

THE ROLE OF NATURE IN PERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALING IN BACKMAN'S *MY GRANDMOTHER ASKED ME TO TELL YOU SHE'S SORRY*

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Abstract

*Amidst growing concern for mental health, literature offers a unique space to explore how individuals cope with emotional stress. This study investigates how nature—both real and imagined—functions as a healing force in Fredrik Backman's novel *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*. This research aims to analyze the representation of the human-nature relationship and its role in the emotional recovery of the protagonist, Elsa, using Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocritical framework. Using qualitative textual analysis, this study identifies two forms of nature in the novel: real settings such as forests, snow, and the sea, and imaginative nature such as *Miamas* and *the Almost Awake Land*. These environments act as active agents offering protection, fostering resilience, and encouraging self-reflection. The contrast between real landscapes and symbolic fantasy spaces reveals how both can promote healing while conveying values of courage, hope, and ecological awareness. The findings suggest that literature can bridge personal emotional recovery with environmental ethics, inspiring readers to view nature as a shared habitat and integrate relationships with nature into everyday life.*

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Emotional healing, Human-nature Connection, Literary ecology, Fantasy landscapes*

INTRODUCTION

Reports of students experiencing mental and emotional disorders due to frequent stress and anxiety are increasing, with major causes including lack of emotional support, academic pressure, and negative social surroundings such as bullying (García et al., 2024; Hosseinkhani et al., 2020; Ma, 2023). These condition can aggravate anxiety, depression, and hinder character development (Bratman et al., 2019). Studies consistently show that interaction with natural

environments—parks, forests, and blue-green spaces—reduces stress, improves mood, and enhances psychological well-being (Coventry et al., 2021; Lawton et al., 2017; Roslan et al., 2024). Nature's restorative qualities, including calming sounds and visual stimuli, can improve focus and reduce overstimulation (Grabowska-Chenczke et al., 2022), making it a relevant factor in contemporary mental health discourse.

The link between nature and healing is not only supported by psychological and environmental studies but also deeply rooted in literature. Authors have long used natural settings as metaphors for emotional recovery and self-discovery. Thoreau's *Walden* presents nature as a means of finding life's meaning, while Burnett's *The Secret Garden* uses a hidden garden as a symbol of psychological and physical healing (Demnitz-King et al., 2022; Roslan et al., 2024). As presented by Glotfelty & Fromm (1996), ecocriticism in literary theory provides a lens through which to analyze the interactions between humans and nature in both real and imagined environments, highlighting the ways in which environmental representation may reflect and impact emotional states.

Beyond psychological benefits, various studies have revealed that a person's mental health can be significantly enhanced by the natural components of their surroundings. Plant extracts may enhance mood (Hwang et al., 2019), and medicinal plants have shown efficacy in promoting both physical and mental well-being (Agyare et al., 2016; Murgia et al., 2020). Natural resources with a strong antioxidant characteristics were found by Islam et al. (2024) to have the ability to promote emotional health and hasten the healing of wounds. Similarly, Rossi & Marrazzo (2021) emphasized that natural biomaterials contribute not only to physical recovery but also to emotional balance, reinforcing the concept of self-healing through interaction with nature. Conversely, disconnection from natural environments can worsen mental health (Wise et al., 2022). Istikomayanti & Mitasari (2021), Putra (2023), Suharyanisa et al. (2022), and Yudiyanto et al. (2022) all found that fictional narratives that explore emotional connections with nature can enhance ecological sensitivity, while (Yoshida et al., 2022) found that ethnobotanical approaches can bridge generational knowledge and promote physical-mental balance.

Fredrik Backman's *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry* exemplifies the convergence of ecological imagery with emotional rejuvenation. The novel chronicles Elsa, a young girl navigating sorrow, bullying, and social isolation, who discovers solace in both the tangible natural world and the imaginary Land-of-Almost-Awake conceived by her grandmother (Backman, 2015). These creative environments, abundant in natural symbolism, serve as emotional sanctuaries where Elsa confronts pain and cultivates resilience. The coexistence of tangible and imagined nature offers a rich basis for ecocritical analysis, emphasizing literature's capacity to portray healing beyond just realistic settings.

