab lands and the establishment of "Baghdad for all Baghdadis"; he thinks that he will gain independence from Ottoman rule with the help of the British. But he is betrayed by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Frantz Fanon (1963) discusses this policy. He said that "the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness." (p. 211). He criticizes the ideologies that colonialists use to justify their control over colonized nations. Colonialism imagines itself as a benevolent force that brings light to dark or uncivilized societies. Colonists justified their control as a necessary intervention. For this reason, Ahmed returns to his family. His home, which had been filled with joy, humor, and hope, is now filled with silence and sadness, with news that: "So when, in late 1917, Ahmad sat at home and opened a newspaper to read of the secret pact between the French and the British to divide Arab lands between them" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 201). The narrator portrays colonial legacies more effectively, which are considered one of the most important basic principles of the theory of indigenous ecocriticism. One of these colonial legacies imposed by the colonial powers is the division of the Arab world into regions between Britain and France, ignoring the cultural, environmental, and historical ties of the indigenous peoples to their lands. This agreement embodies the restructuring of the Arab countries. This division was not only a political act, but was also an environmental, cultural, and social separation. Ahmed's reaction to this division indicates his spiritual and physical connection to the land, and that his suffering is not only political, but also national, cultural, and spiritual. Meanwhile, the British attempted to form a mandate over Iraq by uniting the provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul into one country. "AHMAD AWOKE TO NEWS ONE day in late 1919 that the British were attempting to create a Mandate of Iraq, drawing together the three separate vilayets of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul in a new country, ruled centrally by the British" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 213). This quote provides insight into the British Mandate of Iraq from the perspective of indigenous ecocriticism. The Mandate was an imposed political system that aimed to arbitrarily and centrally divide Iraq, disrupt indigenous ways, and sever historical ties between people and their land. It also ignored indigenous spatial knowledge. Such as spatial relationship is deeply rooted in ecological, spiritual, and cultural systems. For indigenous peoples, the Mandate was not only a political imposition, but also an environmental, historical, social, and cultural one. Since each Iraqi city has its own origins, history, culture, and cultural heritage, applying the Mandate system to these cities is considered a disregard for their civilizations, origins, and history.

Ahmed also observes how British rule introduced lies and replaced traditional values with deceit and cunning, which angered the people of Baghdad. Both the Shia and Sunni communities gathered in an important meeting at the Kadhimiya mosque during Friday prayers. The two leaders, Jaafar and Ali, announced the crucial matters they needed to do, one of which was "They presume us to be uncivilized," Jafar called out slowly, with almost

effortless volume. "We have heard what they call us— 'dirty, savage budoos.'" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 257). This discourse is a form of colonial resistance, and the colonialists' labeling of indigenous peoples as dirty is a justification for dominating them and destroying their indigenous ecosystems, their land-related ways of life, and their ancestral customs and traditions. The colonialists' use of the name "savage budoos" to refer to indigenous peoples is intended to remove their cultural identity. This conforms with what Edward Said explained in his book *Orientalism* (1979). He said that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself against Off the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self." (p. 3). He means that Europe constructed its historical and cultural identity by positioning itself in contrast to the Orient. It portrayed the Orient as alien, backward, and irrational. In this claim, Europe allowed itself to be seen as advanced, rational, and civilized. Europe used the Orient as a symbolic space to construct its own identity. This claim was not only a means of defining the Orient, but also a means of shaping the self of Europe. By controlling and representing the Orient in this way, Europe reinforced its own narrative of dominance, modernity, and enlightenment.

Jaafar's statement that "We do not have to prove to them that we are not. We owe them nothing," (Izzidien, 2018, p. 257), is a fundamental declaration of indigenous independence and their disinterest in colonial claims against them, and it also indicates that they have deep connections to their cultures and spiritual connections to their land. This discourse also shows that decolonization is not only military, but also cognitive, cultural, environmental, and traditional. It also suggests that indigenous peoples possess the capacity to resist all forms of colonialism.

