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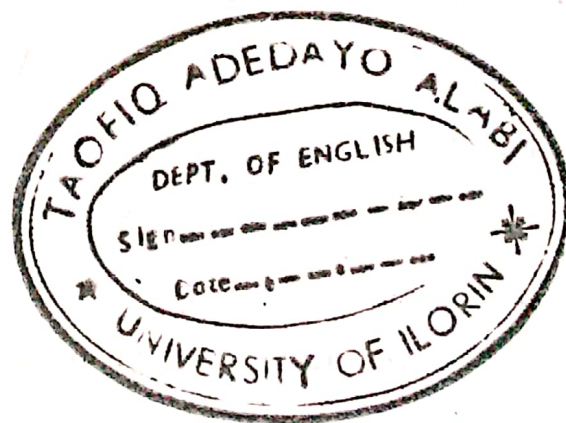
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د. حسنة فتميلايو أبوبكر-حامد و مؤسّصا لـ أيسنؤبوا

POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICAL READING OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *WEEP NOT, CHILD*

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Abstract

Weep Not, Child by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is a prose that carries an extensive expression of nature and its value to the Kenyan. Land and its value to the Kenyan (African) is a predominant environmental discourse in the text. This discourse is an attempt to show the writer's sincere intention and awareness of nature, particularly land, in the life of Kenyans. This paper brings to the fore that, amongst all other focal issues such as betrayal and alienation, Ngugi had a peculiarly strong theme that depicts the connection of the people with their environment, and the interrelationship therein. Situating the study within the ambits of postcolonial criticism, this paper reveals the extent of eco-consciousness of *Weep Not, Child* as Ngugi's modest contribution to show how nature is revered within the cultural and historical spheres of a people (the Kenyans / Africans).

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Ecocritics, Environmental discourse, land resources, Kenyans

Introduction

Postcolonial and Ecocritical studies have been on the rise for decades as separate critical endeavours. However, the blend of postcolonial ecocriticism as a variant of ecocritical studies with similar interest is regarded as a recent branch of literary studies/ criticism that adopts a nature-centred approach to the study of literary texts in the context of post-coloniality. Thus, postcolonial ecocriticism is a way of thinking that seeks to understand how top-level, elite-driven processes like (neo) colonialism, capitalism, international development, interstate alliances, or the centralisation or devolution of power are connected to the spaces, in which people live and act, while at the same time, recognising that the reclamation of space, land and resources is a key part of the process of peoples' liberation. It consciously understands "spaces" as broadly as possible, taking into account both the physical and metaphysical spaces with which humans interact. It offers a comprehensive summary and intelligent analysis of concerns and debates that define the terrain between, and within fields it surveys, including: differences and potential connections between Northern and Southern environmentalisms, the ambiguous legacies of development, the problem of subaltern, the way genre determines the scope of the postcolonial and ecocritical imagination, and the necessary tension between activism and aesthetics (Huggan & Tiffen, 2015). Ecocriticism as a literary study is yet to have a set of widely accepted creeds and principles. It should however, not be assumed that the study is stagnated in its process of development, rather interest in exploring it, and the research into its literary appreciation are steps in advancing the theory as a potent one.

Glotfelty and Harold (1996, p.xviii) define ecocriticism as the "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". Ecocriticism is a literary investigation preoccupied with how literature and literary activities shape perceptions of the environment, and how nature is perceived and managed within the cultural sphere of a people. It is important to also note that ecocriticism focuses on certain historically conditioned concepts and philosophical foundation of a people towards nature and the natural world. Lawrence Buell also defines ecocriticism, "as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to