While certain research have explored Elsa's psychology (Gultom et al., 2024), insufficient focus has been directed into the functioning of Backman's amalgamation of nature and fantasy as a healing mechanism inside the tale. This underexamined aspect is important as it embodies wider interdisciplinary perspectives on nature's healing function in mental health (Dean et al., 2018; Ebrahimpour et al., 2021). This study employs ecocritical analysis of Backman's work to fill a void in literary and mental health scholarship, demonstrating how fictional interactions with nature—whether actual or imagined—can exemplify coping mechanisms for emotional pain.

This study employs Glotfelty's ecocritical framework to examine the depictions of nature in Backman's novel and their significance in Elsa's emotional recovery. The research examines the ramifications of these representations for comprehending human-nature relationships during periods of psychological distress. The novel serves as a locus where ecological consciousness and emotional healing converge, underscoring the significance of nature-focused tales amid contemporary mental health issues.

This study contends that *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry* illustrates how the interaction between nature and fantasy serves as a potent mechanism for personal and emotional rejuvenation. This research elucidates how Backman's narrative corresponds with literary tradition and empirical evidence regarding nature's advantages, thereby enhancing ecocritical scholarship and emphasizing the persistent significance of environmental connection in cultivating resilience, whether encountered in reality or within the realms of storytelling.

This study focuses on three main areas: describing the representations of nature and fantasy elements depicted in the novel, analysing the depiction of nature as a healing element both personally and emotionally, and evaluating the real-life implications of the novel's depiction of nature as a healing force.

METHOD

This qualitative study applies an ecocriticism framework, specifically Glotfelty's approach, to analyze the role of natural elements in Fredrik Backman's *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*. The novel was purposefully selected for its unique integration of nature, fantasy, and psychological depth, offering a rich context to explore how literary landscapes contribute to emotional healing.

Primary data consisted of textual evidence from the novel, while secondary data came from peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and credible online sources. All references were screened for reliability, prioritizing scholarly works and cross-checked against similar studies. Data analysis combined thematic coding and narrative analysis to identify recurring patterns in the portrayal of nature as setting, memory-holder, and healing space. Interpretations were grounded in ecocriticism to connect environmental imagery with character development and emotional resilience.

Methodological triangulation, peer debriefing, and an audit trail were employed to maintain validity and transparency, ensuring the findings reflect both literary depth and methodological rigor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Nature in Stories

Nature as Memory and Emotional Connection

The presence of nature in literature is often a space for writers to voice deeper meanings about life, emotions, and the human healing process. In Fredrik Backman's *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, natural elements not only serve as a backdrop, but also as a representation of the human emotional journey. This study explores how Backman incorporates elements of nature into the story, and how it contributes to the personal and

emotional healing process of the characters in the story. The representation of nature in the story is depicted in the following excerpt:

"There's something special about a grandmother's house. You never forget how it smells." (p. 23)

Backman evokes the smell of a grandmother's house, a detail "never forgotten" (p. 23), to capture how scent preserves memory and emotional ties. In Glotfelty's ecocritical view, the home functions as an ecological space—part of the environment that holds sensory and emotional histories. Here, the domestic space becomes a site of warmth, safety, and identity-building, illustrating how even human-made environments are deeply connected to the healing qualities of nature.

Imagined Nature as Healing Space

The fairy tale in this story is also an important form of representation of nature, as illustrated in the following quote:

"Miamas is Elsa and Granny's secret kingdom. It is one of six kingdoms in the Land-of-Almost-Awake. Granny came up with it when Elsa was small and Mum and Dad had just got divorced and Elsa was afraid of sleeping because she'd read on the Internet about children who died in their sleep. Granny is good at coming up with things." (p. 11)

The quote above describes *Miamas* as an imaginative kingdom created by Granny to help Elsa deal with the anxiety caused by her parents' divorce and the fear of death. *Miamas* becomes a secret place that gives Elsa a sense of security and acceptance, as well as an escape from painful reality. Although fictional, *Miamas* reflects elements of real nature such as the forest, sea, sky, and mythological creatures, which serve as symbols of calmness and emotional stability. In Glotfelty's perspective, *Miamas* represent humanity's relationship with nature in an imaginative form, where nature plays an active role in fulfilling the characters' emotional needs. This reinforces the view that the environment, both real and fictional, has an important role in shaping human meaning and experience in literary works. Another representation of nature is also depicted in the quote below:

"Granny says that the kingdom has been called Miamas for an eternity of at least ten thousand fairy tales, but Elsa knows that Granny only made this up because Elsa couldn't say "pajamas" when she was small and used to say "mjamas" instead. Except of course Granny insists that she never made up a bloody thing and Miamas and the other five kingdoms in the Land-of-Almost-Awake are not only real, but actually far more real than the world we're in now..." (p. 12)

