

Land as Memory and Identify in the Fiction of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

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Abstract

This research examines the interrelationship between ecology, politics, and postcolonial resistance in the writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. It explores how ecological degradation and land dispossession become key troops for colonial and neo-colonial exploitation. Ngugi's fictional writings reflect an intense concern for the land, which he portrays not merely as a geographical establishment but as a symbol of cultural, and spiritual estheticism. Through an eco-critical framework, this research contends that Ngugi's narratives delineate a sustained resistance against ecological consciousness.

Keywords

Ecology, Land, Memory, Indigenous, Aestheticism

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The theory of aesthetics can be broadly described as the study of beauty, both in artistic expression and in human responses to landscapes and natural forms, often understood through the binary of aestheticism. Munro (2013) defines aesthetic theory as grounded in the analysis of cognitive states—reactions, attitudes, and emotions—that shape the aesthetic experience. According to this view, landscape aesthetics refers to the quality of a landscape as perceived through all human senses, particularly sight, combining both subjective and objective, abstract and concrete aspects of perception. This understanding recognises that aesthetics encompasses not only beauty but also the presence of the ugly, the disordered, and the unsettling.

The study either addresses ecological, economic, or social concerns, or on the implementation of novel methods in landscape research, making landscape aesthetics an afterthought. It also attempts to reconcile ecology and aesthetics, or it tries to integrate aesthetics as one of the dimensions of landscape sustainability. From well-known studies by J. Appleton (1975), R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan (1989), J. I. Nassauer (1988), and others expressing differing opinions regarding landscape preferences to more recent approaches attempting to balance ecology and aesthetics, environmental sustainability, such as J.I. Nassauer (1988; 2007), C. Steinitz (1990), W. Nohl (2001), R. L. Musacchio (2009), and many others, this field has a wealth of experience.

Appleton (1990, 69-75) exemplifies the landscape as “the environment visually perceived”, and the aesthetic as the pleasure in this perception. Pleasure is derived from appreciation of the two types of symbols held in the landscape. One is natural, per se genetic, “an ineradicable part of the survival behaviour of the species” (Appleton, 1990, 8). The other is cultural, one whose meaning must be learned for it to be understood and appreciated. The ‘natural’ symbol for landscape aesthetic is “prospect and refuge” in which satisfaction extracts from the landscape’s propensity to meet the need to see without being seen. Response is intrinsic: prospect/refuge is not required in fact; rather, its mere symbol, for example light and dark, provokes an aesthetic retaliation.

According to this theory, this propensity is a benchmark of environmental concern that favours our biological survival. Successive theoreticians have positively received Appleton’s biophysical bases for aesthetics but have prioritised the cultural symbols of identity, solidity and sovereignty. Culturally, “... we do not so much discover aesthetically compelling properties in the environment ... ascribe them to it on the basis of our individual and cultural beliefs, values and needs” (Costonis, 1982, 401). Groups protect their identity and stability by exercising control over landscapes, and landscapes symbolic of identity, stability and control are aesthetic (Bourassa, 1988, 250).

Tirop Simatei (1993) extends this notion of perception to the historical and political sphere by examining how African landscapes become representations of colonial violence.

He describes this representation as embodying “complex linkages between violence,” its responses, and the continued violation of human rights in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. Within this framework, colonial violence functions as a lens for understanding the relationships, processes, and conditions that defined colonial rule in Africa—violations that affected the physical, social, and psychological integrity of colonised peoples while leaving lasting imprints on the land itself.

In African literature, history and fiction are closely intertwined, each drawing from cultural memory and specific historical encounters. As Tony Bennett (1990) observes, “History does not supply a key with which to unlock the meaning of the literary text, nor does the latter function merely as a particular route into the study of a history conceived as a set of realities outside its own boundaries.” Rather, literature should be recognised as an integral part of historiography, capable of shaping and interpreting historical experience. Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s work exemplifies this relationship: his narratives engage with history not simply as background but as substance, using fiction as a means of organising and making sense of Kenya’s colonial and postcolonial realities. Yet, many of Ngugi’s critics overlook this historiographic dimension, failing to see his fiction as part of Kenya’s broader historical discourse. For Ngugi, narrative serves not merely as art but as a vital tool for constructing, questioning, and redefining history itself.

Though scholars have paid attention to the notion of rootlessness and rootedness including the native’s struggle with the land or geographical expansion, in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s works one can observe the sense of resistance along with rejuvenation in the context of visions of land or aestheticism. The depiction of Gikuyu land and culture renders that the Gikuyu see land as connecting them to God and to their ancestors, as well as to the village community. The Gikuyu myth of creation asserts that the land was bestowed to them by God; in addition, “Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors of the tribe lie buried. Culture, traditions, and social complexities challenged Eurocentric binaries prevented in colonial-era literature. The glorious past had been subjugated and needed further rejuvenation. This study explores fictional and non-fictional works, to engage the issue of rootlessness and vice versa. The selected works are basically chosen to justify the relevance of the topic under study. The focus of this research is to dismantle the process of ecological narratives in African realities as represented in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s writings. The study offers a critical perception into various Ecological models imposed on African indigenous and their struggle with culture and nomenclature.

