

Ecological Violation: Rethinking the Consequences of Postcolonial Infrastructures in the Novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Abstract

Existing studies on Ngugi wa Thiong'o creative legacies have focused mainly on cultural and language heritages of the colonised, while little attention has been paid to the aspects of ecological violation which remains a significant leitmotif of his novelistic engagements. This paper thus examines Ngugi's representation of ecological violation with the socio-cultural implications on the postcolonial Kenyan society. Adam Trexler's Anthropogenic Theory is adopted for the critical analysis of this paper. Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* (WNC), *The River Between* (TRB), *A Grain of Wheat* (AGW), *Petals of Blood* (PB) and *Devil on the Cross* (DC) were critically examined towards realising the set goals of the work. The study revealed that ecological violation on the postcolonial infrastructures and legacies are practised through indiscriminate felling of trees for export by the settlers in collusion with the indigenous entrepreneurs, desecration of ancestral environmental sites, and deliberate deforestation remain the landmark of colonial violations. The study further buttresses the fact that ecological violation is characterized by toxic industrialisation and urbanisation, technological advancement, and through devices of imperialism with their internal collaborators thereby validating the claim that the destabilisation and destruction of the ancestral socio-ecological environment is linked directly to the inglorious legacies of colonisation in African societies.

Keywords: Ecological violation, African novel, Ecocriticism, Ngugi wa'Thiong'o, Postcolonial infrastructures and legacies.

Introduction

In the African literary experience, literature has been extensively employed to portray the totality of the people's social, political, cultural, and economic reality. The battle for survival and the struggles that go with it are part of the major themes in African literature. Burning issue concerned with the socio-ecological harmony of the environment for the growth of man is reflected and refracted in literary works all over the world. This development points at the fact that human survival will continue to be an illusion if there is no well-articulated harmony in terms of human relationship with the environment and its resources. Through careless behaviour, the ecosystem has been negatively impacted and severe eco-social and economic problems have resulted. The careless actions pose a grave threat to man's harmonious interaction with the environment and its resources. The ability and will-power to fully appreciate the natural resources have significantly decreased over

time due to multifaceted human problems.

The underprivileged are suffering as a result of the ecological imbalances caused by this tendency. In recent literary experience, African writers have consistently drawn attention to the crisis emanating from environmental abuses, yet the governing class have responded ineffectively or not at all to the dire situation. Joyce Agofure aptly posits that anthropogenic activities are impacting negatively and destroying nature (1). The situation of African socio-ecological issues and environmental degradation are directly attributable to this insensitivity of the ruling elites. Thus, environmental imagination seems to have focused on the devastating effects of anthropogenic-related crises across the region. The terrible consequences of anthropogenic-related issues throughout the continent appear to have captured the attention of eco-conscious literary writers, critics and scholars. The issues at stake include the extinction of biodiversity, erosion, gas flaring and climate change, ozone layer depletion, desertification and deforestation, trash overflow and flooding, oil pollution and spills, and the takeover of land by imperialists and their collaborating indigenous entrepreneurs. The situation also involves the seizure of land without the slightest consideration for ecological harmony for both human and non-human neighbours for industrial and estate uses.

The role of literature is amplified by Dustin Crowley when he states that, “the literary discipline itself has long assumed a sort of geographic vision through its structuration into nationalist/regionalist categories...” (4). This demonstrates the validity of the claim that literature is primarily created to capture the complexities of a people's historical, cultural, economic, political and social lives. Given the extent of violation and plundering that have occurred on the continent, first as a result of the activities of the colonialists and later as a result of the indigenous entrepreneurs, the environment has continued to be one of the primary concerns of discourse on the social and economic life of African people. Particularly in this era of grave and unbalanced climate change issue, these activities appear to have disrupted the harmonious relationship between the people and their eco-social and economic environment. In the face of ecological catastrophes, it will be challenging to maintain a healthy economic existence for society. It is important to understand that anything that has a positive or negative influence on the environment also has an impact on humans, both directly and indirectly. A close reading of Ngugi's works unfolds the abiding tendency towards eco-critical canvas in his creative engagements and imaginative propensities.