Through the quote above, Backman presents *Miamas* as a representation of nature in the form of a fantasy world full of emotional and spiritual meaning. In Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocriticism view, *Miamas* shows how humans especially children, create a deep connection with the environment as a form of psychological protection. Emotionally, the nature of this place is more "real" because it is able to accommodate trauma, love, and escape from a hostile environment. Thus, *Miamas* and other kingdoms are not just fairy tales, but reflections of how nature is an important element in the process of healing and identity formation.

Nature as an Escape and Emotional Healing

Boundless Nature as Refuge

In the novel *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry* by Fredrik Backman, nature is presented not only as a backdrop, but also as an entity that interacts with the emotions of the characters, especially the main protagonist named Elsa. The representation of nature in this story shows how natural elements such as parks, trees, and open spaces serve as a place of escape and emotional healing for humans who are struggling with various emotional and social challenges. Like the quote below:

"Elsa assumes this is why Granny likes the kingdom of Miamas so much: you can't cross the line in Miamas, because the kingdom is endless." (p. 35)

In the quote above, *Miamas* is an imaginary, borderless kingdom created by Elsa's grandmother as a sanctuary from real-world pain and societal pressures. Its boundlessness symbolizes ultimate freedom, offering a contrast to the restrictions and emotional burdens of reality. From Glotfelty's ecocritical perspective, *Miamas* represents the psychological need for a vast, safe space for healing. Literature, in this view, is deeply connected to the physical and symbolic environment, shaping human emotional and spiritual understanding. The natural elements within *Miamas*—such as forests, skies, and animals—serve not just as settings, but as meaningful symbols of escape and comfort. For Elsa, who endures trauma from her parents' divorce, her grandmother's death, and bullying, *Miamas* provides a space for emotional refuge and healing. Its infinite nature reflects the soul's need for connection with nature to recover, grow, and regain a sense of safety lost in the real world. Other quotes are:

"Miploris is the most beautiful of all the kingdoms of the Land-of-Almost Awake. The trees sing there, the grass massages the soles of your feet, and there's always a smell of fresh-baked bread." (p. 210)

The quote describes *Miploris* as the most beautiful kingdom in the *Land-of-Almost-Awake*, the fantasy world created by Elsa and her grandmother. In the description, nature appears warm and alive—the trees sing, the grass massages the feet, and the air smells of warm bread—not just an aesthetic setting, but a therapeutic space. Based on Glotfelty's theory, nature in literature should be seen as an active agent that affects the characters' emotions. *Miploris* shows how nature provides physical and emotional comfort through sensory elements that respond lovingly to humans. This reinforces the view that nature in this world is not passive, but welcoming and healing. In this context, nature functions as a symbol of emotional ideality – a place where Elsa finds beauty and serenity that she cannot find in the real world. Nature becomes a space of escape and recovery that touches the character's body and soul deeply. The quote below also depicts nature as an emotional healer:

"Elsa lies in the snow, trying to catch her breath while the cold stamps on her chest." (p. 75)

The quote depicts nature through the elements of snow and cold that physically and emotionally affect Elsa, who lies struggling to breathe. Nature here appears as an active and oppressive force, different from the gentle nature in imaginative worlds such as *Miamas* or *Miploris*. According to Glotfelty, nature in literature is not always present as a healer; it can also reflect a character's inner distress or conflict. Snow and cold become metaphors for Elsa's emotional suffering—such as fear, isolation, and inner distress. The cold that "crushes her chest"

represents a real mental burden. This is in line with Glotfelty's view that in literature, the physical environment (such as weather and landscape) plays an active role in shaping a character's emotional experience, rather than just being a static neutral setting. The role of nature in emotional escape and healing is also found in the following quote:

"Granny has told her thousands of stories from Miamas about pursuit and war. About evading shadows when they're on your tail, how to lay traps for them and how to beat them with distraction." (p. 80)

The quote illustrates how *Miamas*, the fantasy world created by Granny, serves as a metaphorical space to express themes of struggle, fear, and courage. Elements like shadows, traps, and diversions symbolize Elsa's internal conflicts, such as anxiety, loneliness, and the trauma of her parents' divorce. According to Glotfelty's ecocriticism, nature functions not merely as a backdrop but as a space for psychological reflection. *Miamas*, though fictional, features natural elements—like forests and shadows—that mirror Elsa's emotional turmoil. Granny uses this imaginative setting to help Elsa face her fears and develop emotional strength. Each symbol—shadows as fear, traps as coping mechanisms, and diversions as trauma responses—supports Elsa's emotional journey.