The writings of Ngugi’s and similar other authors have played a seminal role in bringing about the ideas related to ecocritical resistance and rejuvenation. Much has been discussed on the theme of rootlessness. This research will hegemonize land aestheticism

over an aesthetic free of individual and culturally sensitive standards of beauty. Without such an aesthetic outlook, landscape conservation is too easily dismissed as an individual response to aggrieved personal savor, a taste which enjoin little support. A wide aesthetic conceptualization can muster the consensus necessary to successful action.

Ngugi withstands the disadvantage of reconciling the society to landscapes metamorphosed by imperialism and neo-colonialism. This research either addresses ecological, economic, or social concerns, or on the application of novel methods in landscape study, making landscape aesthetics an afterthought. It also strives to reconcile ecology and aesthetics, or it tries to coalesce aesthetics as one of the proportions of landscape sustainability.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This research interrogates Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Weep Not Child*, *Devil on the Cross*, *The River Between*, and other non-fictional writings investigates the motif of ecological consciousness and the trauma of the 'other', the native felt segregated and is inclined to shed the old tradition for the sake of new hence pave way for exploring the margins of modern culture.

This study also examines works written by Ngugi and some other similar authors in the context of environmental degradation, ecological consciousness, cultural assimilation, Deculturation, Imperialism, rejuvenation and resistance. The selected works of this author and related works on this theme attempted a justification of this paper. Critics such as Simon Gikandi, Patrick Williams, and Rob Nixon have provided critical comprehension into Ngugi's political and cultural perspective. However, few researches have aimed explicitly on the ecological proportions of his writing. Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' imparts a valuable framework for understanding how environmental degradation is employed as a gradual form of colonial violence. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's writings on postcolonial ecocriticism further bridges the gap between cultural and ecological resistance. This research builds upon these theoretical contributions to reveal how Ngugi's treatment of land and environment re-defines postcolonial scuffle in ecological terms.

One of the most referred sources on Ngugi is Simon Gikandi's book so popular among critics is: *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* and his review article "Ngugi's Conversion: Writing and the Politics of Language", studies Ngugi's "liberal" phase, for example, Ngugi conceived his use of language as a way of "entering into the spirit of things" and of establishing communion with his environment; he admired D. H. Lawrence for his capacity to "enter into the soul of the people, and not only of the people, but even of the land, of the countryside, of things like plants, of the atmosphere" (Duerden 121,122). While his early novels resonate with the contradictions of history, his theory of language posited an ahistorical realm of freedom. In 1962, Ngugi asserted that the freedom which enables good writing is not political

freedom but individual freedom- “The end should be man ultimately freed from fear, suspicion and parochial attitudes: free to develop and realize his full creative potential” (Homecoming 23). Beneath this yearning for a universal language of human essence, however, the novelist was haunted by the language of real life; he lived with the concept that in the Kenyan scene of the last sixty years you cannot separate economics and culture from politics. The three are inter- woven. A cultural assertion was an integral part of the political and economic struggle” (Homecoming 26). “What do these contradictory positions tell us about Ngugi’s emerging politics on language and culture? Can they be explained by the divided consciousness of the African novelist on the moment of transition from colonialism to independence?”

Both fiction and history, while having distinctive characteristics, also share extensive similarities. As Carol Sichermann (1989, 348) puts it, “Ngugi blurs the lines between history and literature and that, perhaps as a consequence of this blurring of the two genres, the distinction between Ngugi and his narrators and certain characters also becomes blurred”. Sichermann’s stand is that Ngugi’s narration is steeped in Kenya’s historical landscape imagery and, indeed, at times bounds close to direct allusion on actual historical personages and events. In the act of historical recuperation, Ngugi’s recounting of land in his early novels comprises these traditional Gikuyu beliefs about the land and makes it a part of the Gikuyu life as well. The theme of a splendid past evinces itself clearly in Ngugi’s novels that allocate direct colonial presence in Kenya such as *Weep Not Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965), that past lingers on as a subtext in the novels set on the theme of rejuvenation. This study unravels the labyrinth of land aestheticism in the context of indigenous mind set, which will be helpful to dismantle the after effects of colonialism not only over the body of the colonized but over the land too.

Conclusion

Ngugi’s fictional world examines land under the framework of the ecological theory of landscape aesthetics and identifies various disparities between cultural symbols and natural symbols; prospect and refuge; cultural identity and stability versus control and the ability to manipulate. R. Binder et. al. examines this - “How a society blends these contrasts results in a landscape unique in time, space and culture the freedom to control and manipulate, which is recognized by Bourassa (1988), but fully articulated by Rodiek (1988), is critical; according to him this creates responsibility and requires that the future be taken seriously. Ultimately, landscapes deserve serious attention. They are conserved not because they are beautiful or pretty and quaint but because they contain the symbols that define civilization” (R. Binder et al, 1994, 50).

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