Cheryll Glotfelty who is among the major proponents of ecocriticism underscores the fact that natural and man-made disasters have made humans to be more conscious of the environment (xix). There are significant environmental issues in the world in general and in Africa in particular due to the apparent imbalances in the exploitation and management of ecosystem with its life-sustaining resources. Africa's position at the bottom of the global economic food chain with the ravaging poverty makes this situation worse. It therefore remains difficult dissuading people from certain environmental activities that are inimical to the sustenance and healthy relationship between man and the environment. This explains why most of the African societies appear to respond slowly to environmental infractions in the continent. African writers have used creative ingenuity to draw attention to the flaws and issues, as well as the crises they have brought about practices that jeopardise peaceful coexistence of humans and the non-human environment.

This research focuses on environmental abuses and infractions in Kenya as depicted in Ngugi wa'Thiong'o's seven novels. The study establishes a series-like connection among the causes, phases, perpetrators, responses and consequences of ecological violation and

exploitation in Kenya. There is a string-like process of joining together a sequence of events to establish a direction of ecological violation in Ngugi's narratives. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the context of the problems surrounding Kenya's land crisis and how Ngugi has mirrored and refracted them in his novels.

Adam Trexler in his work entitled *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (2015) argues extensively on the impact of human activities on the environment and on the crisis that ecological violation portends for both human and non-human environment. Ecocriticism's variation on anthropogenic literary theory tries to broaden the discussion of environmental studies beyond the connections between literature and the environment and between human and non-human objects. It focuses on the severity of the effects of environmental infractions committed by humans.

The texts examined in this study point at the fact that the ecological violations and the crisis of environmental survival are primarily culturally, economically and socially induced, and that the technocratic fixes often mooted by business interests and technologists will tend to reinforce rather than reform the societal iniquities that led to their creation (Joseph John Gualtieri (1). Therefore, this study was designed to examine how Ngugi wa Thiong'o presents ecological violation and its consequences in his novels, with a view to determining the phases of the violation, the consequences of the violation and the literary eco-critical strategies used for representation in the texts. According to Serpil Oppermann's observation:

... despite a number of attempts at its theorizing from writers such as Sue Ellen Campbell, Dominick Head, Neil Samuels, Dana Philips and Gretchen Legler, who draw mostly from various lines of post-structuralist thought, ecocriticism still remains controversial and antagonistic about its insufficient theoretical engagement (107).

The assertion above supports the fact that eco-critical scholars have not adequately incorporated theory into their work. The second-wave ecocriticism has, in fact, "expanded into a highly diverse field encompassing different kind of genres and authors in a wide variety, the United States and abroad, as well as the full spectrum of cultural theories and methodologies, from Marxism and post structuralism to feminism, critical race theory, queer studies, and cognitive science," according to Ursula Heise (2006:506). The most anti-theoretical voices in the field have viewed this scenario as one of ecocriticism's distinctive and appropriate characteristics.

In the opinion of Oliver Lovessey Ngugi's latter works show a desire "in classical Marxist terms for the progressive dissolution of the nation, with its colonial and neo-colonial legacies, regarding the very idea of the state as oppressive' (156). Because of the "suppression of specificity and local conflicts" (42, 67), according to Ogude, Ngugi is "trapped in a binary polarity" that "undermines the notion of typicality." These "local conflicts," as noted by Ogude, concur with Crowley's assertion that they are precisely what Ngugi means when he argues that they are the "product of exchange between internal multiplicity and external relations at various scales" (73).

The early engagements by Ngugi also include references to the theme of "return of the community to itself (as) a prerequisite for the process that ends in the construction of a country," according to Ogude (126). Understanding Ngugi's spatial imagination of glocality, according to Crowley, resolves all the conflicts or provides solutions to all the issues critics have raised with his writing, (86). Despite the preceding, it is doubtful that Ngugi will

completely resolve the challenges associated with identifying the geographies of empire because, as his own work suggests, each place he works with will always be the product of complex and shifting “glocal” effects. In line with Ngugi's suggestion, Crowley comes to the opinion that “glocality” is not a resolve unto itself, but a reality of locations connected together in an increasingly global community (88).