By the spring of 1920, hatred of British rule, rooted in broken promises and oppressive British rule, spread throughout Iraq, and resistance movements were unified throughout Iraq. The month of Ramadan became a period of spiritual and revolutionary awakening. Ramadan is a time of spiritual, social, and environmental renewal that brings people together, helping them become more aware of their connections with others, nature, and self-discipline. From an Indigenous ecocritical point of view, Ramadan is a period of rebirth that works with indigenous beliefs that stress connection and the well-being of all people.

Ahmed took advantage of this situation and gave a speech in which he condemned British colonialism and exposed their betrayal of promises and their treatment and marginalization of Arabs, where they viewed Arabs as inferior. Also, during the meeting, his speech emphasized unity among Iraqis of all backgrounds, Shiites, Sunnis, Jews, and Christians, and Ahmed also called through his speech for the restoration of dignity and freedom: "Ahmad took a gulp of air. "It is time to reclaim your dignity" (Izzidien, 2018, p. 278). The term reclaiming "dignity" refers to a dignity that has been taken away or suppressed by colonialism for an extended period of history. In the context of indigenous ecocriticism, reclaiming dignity is not just about personal or national pride; it is about reclaiming connections to land, cultural traditions, and environmental sovereignty disrupted by colonial rule. In this context, the act of reclaiming dignity is linked to the reclaiming of self-governance over land, ecological knowledge, and the rejection of colonial control over indigenous landscapes and cultural identity. These were words that resonated powerfully with the Iraqi masses.

Protests and resistance spread rapidly throughout Iraq. Ahmed's family also took an active part in these protests and demonstrations, each family member expressing their own way of participating in the protest. Dabriya raised her fist in protest, Yusuf stomped the ground in anger, Emad openly expressed his feelings, and Ahmed chose to defend his family and values rather than return to armed conflict. Ahmed's efforts represent the real struggle of indigenous people to maintain cultural and environmental sovereignty in the face of colonial rule. This regime is not only about political freedom but also about preserving traditional ways of life linked to the customs and traditions inherited from his ancestors. The character of Ahmed in the novel illustrates how land is an essential part of cultural survival, and Ahmed's resistance can be seen as an effort to reclaim personal, national, and indigenous identity.

Izzidein masterfully depicts the accuracy of Ottoman and British colonization. She depicted them as they disrupted Iraq's ecological and cultural systems, treating the land as a commodity to be exploited rather than a homeland with its history and culture. Deeply rooted in her heritage, she portrays Ahmed as fighting against their actions. His fighting was not only for political independence but also for reclaiming the land and its use by the indigenous people who have lived on and with it for generations. However, by adhering to the customs and traditions they inherited from their ancestors and preserving the indigenous practices, Ahmed's family ensured that their identity remained intact despite the colonial efforts to suppress it. This is what indigenous ecocriticism emphasizes. It emphasizes that reestablishing an indigenous relationship with nature is essential. Identity cannot be separated from the land.

1.3 CONCLUSION

In *The Watermelon Boys*, Ruqaya Izzidien focuses heavily on traditions and portrays the environment of Iraq, including historical, religious, and family traditions, which play a fundamental role in steadfastness and resistance against colonialism. Izzidien excelled in her portrayal of characters and events and her accuracy in narrating history. She was more successful in portraying Ahmed's family, which represents the indigenous Iraqi cultural and environmental identity as well as a form of extended resistance to cultural heritage. Their traditions, customs, and spiritual connection to the land they defend serve as a form of decolonization against the British occupation that

sought to remove the indigenous Iraqi identities. Despite colonial upheavals, Ahmed and his family have deep roots in agricultural life and generational knowledge of the land. Traditional ecological knowledge is not just a survival mechanism, but a form of resistance against colonialism. By preserving traditional practices, Ahmed's family refuses to be integrated into the colonial economic structures imposed by the British. So, the details, the events, symbols, and the setting prove that the novel is a historical narrative of war and nationalism as well as a literary reclamation of indigenous people their identity and their relationship with land.

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