Nature as Symbol of Acceptance and Belonging

Through this symbolic landscape, nature becomes a tool for healing. This aligns with Glotfelty's idea that environments, whether real or imagined, play a crucial role in fostering emotional growth and transformation in literature. Other quotes are listed below:

"All fairy stories take their life from the fact of being different. 'Only different people change the world,' Granny used to say. 'No one normal has ever changed a crapping thing.'" (p. 85)

The quote highlights how fairy tale worlds like *Miamas* and *The Land-of-Almost-Awake*, though not explicitly mentioning forests or seas, are rich in magical natural elements and serve as imaginative refuges. These spaces are created for those seen as "different," offering emotional escape and healing for marginalized or distressed characters. In these fantasy realms, nature becomes more than a setting—it symbolizes acceptance, restoration, and freedom from real-world social constraints. Through these imaginative landscapes, characters find hope, empowerment, and a sense of belonging. According to Granny, such worlds provide meaning for those who struggle to fit into societal norms. Nature within these stories thus functions as a metaphor for inner healing and the potential for social transformation. Additionally, it acts as a bridge between memory and emotional understanding, reinforcing nature's essential role in personal growth and emotional recovery.

In *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, nature is not only a background but also something that shapes how Elsa feels. The imaginary land of *Miamas*, described as endless, gives her a safe place away from problems like bullying, sadness, and her parents' divorce. Its wide and open space shows complete freedom, which fits Glotfelty's idea that stories can show our need for safe and open places to heal. The forests, skies, and animals there are not just for decoration. They bring comfort and hope.

Another place, *Miploris*, is shown with warm and friendly details such as trees that sing, grass that feels soft, and air that smells like bread. These details make nature seem like

something that can help people feel better in body and mind. According to Glotfelty, this shows that nature in stories can take part in helping people heal.

Not all nature in the book feels gentle. In one scene, Elsa lies in the snow, trying to breathe, while the cold presses on her chest. This is very different from the warmth of *Miamas* and *Miploris*. It shows that nature can care for people but can also cause pain. Here, the snow matches Elsa's feelings of fear, loneliness, and sadness.

Granny's stories in *Miamas* also use nature as symbols such as forests, shadows, and traps to talk about fear and strength. Shadows stand for fear, traps show how people try to cope, and tricks show ways to survive hard times. Through these stories, Elsa learns to face problems and turns these imaginary places into lessons for her own growth.

Real Life Implications of Nature as a Healing Force

Ecological Awareness and Nature Conservation in Literary Contexts

The healing relationship between humans and nature encourages humans to no longer see nature as a resource that can be exploited, but as a living entity that needs to be preserved for emotional, spiritual, and environmental harmony. This symbolic role is reflected in the following scene from *Miamas*, where imagination and nature converge as a source of refuge:

"And then she thinks about Granny's stories from Miamas, about how one of the princes once evaded a whole flock of pursuing shadows by riding into the darkest forest in the Land-of-Almost-Awake. Shadows are the foulest foulnesses ever to live in any fantasy, but even shadows feel fear, said Granny. Even those bastards are afraid of something. Because even shadows have a sense of imagination." (p. 81)

The above quote depicts a story from the imaginative world of *Miamas*, where a prince flees into the darkest forest to escape the evil shadows. Interestingly, even scary creatures like the shadow are afraid of the power of the forest and imagination. In ecopsychological terms, forests in literature often function as archetypal spaces of protection and renewal. In this narrative, they are not merely mysterious settings but sacred domains whose moral and spiritual symbolism reinforces human resilience. This depiction aligns with broader ecological psychology, suggesting that natural environments can function as symbolic protectors in human consciousness. Building upon this notion of nature as a guardian, the following section explores how the narrative promotes the view of nature as a shared habitat for diverse forms of life. Fairy tales like this serve as a bridge that connects human imagination and emotions with nature, thus helping to build ecological awareness from an early age.