Textual Analysis

Quest for occupation and domination drives the spate of environmental infractions that run through Ngugi's novels. His response to eco-cultural violations is largely determined by the exigencies and peculiarities of the given phase of colonial contact. It is also determined by the state of his ideological exposure of the novelist at the time of writing. This is because, each phase comes with its unique challenge and Ngugi seems to be aware of the implications of blanket response. He creates his characters both human and non-human to suit each narrative within the given purview of ecological trope. This is because, it seems pretty difficult to separate Kenyan historical trajectory from the politics of land, land alienation and forced appropriation of natural resources found in Kenya environment by the forces of colonial imperialism. This has comprehensively defined Ngugi's novelistic oeuvre. Though other subjects and thematic concerns have remained prominent in Ngugi's literary engagements, a critical assessment of his engagements leads to a discovery that all derive their thematic and narrative focus from ecological perspective and the crisis that has resulted from it overtime.

Representing ecological violation and its consequences seems very natural to Ngugi given his family experience in land alienation and its consequences. Many critics have tried to connect Ngugi as a child to Njoroge in *WNC* given the similarities of their representations. Some writers hold the opinion that the novel is a fictional biography of Ngugi's growing up years and his personal experience in the face of the penetration and influence of European settlers. Whatever the case, the fact remains that *WNC* depicts clearly without any form of contradiction, a major phase in ecological violation in his literary engagements.

In Ime Ikiddeh's observation, European colonisers and Gikuyu peasantry in Kenya were perpetually at odds with one another over the partition and seizure of land and its resources (7-10). The literary worldview and subject focus of Ngugi wa Thiong'o were significantly influenced by this land conflict. Ikiddeh goes on to say that land historically remained the central sensitive factor in the contention between Africans and Europeans in Kenya, serving as the source of man's life, the foundation of any social community, and the foundation of all human culture.

This study's foundation is based on the fact that it is clear that land issues were the root cause of Kenya's colonial and postcolonial conflicts. In Ngugi's first published novel, *Weep Not, Child*, the right to and control of land is central to the political conflict between Howlands and Ngotho. Ngotho is the rightful owner. His claim to the hereditary title is supported by the fact that he is an aboriginal of the land by descent. The story of Ngotho's separation from the land is told to his son, Njoroge.

This is when the elementary phase of land alienation is revealed to us, triggering the ecological consciousness of Ngugi's narratives. At the cultural stage of Ngugi's ecological narratives, we are later introduced to anthropogenic behaviour. It begins with Ngotho's enlistment in the colonial army during World War I. (WWI). He is astounded to learn that his family had been forcibly removed from their ancestral land so soon after his arrival. Ngotho is forced to work on both Jacobo's and his own ancestral land, which has been designated and appropriated by the white settler, Mr Howlands. Ngugi's consciousness is directly focused on

the level of betrayal among the locals in order to gain the favour of the colonist. Instead of banding together to fight land grabs, they are deeply divided for selfish reasons. By acting as a spy for the settlers, Jacobo is rewarded with permission to plant pyrethrum, a highly profitable cash crop. He does so at the expense of other Africans and natives. Jacobo's wealth incites envy among the natives, fuelling their rage after it is revealed that he is on the payroll of the white establishment, assisting in the eviction of his people from their land and resources. Ngotho finds out Jacobo has "... crystallised into a concrete betrayal of the people. He became the physical personification of the long years of waiting and suffering-Jacob was a Traitor" (*WNC*, 58). This protest against Jacobo and his interests serves as the foundation for Ngugi's writing, which aims to raise awareness about the common discomfort of the poor.

