



AN EXAMINATION OF THE REPRESENTATIONS OF NATURE IN THE SHORT STORIES OF AWARD WINNING ZAMBIANS

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Abstract:

The short story scene of award winners in Zambia is dominated by female writers. *Chicken*, by Efemia Chela, was nominated for the Caine Prize for African writing in 2014. *A Hand to Hold*, by Mali Kambandu, won the 2018 Kalemba Prize, a local award for Zambian writers. *The Sack*, by Namwali Serpell, won the Caine Prize in 2015 and *Madam's Sister*, by Mbozi Haimbe, was the African regional winner of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize in 2019. Studies between literature and the physical environment have become an area of interest for many writers. Following the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005 – 2014) and Agenda 2030, this study examines the representations of nature and ecocritical issues in the works of four award winning Zambian short story writers. Using the model by Glotfelty (1996), the examination addresses two issues (1) how nature is represented in four award winning short stories (2) the ecocritical issues raised in the short stories. Through a qualitative, textual analysis of the short stories, the findings highlight contributions that literature by Zambian writers can make towards the discourse on sustainability issues and raise awareness about nature and environmental concerns of the 21st century.

Keywords: ecocriticism, physical environment, nature, short story, Zambia

1. Introduction

Ecocriticism has been divided into first and second waves where the first wave was preoccupied with the environment as nature as an entity itself and defending it (Buell, 1995) while the second wave (Bressler, 1999) sees nature and human dwellings as interdependent. Ecocriticism looks at how texts portray environmental concerns and how nature is treated in the texts. This study highlights the value of discussing the relationship between the physical environment and literature and it is not its goal to debate the differences or indeed the meaning of ecocriticism to the Anglo-American literary reader or the meaning of ecocriticism through post colonialism to the African literary reader.

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As a theoretical movement that began in the 1990s, ecocriticism seeks to address among other issues the need for concerted efforts to tackle climate and destruction of the environment through ecological theory and tools of literary analysis. Although literary texts give us the pleasures of the natural world, they demonstrate how human beings use and interact with nature. The risk of an ecocritical analysis lies in the possibility of misrepresenting a given text to drive a particular position or way of thinking. The critic therefore needs to be aware of his or her position as a commentator and endeavor to represent the 'truth' in the text. The current study realizes, among other key approaches, the influence of psychoanalytic theory, postmodern approaches and the historical approaches in an attempt to understand a text. Beyond these realizations, noted African writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have shown in their works that there is an obvious interrelation between nature and human beings. Contrary to certain perceptions that African literature has not added much to the discourse on ecocriticism, this paper is of the opinion that literature by Africans and especially Zambian writers does perceive ecocriticism and incorporates it in their works. The works may not mention ecocriticism as a concept, but the content speaks for itself.

Ecocriticism does provide a brand of environmental literacy in the form of lived environments especially in Zambia. In the past, Zambia has experienced drought, food shortages, disease outbreaks, locust and army worm invasions and pollution, among other issues. Poems and novels that capture these happenings and their relation to the environment and humans have been written. But what about the literature by award winning Zambians? Do they address these issues and many other environmental concerns for the modern Zambian reader? Between 2005 and 2014, during the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, there were award winning works by Zambian writers. For example, Ellen Banda Aaku won the 2004 Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa for her work *Wandi's Little Voice*. She further won the Commonwealth short story prize in 2007 for *Sozi's Box*. In 2010, she won the Penguin prize for African writing in *Patchwork*. Namwali Serpell's short story *Muzungu* was selected for the best American short stories in 2009. This current study focuses on works by Zambians since 2014, which was the end of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and replaced with Agenda 2030. During this same period (after 2014), it is important to note that a collection of poems by Kayo Chingonyi won the Dylan Thomas Prize in 2018 although poetry award winners are not the subject of this paper.

The study addresses (1) the representations of nature in the short stories *A Hand to Hold*, *Chicken*, *The Sack* and *Madam's Sister* (2) the ecocritical issues addressed in the works and (3) the implications for environmental awareness and change.

2. Material and Methods

The study is a textual analysis of the short stories using Cheryll Glotfelty's approach, who defines ecocriticism as "*the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment*". This paper explores (1) representations of nature, (2) the ecocritical issues

embedded in the author's narratives, (3) and the implications for environmental awareness and change. The representation of nature in each text addresses the following themes:

- 1) Nature as destroyer or potential cause of suffering;
- 2) Nature as the abode of the gods;
- 3) Nature as mysterious and elusive;
- 4) Nature as feminized and sexualized.