Recognizing Nature as a Shared Habitat for All Living Beings

One important aspect of the human connection to nature in the context of emotional healing is the increased awareness that nature is a shared living space for many beings, not just humans. In the healing process involving nature, humans realize the existence of other living beings, for example animals and plants that have equally important roles and rights to live in the ecosystem. This awareness brings humans to a new understanding that a balanced life cannot be achieved if humans constantly put themselves at the center. These values are symbolically reflected in the fairytale world created by Elsa or Granny, where the diversity of creatures and fairness are the foundation of a harmonious life. As reflected in the quote below:

"The Girl Who Said No" was one of the first stories Elsa ever heard from the Land-of-Almost-Awake. It was about the Queen of Miaudacas, one of the six kingdoms. In the beginning the queen had been a courageous and fair-minded princess very much liked by all, but unfortunately she grew up and became a frightened adult, as adults tend to be. She started loving efficiency and avoiding conflict. As adults do." (p. 110)

The quote describes a character in the *Land-of-Almost-Awake*—a brave princess who, over time, becomes an adult focused on avoiding conflict and prioritizing efficiency. This shift reflects how adult perspectives often move from curiosity and fairness to pragmatism that disregards human values and diversity. In an ecological context, such efficiency can harm the environment, as it tends to simplify the world for human benefit while neglecting animals, plants, and ecosystems. The story's world of *Miaudacas* initially represents fairness and harmony among all living beings, but is later disrupted by a human mindset centered on comfort and self-interest. This transformation mirrors real-world environmental degradation driven by development. The narrative encourages readers to recognize that nature is a shared space, not solely for humans. It urges a return to fairness and ecological balance, promoting respect and coexistence with all forms of life for a more just and harmonious world.

A Paradigm Shift in Literature

This paradigm shift in literature presents nature as an active subject that plays an important role in the character's inner development, not just a backdrop. In the world of *Land-of-Almost-Awake*, nature, such as the darkest forest, becomes a protector and a source of spiritual strength that helps people face their biggest fears and shows that peace and strength can grow when spending quiet time in nature. The story "*The Girl Who Said No*" depicts the change in human values from courage and openness to fear of conflict and over-emphasis on efficiency, reflecting the modern tendency to ignore the balance of nature in favor of convenience.

Literature reminds human of the importance of respecting nature as a shared living space worth preserving. Backman through his fairy tales teaches that imagining nature as a living being is the first step towards ecological empathy and responsibility. Nature always communicates through elements such as trees, seas, and forests that hold answers. The moral is that nature does not belong only to humans, but is the home of all creatures, and adults need to open their hearts to nature again so that the values of courage, love and awareness can be passed on to the younger generation. In a world full of fear and busyness, returning to nature is not an act of withdrawal, but a means of personal growth.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that in *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, Fredrik Backman presents nature—both real and imagined—not merely as a backdrop but as an active agent in the protagonist's emotional recovery. Through Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocriticism framework, the analysis revealed that natural landscapes such as *Miamas*, *Miploris*, and the *Land-of-Almost-Awake* serve as therapeutic spaces where Elsa processes grief, confronts fear, and nurtures resilience. The dual function of nature—as a source of nurture in creative realms and a source of challenge in reality—reflects the intricacies of human emotional experience,

reinforcing literature's capacity to connect psychological healing with environmental awareness. This directly fulfills the research objective by demonstrating how Backman's integration of nature enhances character development and ecological awareness.

Furthermore, the results possess broader ramifications beyond literary examination. The novel encourages readers to reimagine their relationship with nature, viewing it as a shared habitat for all living beings and as a source of spiritual, emotional, and communal renewal. Such representation can inspire educators, mental health practitioners, and environmental advocates to integrate nature-based approaches into healing, education, and conservation efforts. By portraying forests, seas, and other natural elements as sentient partners in human well-being, Backman's work contributes to a broader discourse on ecological empathy and the moral responsibility to protect the natural world.

This study elucidates the symbolic and therapeutic significance of nature in Backman's narrative, however it possesses limits. This approach focuses on a single literary text, which may limit the applicability of its insights to other works or cultural contexts. Future studies could expand this scope by comparing other narratives across genres, cultures, or age demographics to investigate the emergence of analogous patterns of nature-mediated healing. Further research could use reader response methodologies to evaluate the emotional and cognitive engagement of diverse audiences with nature-centered narratives. Ultimately, this research affirms that returning to nature—whether through real encounters or literary imagination—remains a timeless and transformative pathway for personal growth and ecological awareness.

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