Kabonyi in *The River Between* which comes first in chronological order though second to be published, Karanja in *A Grain of Wheat*, and Jacobo in *Weep Not, Child* personify Africans who betray their communities on the issues ecological and environmental maintenance for both colonial mercy and personal tributes and advantages. They are found to have collaborated with the British establishment in the execution of a divisive colonial ideology. A colonial usurper named Howlands is completely obsessed with getting rid of the natives of the land which he then takes over. He derives so much joy in seeing Ngotho's diligence as he "tended the young tea plants as if they were his own" (*WNC*, 30). Ngotho notices the threat of extinction of his lineage that will occur if the dispossession and alienation of his people from their ancestral land continues, "it was a spiritual loss. When a man was severed from the land of his ancestors, where would he sacrifice to the Creator? How could he come in contact with the founders of the tribe, Gikuyu and Mumbi" (*WNC*, 74)?

The River Between opens with Ngugi deliberately claiming that the bountiful territory of Kenya was granted to the Africans by their maker, similar to the opening of *Weep Not, Child*. One of the ancient seers, Mugo wa Kibiro, who travelled the Gikuyu nation, foretold that a people with garments like butterflies would invade and seize the territory (*TRB*, 2). This turned out to be the Europeans. It is also in the prophecy that salvation would come with the emergence of a leader from among the aboriginal people who would take back their lost lands.

Desecration of ancestral worship and indiscriminate felling of trees leads to deforestation which constitutes the primary phase of ecological violation. The resultant consequence is the widening of social gap between the settlers and their local agents and the natives. People's main economic stay and access to subsistence farming are taken away, thereby introducing properly poverty to the communities. The process and system of ecological violation and resource plundering result into untold hardship. In *WNC*, Ngugi focuses on the disenchantment of the younger generation with the docility of their older generation who do not understand the original intensions of the invading white people and could not read any meaning into the settlers approach to land alienation and ecological violation. Attempt by the younger generation to physically recover their violated land and restore sanity to their ancestral worship lacks tactics and potent strategy which leads to further alienation both from the land and family harmony.

Ngugi continues his intense ecological narratives in his third novel *AGW* during the Emergency period. He graphically depicts the peak of the Emergency and its environmental consequences for Kenyans. In *AGW*, the number of settlers has increased, which means more ecological problems for the natives on their land. As a result of the influx of predatory white settlers on the land, Ngugi's narratives gradually progress from a rustic village to a larger and more advanced village. This influx of settlers increases the exploitation of indigenous

peoples' territorial and natural resources. In his next novel and narratives, Ngugi's ecological consciousness is dominated by the large presence of settlers and what they intend to do with Kenyan land. It has progressed from sowing, planting, and harvesting land produce to a more sophisticated mode of land exploitation and dispossession at this point. For example, in "the days when European and Indian immigrants wrestled to control Kenya- then any thought of a black person near the seat of power was beyond the reach of the wildest imagination" (*AGW*, 37). It is clear that Kenyan land is being invaded and overpopulated by foreigners who have no regard for environmental purity or preservation other than business interests and concerns. For the majority of them, their "passion lay, not in politics, a strange thing in those days, but in land development" (*AGW*, 37). Here "land development" as their land development is a cover for self-interest.

In *AGW*, Ngugi vividly demonstrates the protective nature of the environment during the Emergency. The forest served as a formidable fortress for the Mau-Mau warriors. This explains why most colonial government policies are geared toward clearing the forest in order to strip the people's protective fortress naked. This is discovered when "a Forestry Reserve Station was set up in the area" (*AGW*, 37). This strengthens Ngugi's argument that Kenyan land and environmental resources are the primary driving forces behind the massive influx of foreigners into Kenya.

Ngugi in *AGW* seems to linger on the threads of so many events and issues preceding Kenya's independence. He brings together the confiscation of the lands of an increasing number of detainees in order to aggravate their physical and mental suffering. The terrible agonies affect people outside of detention camps as well. The battle for control of Kenya's fertile ecosystem has become more than sophisticated. The Europeans drag a few young people, such as Mugo and Gikonyo, and instil fear in them in order to warn them not to oppose the white government and establishment. Stringing together these events provides a strong understanding of the cultural and psychological damage to Kenya's ecological issue. It is all about taking their land forcibly or by any means possible and psychologically weakening them in order to make agitation for the return of the land a secondary issue and concern.