environmentalist praxis" (Buell, 1995, p.430). Given the interest of this study, it is believed that African literature gives a concern about the experiences of the African, including his environment. Thus, it harnesses cultural, social and historical experiences of the Africans. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is among the African prolific writers that strive to write about the experiences of the Africans during and after colonialism, and criticises the effects it had on the Africans, particularly the flora and fauna, in their literary outputs. In *Weep Not, Child*, the novelist tells us about the effects of colonialism on the lives of the people of Kenya; and more importantly on the natural environment. As a postcolonialist, he tries to give a broader perspective to the cultural, social and historical lives of the people of Kenya, concerning their ancestral lands, how it defines them, and how it stands in opposition to colonialism and their quest and search for their lost identity. His concern about how the Kenyans are stripped of their inheritance (Land) is raised in the text. He creates the character Ngunjiri to show how helpless the Kenyan man is in the face of colonialism. In his novel, he craftily links the connection that existed between the people of Kenya to their environment (Land), and the separation that arose after the coming of the settlers. To him, the history of the people of Kenya is represented by colonialism, where the settlers took over their inheritance. He draws attention to how nature plays a pivotal role in the lives of the people. This search for the attainment of the lost identity of the Kenyans is exhibited through the Mau Mau revolt as a fight to take back their space and lands; and this is done through characters like Boro and Kori which he created in the text. Literatures from Kenya, in particular, have shown that the policy of land alienation has been the major trigger of war, destabilisation and victimisation of the youth physically and psychologically in East Africa. Thus, this paper is a part of critical response to the need for humans to understand their relationship with their natural world in this age of massive environmental degradation.

Focus of the Study

Colonialism and its attendant effects have created awareness on the need to examine the place of ecology in the cultural, economic and historical lives of people (the colonised). As espoused in *Postcolonial*

Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment (2001), global environmental issues cannot be separated from postcolonial issues of urbanisation, industrialisation and (nature) exploitation. In a much similar vein, this paper's exploration would be guided by salient questions raised in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Glotfelty and Harold, 1996) which the writers believe are germane to discourse in ecocritical inquiry. The first question is; how is the value of nature (land) represented in the text? Secondly, where is the environment placed in the power hierarchy? Thirdly, how do metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? Fourthly, in what ways has literacy itself affected human relationship with the natural world? Finally, how has the concept of wilderness changed over time?

Meanwhile, in the spirit of Greg's (2004, p.89), four approaches in the discourse of ecocriticism (i.e. "discursive construction", "aesthetic construction", "political construction" and "scientific construction") and for a defined scope, the discussion in this paper, would be structured into two sections; namely, (i) Representation of the Land, and (ii) Metaphor of Nature in the Novel.

Representation of the Land

Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Will Kymlicka and Benedict Anderson have presented the earth as the source of more than just basic human needs. In Fanon's (1961) words, the land provides not just bread, but also human dignity to a colonised people. However, these invocations of nature rarely address the ecological aspects of colonialism in detail; e.g. phenomena like the extraction of natural resources, the 'forced' changes in human and animal settlement patterns, and the dissolution of traditional means of arranging and using land. More often, "land" is reduced into an abstract, amorphous concept and blended with concepts like "the people," "the nation," and "the country."

In *Weep Not, Child*, the value of land to the Kenyans is a matter that goes to the very existence of the Kenyan (African) society. It is a matter of life and death; a matter of livelihood and heritage. This is because to a large extent, ownership of land is an existential issue to early societies. The value of land to the Kenyans is captured vividly in

the text, and this cannot be overemphasised. Ngugi wa Thiong'o makes it known to us that:

Any man who had land was considered rich. If a man had plenty of money, many cars but no land, he could never be counted as rich. A man who went with tattered clothes but had at least an acre of red earth was better off than the man with money (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.19).

It can therefore be argued that the human and the non-human (land, flora and fauna) elements of nature can never be separated. To the Kenyans, the non-human elements are interwoven with their very existence, such that one cannot exist without the other; thus, it defines who they are (their dignity as people), and stands in opposition to colonialism through the Mau Mau war waged against the settlers and the government in the text. This account of the value of land in the Kenyan society shows its importance. The appreciation of concepts and the values placed on the environment in such a cultural context are of interest to the eco-critic. This is especially so, because the heightened recognition of the importance of land is an apt expression of the intrinsic relationship that exists between the society and the land.

This value of land is so sterling in the Kenyan (African) society that it becomes so obvious to the white foreigner (Howlands) as he observed Ngotho work:

(Howlands) just loved to see Ngotho working in the farm, the way the old man touched the soil, almost fondling, and the way he tended the young tea plants as if they were his own...Ngotho was too much a part of the farm to be separated from it (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.30).