The ecocritical issues are themed as follows:

- 1) Drought and global warming;
- 2) Food shortage;
- 3) Environmental diseases;
- 4) Exploited and damaged environment;
- 5) Place as important and emotional signifier.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 A Hand to Hold

3.1.1 Representations of Nature

In *A Hand to Hold*, the reappearance of a former helper or maid causes further deterioration of the already weak relationships of a middle class family. The story represents nature in two main ways. Firstly, nature is represented as destroyer and potential cause of suffering. The description of Reeda's house as having too many cobwebs and the "*hazy sunlight beats down*" shows the destructive effects of nature. The description of the outside as being so hot and pictures having faded in the Sun confirms the representation of nature as destructive. Secondly, nature is represented as mysterious and elusive. The representation of nature as being mysterious and elusive is seen in the story when streaks of light pierce the darkness, the water refreshing and steadies her breathing, the pristine and emerald garden and the calming effect of the gaze into the garden. The story does not describe nature as abode of the gods and nature is not feminized or sexualized.

3.1.2 Ecocritical Issues

The most prominent ecocritical issues raised in the story are (1) exploited and damaged environment and (2) environmental diseases. The story opens with a grim image of an exploited and damaged environment "*The bodies, busy with activities – sweeping mounds of hair from their salons into the dusty street...*". This statement alone displays the compounds' (community) ignorance of the effects of hair, particularly synthetic hair on the environment although the story does not mention what kind of hair this is. In paragraph 2, noise pollution through music from different "*plots, stalls, shops, houses*" fills the streets at "*piercing volume*". The description of the houses as "*crammed so close to each other that the neighbours can hold hands from their windows*" is further explained by dust and narrowing roads as one goes deeper into the compound. The issue of environmental

diseases is portrayed by the maid's suffering from pneumonia, a disease caused by germs in the air we breathe. The description of Reeda's surroundings partly explain the condition of the inhabitants. Her neglected environment, exemplified by dust gathering on the steps leading to the house and the dust gathering in the house works as a source of disease. Neighbors' neglecting each other and their unconcern to clean the surroundings adds to creating a healthy environment for diseases. The story does not deal with issues of drought and global warming, and food shortage.

3.2 Chicken

3.2.1 Representations of Nature

In the story *Chicken*, there are instances when nature is represented as destroyer and potential cause of suffering. The story tells of how "*window edges taped shut to keep out the cold*" and "*cold places where money...girls and boys would die during the dry season.*" There is no reference to nature as the abode of the gods in the story. However, nature is regarded as mysterious and elusive. When the rose bushes are being pruned and yet their growth is inevitable; how dust collects on the front yard by action of other unnamed forces. There is a reference to the ancient forests of Ghana. The story further shows how the "*cold mist cloaked me in damp as I stepped...*". The story further describes the coastal wind as a "*blustering soundtrack*". The wind is sexualized and this is evident in the incident where it lifted up the narrator's skirt in public.

3.2.2 Ecocritical Issues

The exploited environment is seen in the plight of the chickens as the narrator was told to kill some chickens. The narrator "*searched myself for violence and strength*" to slaughter the chickens. This suggests that the action of killing the chickens doesn't come naturally and taming the environment implies being able to kill. There is reference to an exploited environment where the narrator speaks of "*a tiny snail that had escaped being stewed*". The actions of human beings as masters and exploiters of their environment is clearly depicted here through the escaping snail.

3.3 The Sack

3.3.1 Representation of Nature

In *The Sack*, there are descriptions of nature represented as destroyer and potential cause of suffering. The scene where the chicken is being mauled by ants shows how nature is wild and uncontrollable. The same ants "*snipped at his skin*" as he tried to help the chickens. The boy is seen as gripped with fear at the sight of the chicken and the ants. He has also been bitten by the ants. The image of the security gate being swamped with insects is yet another indication of the potential destruction or suffering nature could cause. The birthing process is also portrayed as a potential cause of suffering and as destroyer, leading to death. The "*metallic smell of dried blood*" shows familiarity with death, a destruction. The Sack also shows nature as mysterious and elusive. For example, the chicken and ants' scene happens in nature's own unknown ways. Also, the sky is referred

to as being bruised and night as the bottom of the garden. The description of the light as having moved from “*copper to white gold*” is described as the “*day spending itself freely.*” In no terms does the story describe or insinuate nature as being the abode of the gods. The story does not feminize or sexualize nature.

3.3.2 Ecocritical Issues

The story raises the ecocritical issue of an exploited and damaged environment to a certain extent. The practice of fishing, although not told to what extent, reveals a common economic activity. Humans have harnessed this activity to their advantage for years. Even the cooking of the chickens reveals humans’ control of their environment.