Petals of Blood climaxes the primary phase of violation with the drought which is primarily prolonged by the people's disconnection from the ancestral worship and sacrifices. Before the arrival of the settlers and the desecration of regular sacrifices and supplications are made to the ancestral spirit and gods who in return open the sky for rains thereby guaranteeing enough food. But with the desecration and abandonment of ancestral practices, the gods and ancestors seize the rain. The consequence is a great famine that brings untold hardship to both the flora and fauna, humans and non-human objects in the communities.

After paying the European government's taxes in the form of cattle tax and others, the natives are reduced to poverty. The Ilmorog's ecological and economic exploitations have a catastrophic effect on the lives of the people who are unable to survive the brutal conditions and in the end, they join the very labouring tribe they were trying to escape by abandoning their farms and property (*PB*, 90). The natives appear to have no way out of the ecological burden that the settlers have imposed on them. The environmental devastation caused by the European results in harsh and dire consequences for the indigenous people. The Europeans, in collusion with the local compradors, are only interested in expanding their business into the hinterland and exploiting the locals, not in the survival and preservation of the ecosystem. The severe drought that has hit Ilmorog and its surroundings has had a disastrous effect on the landscape. This is also symbolic and representative of the entire socio-economic and political drought that afflicted Kenya as a result of the Europeans' reckless behaviour. There is no shade or rain as Europeans transport wood from deforested areas and charcoal from burned

forests in Ilmorog to feed the machines and men in their trains and factories. Ngugi expresses it succinctly:

The road has once been a railway line joining Ilmorog to Ruwa-ini. The line had carried wood and charcoal and wattle barks from Ilmorog forests to feed machines and men at Ruwa-ini. It had eaten the forests, and after accomplishing their task, the two rails were removed, and the ground became a road - a kind of a road - that now gave no evidence of its former exploiting glory (*PB*, 11).

The wealth has been frittered away by marauding Europeans, leaving the lands desolate as nobody “would want to settle in this wasteland except those without lumps” (*PB*,5).

Also, the corrupt nature of the local imperial agents and the brutality of their approaches to commercial activities create a metaphor of ecological violation in the communities. Their only presiding interest and consideration is economic expansion without any regard for survival of the natives who are the original owners of the land resources that are presently being converted to imperial commercialism. The emerged political and business class after independence seems more brutal in the drive for the exploitation of ecological resources than the settlers. There is basically lack of environmental impact assessment before any construction to determine its suitability in the communities. This seems to create a great concern for Ngugi considering the irony of the situation. This drives him to refer to this phase as the “blackanisation of colonialism”.

Devil on the Cross continues the technical and second phase of ecological violation in Ngugi's novelistic oeuvre in which he consistently engages the dual violators. In *DC*, the imperial lords make a metaphorical visit to assess the extent to which their local agents have carried out the directives given to them to damage their environment for political and economic advantages. The visit from the seven world powers that represents imperialism is mainly to assess ecological violation done to the environment in their quest for political and economic control. It is an opportunity for the local entrepreneurs to give account of their stewardship with the powers handed over to them at independence. The visit exposes the collaborative nature of the imperial powers and their local agents in the decimation of the people's access to environmental resources. It also exposes a system of brutality in the exploitation of nature in the novel. Though Ngugi uses ogre and grotesque images, the narratives nonetheless reflect and refract the ecological violation in his native country.