The value associated with land is not as a result of capricious, or materialistic gains inherent in the land, but because land in itself epitomises a fundamental philosophical, historical and cultural essence of the people. The value of nature to the Kenyans runs deeper than for individual gains. Land is therefore not only viewed in materialistic terms, but also viewed in an almost anthropomorphic way that forces the individual and his society to treat it, not merely as an exploitable

resource but as something whose value is intrinsic and independent of his exploitative value. Ngugi wa Thiong'o says:

Ngotho felt responsible for whatever happens to the land to the extent that he sacrifices his life for the sustenance of the community. He owed it to the dead, the living and the unborn of his time to keep guard over this shamba (1966, p.31).

Ngotho states in his story:

What happened, O Murungu, to the land which you gave to us? Where, O Creator, went our promised land?" "At times I've wanted to cry or harm my body to drive away the curse that removed us from the ancestral lands (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.25).

The ancestral value of the land is further asserted when Ngotho says:

My father and many others had been moved from our ancestral lands, ... they grew up working on the land that belonged to our ancestors (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.26).

These extracts show that the value of nature to the Kenyans transcends the physical and economic gains therefrom, and is further anchored on ancestral and historical values, which have to be fought for, restored and defended. It is also clear that land is at the core of the identity of the Kenyans as is portrayed in this text. Such a relationship between land and identity engenders the bond that will form the foundations of reverence of land and ultimately its preservation. This reverence for land by the Kenyans can be traced to the philosophical foundation of reality to the Africans. Unah Jim makes us understand that the notion of nature, (land) being an ancestral gift, is by no accident. In the words of Unah (1996, p.432):

[To the Africans] land is never a personal property, but communally owned. Individuals are not only allowed to make use of it, but this use must be careful in recognizing the position of the Earth goddess, the ancestors and for a possible passage to the generation unborn, ... It is deemed

inappropriate to individualize land. Instead, it is made a communal property at the service of all and sundry. [Interpolation in brackets ours for emphasis]

This philosophical underpinning of the status of nature in the worldview of the Kenyan (African) makes the premium placed on nature unsurprising as expressed by wa Thiong'o.

The value of land to the Kenyan (African) is so immense that it takes precedence over education, which is seen as the light of the future, a gift given to the colonized, and the surest way to overcome the settlers. Njoroge is motivated to believe that "Education is everything". But deep at heart, his firm faith is different and conditional, as "he doubted this because he knew deep inside his heart, that land was everything. Education was good only because it would lead to the recovery of the lost lands" (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.39).

Stemming from the foregoing on the value of nature (Land) in *Weep Not, Child*, it is clear that nature (land) sits at the top of the power hierarchy. Land is part of what sets the powerful, wealthy and influential, from the rest for both the settlers and the natives. Education is presented as the light of Kenya, and the tool for overcoming the settlers. Kamau tells us that the educated in the big city, "will learn that mere salary without a piece of land to cultivate is nothing. Look at Howlands. He is not employed by anybody. Yet he is very rich and happy. It's because he has land. Or look at Jacobo. He's like that because he has land" (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.41). This assertion by Kamau is a vivid description of the place of nature in the power hierarchy. Nature here has been accorded a great measure. It is also important to note that the reason for the high status of nature in the power hierarchy would not be farfetched from the fact that agriculture is the mainstay of the people of Kikuyuland. Thus, land for such economic activity will surely sit at the top of people's priority. From the aesthetic construct perspective, the value on nature for its beauty, complexity, or wildness can also be appreciated in the text. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's presentation of wonderful scenery of nature, provokes an appreciation of the value of nature in the text for its beauty. *Weep Not, Child* gives a picturesque Kenya, and shows how rugged and wild the landscape of the environment is:

In a country of ridges, such as Kikuyuland, there are many valleys and small plains. The plain, more or less rectangular in shape, had four valleys leading into, or out of it at the comers. The first two valleys went into the country of the Black People. The other two divided the land of the Black People from the land of the White People..... Two of the ridges on the opposite sides of the long sides of the plain were broad and near one another. The other two were narrow and had pointed ends (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.7).

This picturesque account of the landscape of Kenya shows the awareness that wa Thiong'o has of the beauty of the wilderness, and the natural landscape in Kenya. Nonetheless, it depicts the disparity that existed between the colonisers and colonised in relation to their settlements.