3.4 Madam’s Sister

3.4.1 Representation of Nature

In *Madam’s Sister*, nature is represented as destroyer and cause of suffering and as mysterious and elusive. The story describes the narrator as “*stew in the heat*” and “*the sun hammers down on me*” and a “*sort of sticky, concentrated heat that makes the asphalt go soft*”, and “*the heat is like a blanket wrapped around me; humid, suffocating*”, referring to the uncontrolled heat from the sun. On the other extreme, the narrator shows how the cold forces him to get closer to the brazier to warm himself. The narrator also discusses the action of mosquitoes as whining in the darkness “*until the mosquitoes finally drive us inside*”. The story shows how the charcoal is treated after it has been used so that it can “*dry in the sun tomorrow for re-use*”. Nature’s own mysterious ways prepares the charcoal for reuse. The description of the “*sweet smell of honeysuckle*” from the garden making its way into the house and bringing an intriguing aroma is a mysterious and elusive occurrence. In the story, nature is not presented as the abode of the gods and is not sexualized or feminized.

3.4.2 Ecocritical Issues

The story brings out important ecocritical issues. Pollution as an effect of an exploited and damaged environment clearly stands out and is particularly singled out as a primary concern although it is described in humorous terms. The narrator says the way home “*is in the thick smell*”. The narrator further explicitly describes the condition:

“the smell of green water wending through the Komboni; carving out islands where houses sit. Infested waterways carrying colourful rubbish around the islands to dump it in the open-air sewage treatment plant on the outskirts of Mumana”

The narrator’s wish of escaping the crowded streets and noisy taverns is stated. Additionally, the narrator is uncomfortable with the polish that is applied on verandas which smells like “*industrial grade paraffin*”, which highlights the effects of chemicals produced by industries on the environment. The weave, a much-praised possession for Madam’s sister and Chipo, the narrator’s wife, is described as “*waxy and synthetic*”

strands". This forms part of the rubbish mentioned and it is clearly an environmental danger. The issue of the potential for and occurrence of environmental diseases is clearly discussed in the story. The story makes reference to a previous cholera outbreak in Zambia when the army was brought in to clean the streets of Lusaka. The narrator observes that a few weeks after the clean-up, "the green water and rubbish" had returned. The story further shows the "green smell clings to all of us...". Also, the constant "slapping at the mosquitoes that needle our arms and legs" is a reference to a potential malaria illness, which is a result of mosquitoes breeding in the stagnant green water. The idea of "shared bathrooms and toilet facilities" further causes this collection of the green stream "behind the bathroom block".

The place as an important and emotional signifier is exemplified in phrases such as the "London style", "approaching Mumana" through the smell, "Yard vs Komboni, the Garden, Lusaka heat and the veranda".

There is a slight reference to food shortage in form of references to poverty, no food and crowded houses. Global warming can only be inferred from the attention paid to the description of the heat.

4. Conclusion

The representations of nature in the short stories portray nature as a destroyer and potential cause of suffering. Although all four stories make reference to environmental issues, *Madam's Sister* is explicitly direct and puts the environment in a prominent position in the story.

All the short stories do not present nature as an abode of the gods and therefore, no divine characteristics are emphasized in the stories. In all the short stories analyzed, nature is presented as mysterious and elusive and leaves humanity in a state of wonder and curiosity.

There is an obvious connection between humanity and nature in the short stories, especially through humans' uncontrolled activities and actions on nature. The two affect each other and this theme is prominent in the short stories. This theme clearly stands out in *The Sack* especially the fish and chicken meals; the cutting of the chicken's head and the abundance of vegetables in *Chicken*; the willy-nilly disposal of rubbish and failure to keep a clean environment in *Madam's Sister* and a lack of concern for environmental hygiene in *A Hand To Hold*.

These stories do not aim as agents of change or ecological narratives. However, *Madam's Sister* places significant emphasis on the treatment of the environment. The short stories would not necessarily lead to change in beliefs or embrace environmentally friendly practices. In *A Hand to Hold* and *Madam's Sister*, the squeezed houses and loud music leave no room for environment friendly practices to germinate. The short stories highlight this plight, but do not aim to bring out a discourse on cultural change. The change from rural to high density urban conditions leads to cultural change which is devoid of environmental consciousness. However, the concept or theme of the garden

recurs in all the four short stories and serves as the one place where there is sanity amidst the chaotic surroundings of an otherwise imperfect and neglected environment.

The analysis has revealed that award winning short story writers in Zambia are aware of environmental issues. However, there is a need for more deliberate attention to environmental narratives and issues that affect us now for us to improve and change the discourse at community, national and international levels. Because of the recognition of their works, they are better positioned to serve as a mouthpiece.

About the Author

Alex Simpande holds an MA in Applied Linguistics and is currently a lecturer of language and communication skills at Copperbelt University in Zambia. He has taught language, linguistics and literature in Zimbabwe, Madagascar and Zambia. He has published articles and presented at conferences on language and literacy practices, soft skills, communication skills assessment, and education for sustainable development and teacher training. He is a member of the Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa (EEASA).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no actual, potential, or perceived conflict of interest in respect of this work.

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