Violation in *DC* appears in stages and in various dimensions based on the testimonies of the local entrepreneurs. Incidentally, ecological violation dominates the testimonies of the local imperial agents. Ngugi continues with the issues of industrialisation and urbanisation as factors or features of Anthropocene and are strongly depicted in *DC*. The depiction of urban slums that litter the entire city is caused by overpopulation as a result of industrial development. The unregulated toxic industrial wastes creates serious health hazard in the slums. This is a major consequence of ecological violation on the life of the vast majority of the locals who have been reduced to human wrecks by industrialisation and urbanisation.

As a result, Ngugi's fictional community of Ilmorog relocates to the *Devil on the Cross* and comes to terms with their post-independence political and economic betrayal. After placing so much hope in their country's eco-social and political transformation following the end of British rule, Ngugi's characters are devastated to learn that, while the face of bureaucracy

may have changed from white to black, the underlying ideology has not. Kenya is still a country where competitive commerce and capitalist exchange trump all other pleasant relationships. Despite his frustration with the level of land and resource alienation, Ngugi renews his ecological consciousness in his narratives in *Devil on the Cross*. The novel depicts the depth of the people's alienation from their land resources, as well as the resulting conspiracies. The imperial and capitalist powers return to Ilmorog to evaluate the level of exploitation and advancement made by their agents since their departure. The majority of this is due to how they have been able to put all of the dispossessed lands and resources to use. This is a continuation of what happens in Ilmorog of *Petals of Blood*. In *DC*, Ilmorog's industrialisation is well underway, with disastrous ecological consequences and environmental pollutions.

The seven agents are the neo-colonial powers who enjoy the most heinous practices. They are competing for the title of causing the most devastation to the land, environment, and people. Each wears clothes made of paper currency from their respective home countries and demonstrates his talent and skills in the act of stealing Kenyan resources. They take Kenya's natural resources and profit from the toil and sweat of its workers and peasants. Thus, *Devil on the Cross* moves from the rural to the urban, depicting neo-colonial actors plundering, violating, and frittering away Kenya's environment and land resources. It is a method of systematic plundering of a people's land resources.

The cruelty of the local compradors and the extent to which they will go in order to profit at the cost of the helpless peasantry are depicted by Ngugi in this text especially. Ngugi depicts the tense exchange between the pot-bellied and the pale exploiters without holding back.

The consequences of ecological violation in Kenya are depicted in the texts studied in various ways and complex dimensions. Some of the most significant consequences include loss of biodiversity, the displacement of people and communities and the disruption of traditional ways of life. In *PB*, the construction of roads, brewery and railways leads to the flooding of the village and the destruction of farmland and natural vegetation and serenity. The displacement of people, loss of their homes and livelihoods and the attendant poverty leads to anger, resentment and conflict. The dam and the factories become symbols of the destructive power of capitalism and imperial commercialism. Another consequence of ecological violation depicted in the texts studied is the loss of cultural and spiritual connections to the land. In *TRB*, the building of a mission school leads to the destruction of sacred sites and the erosion of traditional beliefs. This loss of cultural identity has a profound impact on the people of the community, and leads to conflict and division. In addition, Ngugi's novels as established by this study, explore the emotional and psychological consequences of ecological violation. His characters often experience feeling of grief, anger, and despair in response to the destruction of their land and natural abode in *WNC*, *AGW* and *PB*.

Conclusion

The analysis of this work has revealed that environmental infractions that run through Ngugi's novels are driven by greed, profiteering, and a desire for dominance and occupation. His reactions to environmental violations are heavily influenced by the exigencies and peculiarities of each phase and the corresponding responses and consequences. It is also influenced by his ideological exposure at the time of writing. This is due to the fact that each phase projects a unique challenge; and, Ngugi is aware of the consequences of blanket responses and as a result spread out the sequence of colonial events through the phases

enunciated in the analysis of this work. He creates human and non-human characters to fit each narrative of ecological trope. This is due to the difficulty in separating Kenya's historical trajectory from land politics and land alienation. This has effectively defined Ngugi's novelistic output. Though other subjects and thematic concerns have some prominence in Ngugi's literary engagements, a critical examination of his engagements reveals that they all derive their thematic and narrative focus from ecological perspective and the crisis it generates over time.

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