Ngugiwa Thiong'o (1996, p. 31) talks of an "African Reserve", showing that the Kenyans value the aesthetic quality of wild nature that is preserved and undisturbed. This value for a wild nature reserve shows the awareness that the African understands the role of natural reserves in the ecosystem. The notion of an ecosystem, co-existing between man on the one hand, and the other elements of nature on the other, in an inter-dependent manner, is underpinned in the African philosophy. To Unah (1996, p.351), the African metaphysical concept of being is a Vital Force or Spirit, that permeates everything; that is, all things that there are, are aspects of the Spirit (Unah, 1996, p.351). This notion of the ecosystem to the African explicates the value the Kenyans place on every aspect of nature. This value is so inherent that the African child values nature for its beauty and eco-functionality. In Njoroge and Mwihaki's interaction, it is interesting to note Njoroge's value judgment on nature:

She picked flowers and threw them at him. He liked this and wanted to retaliate, but he did not like plucking a flower in bloom because it loses colour (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.36).

The novelist further shows the value that the Kenyans have for the beauty of nature in Ngotho's account, while walking through the fields.

Ngotho loved the rainy seasons when everything was green and the crops in flower, and the morning dew hung on the leaves. But the track where he had disturbed the plants and made the water run-off made him feel as if, through his own

fault, he had lost something. There was one time when he had felt a desire to touch the dew-drops, or open one and see what it held hidden inside. He had trembled like a child, but after he had touched the drops and they had quickly lost shape, melting into wetness, he felt ashamed and moved on (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.28).

This act as catalogued by the novelist is a confirmation of how even the minute details of the beauty of nature is valued by the Kenyans; a literary attestation that an average African is fully aware of his natural environment, and the symbiotic relationships that exist therein. The environment is seen as freshness and hope that keep the Kenyan who is in a distressed situation going.

Metaphor of Nature in the Novel

Weep Not, Child portrays land in various metaphorical contexts that show how land has been treated by the different group of people in the text. Mr Howlands is said to have always felt a certain level of victory, whenever he walked through his vast fields, as he (alone) was said to be responsible for taming this unoccupied wilderness (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.31). This presentation of land from the perspective of the Whiteman, with the use of words like "victory" and "taming", shows the domineering agenda, posture and plan of the foreigners towards the lands in Kenya. This presentation of possession of land through the eyes of Mr Howlands typifies the agenda of the foreigners in Kenya, and how the Kenyan has been dispossessed. It shows the agenda of the occupation by the British. The British treated nature (land) as a commodity to be won and used for their personal gratification and benefit. The cultural social and historical values of the land were relegated to the background. The commoditisation and the self-interest the British had towards the lands in Kenya was so glaring, that the Kenyans could not have been naive not to have known what they came from England to do. The Kenyans knew the foreigners came to pursue their materialistic gain at the cost of the value they (African) had for nature (land); "they all had their country to come and rob us acres of what we have" (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.43).

As mentioned earlier, the way land is portrayed, talked about, and treated in the text, raises related concepts such as eco-feminism. Eco-feminism as a concept has seen a great degree of intellectual development into a theory, which has a tremendous sway within the ecocriticism umbrella. The theory of eco-feminism as an aspect of ecocriticism can be seen to be expressed by the author in the text. Bressler in *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* succinctly summarises eco-feminism as primarily a critical analysis of the interconnection of the oppression of women and nature (Bressler, 1999, p.236).

The view of eco-feminism as expressed in this discourse will assume two forms; one which will consider projecting the parallel in the dominion of nature (land) and the cultural phenomenon of the dominion of women by men. The second form of the eco-feminist view will consider the gender value placed on land, where land is often equated with the feminine tendencies of fertility and a mother that feeds everyone. Ngugi shows a lot of awareness of how nature (land) has been dominated in the text. The role of the man as the dominant figure in the family, as a social reality in Kenya, is evident in the text. As a social reality, of course, in many African societies, the man is the dominant figure over the woman in the family. One can draw a corresponding parallel of the social phenomenon of male domination over females to the foreigners' domination over the 'native' land in the text. The domination of the British is seen when Howlands is said to be "responsible for taming this unoccupied wilderness" (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.31). The common denominator in this parallel appreciation is the fact that the British (Howlands) had the assumption that the land of the Kenyans should be under their dominion, as it is the case for a man to dominate in the family setting.

The second form of the eco-feminist discourse that considers the gender value placed on land, where land is often equated with the feminine tendencies reverberates through the text. Nature usually referred to as "Mother nature" is not only an African perspective, but generally a global one. The "motherhood" of nature is however a reality to the African (Kenyan), because of the African's predisposition to cultivating the land. The land does not only feed the African farmer, but

provides the African with other resource in her bid to sustain her children.

With respect to the question raised on how literacy has affected human relationship with the natural world, we explore how the levels of modernity, education and by extension development, have influenced our relationship with, and response to the natural world. It should be stressed that this relationship has changed to an estranged one. Literacy and education, as well as the resulting development from these, have caused man to become somewhat distant from 'mother' nature. Environmental degradation as a result of this estranged coexistence has gained notoriety with the advancement in literacy and development. The novelist draws attention to a striking observation:

A fairly large 'hill' stood outside Ngotho's household. Years of accumulating rubbish had brought this into being (wa Thiong'o, 1966, p.40).

Land, highly valued by the Kenyan (African), has become a place to dump rubbish. When did the value of the environment change from the perspective of the Kenyan (African)? When did this hill come into being? These are questions that come to mind with this observation by the writer. It is important to note that the answers to these questions are provided by wa Thiong'o as he tells us the source of this hill, when he stated that, "from this hill of rubbish we can see Nairobi". "Nairobi" represents the increased literacy, development and consumption that have resulted in the generation of this rubbish – "fairly large hill".

In response to the question that borders on ways in which literacy has affected man's response to the natural world, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o provides a two-way perspective; one that has shown that literacy has brought about an estranged man, whose relationship with nature has been strained and severed in extreme cases as well as the inheritance that needs to be repossessed. The other perspective is the fact that literacy can be used to create awareness and contribute to the debate on man's relationship with nature in the spirit of ecocriticism.

The last question is "How has the value of wilderness changed over time?" The concept of wilderness and its change will be discussed in the context of wilderness before colonisation and after. The value of

nature to the Kenyan (African), or its place in their lives has extensively been explicated in this discourse, and cannot be overemphasised. The influx of foreigners (British) and the advent of colonisation changed the value of wilderness in Kenyan (Africa). Various authors have argued that colonisation and deforestation have frequently gone together. This notion is widely corroborated by historians in narrating the machinery of colonisation and the extraction of natural resources on the African continent. The shadow of civilisation in the guise of imperialism has always brought with it deforestation, exploitation and depletion of natural resources (Barry, 2009, p.242). This position is re-echoed in *Weep Not, Child*, where the white man is seen to have the destructive mentality towards wild nature for his own self-interest. We hear Nguni say, "We made roads and cleared the forest to make it possible for the warring white man to move more quickly." The value and reverence for nature by the African, sustained from generation to generation, and underpinned by the African philosophy, is debased by the self-interest of the whites (British). Wilderness (nature) valued for its social, cultural and environmental significance by the Kenyan (African) has overtime changed to be valued as a commodity, and a means to an end, instead of an end in itself. This change in the value of wilderness (nature) overtime has largely not been positive. Unfortunately, this change in the value placed on nature over the years, has resulted in the degradation of the environment; a phenomenon that has precipitated the issues of climate change today.

Conclusion

Postcolonial ecocriticism, as a literary approach, deals with appreciating the role and place of the natural environment in the cultural context of a society at any specific time. *Weep Not, Child* raises the concerns of the search for the lost identity of the Kenyan as a result of colonialism. It expresses how important nature, particularly, land as a factor of production, is to the colonised (Kenyan). Ngugiwa Thiong'o, among several themes, artistically brings to bear the interdependence that exists between human and non-human elements in his text and the need to fight for it. Also, he emphasises the effects that neglect of nature could bring, and the subsequent effects it will have on man. It is arguable that

literary works are a powerful tool of preserving and defending nature for continuous existence of planet earth. It is noteworthy that literary works are inspired by contemporary issues, and as such, the human nature in its cultural, social and economic constructs cannot be studied in its entirety without considering the environment; particularly land in this case. The paper concludes on the note that there is the need for ecocritics to consider the trendy issue of eco-consciousness that forms part of human life in this era, when technological revolution tends to drift man from his environment. The beauty of literature is how writers of the arts artistically blend both human and non-human elements to achieve the desired effect. It is prudent therefore that due attention needs to be given to the subject of environment in works of arts.

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