

Nobel Prize: A Shot in the Arm for African Eco-Criticism

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The award of this year's Nobel Peace prize to African environmentalist Wangari Maathai is a big boost to eco-criticism in the study of the continent's literature. Eco-criticism, a relatively new approach to literature, is the study of the inter-relationship between art and the natural world.

An elated Wangari Maathai receives news of the Nobel Peace Prize: "She was recognised for her environmentalist efforts."

Although African critics have over the years examined the relationship between literature and other forms of social consciousness such as morality, politics, psychology, pedagogy and philosophy, a more conscious insertion of the study of environment in criticism would help us understand literature better and appreciate the art's interaction with other forms of human practice.

Prof Maathai is the first African woman to win the award, and although she is not a literary personality, there are a few poems dedicated to her and her "green" campaign.

For over three decades, she has been advocating the rights of forests and women, the rights of the easily overlooked "other". Since post-colonial readings of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the Western view of Africa as a baffling space which, like a woman, has to be tamed and controlled, has dominated cultural discussions on Africa.

African literature has responded to the views expressed by Conrad's male characters, from whose perspective Conrad presents the story in order to mock imperialists.

African texts, ranging from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness*, have attempted to valorise the "forest" as a possible site of development which didn't hear about civilisation for the first time from the urbanised West.

Since the publication of William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology", eco-criticism has emerged as one of the fresh ways of explaining the nature and function of art. Also called the "green theory", eco-criticism entered rural universities in America in the 1980s and in Britain in the 1990s. But it remains, like forests, in the margins of mainstream literary theory. It is rarely practised consciously in the African academy, although expressions like "man's struggle with the environment" are often heard in literary essays.

In the West, eco-criticism focuses mainly on the 19th century literature which celebrated nature and wildness. In Africa, it would be more energetic because most of the literature has a rural setting or a degenerate urban background that expresses a longing for the lost rural peace.

It is no accident that the most widely read African text, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, is set in a village called Umuofia which is the Igbo word for "children of the forest".

"Reversing Conrad's male characters' view of the African forest as a site of death," *Things Fall Apart* typifies African village life and its richness as an organic self-sustaining forest which has almost everything that the West - in its arrogance - claims to have come to introduce.

In the forests of Umuofia, there is a system of education, a rich philosophy, and sophisticated art, not to mention a complex religion and medical practice.

Similarly, the clarity of symbolism around which the main conflict is built in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, another African classic, resides in the way the author opens the narrative with a meticulous observation of the topography as he painstakingly describes Makuyu and Kameno ridges and valleys.

Incidentally, even the most jocular of African art expresses this deep interaction between literary imagination and the natural world. To give but one simple example, despite the vulgarity in Wakimbizi's song "John", the playful panegyric (praise song) to male genitals that seem to have run away from duty indicates African respect for forests. In the song, the enigmatic "John" is prefigured as the toast of womenfolk who hides in a mysterious "msitu" (forest/bush).

Through sexual overtones, the Wakimbizi trio of Mr Filter (Henry Masheti), Mariko (Morris Masheti) and Andre (Andrew Mbogo) present the forest as the figurative site upon which self-protection, human regeneration and most intense bodily pleasures are likely to occur.

More profound than Wakimbizi's exercise in sexual references is a richer body of African verse that weaves the natural environment into its themes to enhance the cognitive and political value of images of African natural environment.

In her writing, Zimbabwean poet Kristina Rungano invokes the environment in the form of grass, trees, butterflies, and the weather to comment on political and social issues facing her nation and underline the possibilities of the end of the prevailing confusion.

Written from a woman's perspective unlike Wakimbizi's male-centred "John", Rungano's verse is loaded with images of the life-giving powers of nature which intersect with the resilience of the African woman to widen human possibilities. The poet complexly conflates the beauties of nature and the qualities of male and female love, to underline nature as regenerative.

In a collection of poetry entitled *A Storm is Brewing*, Rungano deploys images of turmoil succeeded by serenity and bounties from nature to underline that the African environment wouldn't harm us despite the enigma that it generates.

In the poem "After the Rain", Rungano captures a moment of triumph in the afternoon sun after a storm. We see the flourish of nature as "leaves bristled in the woods"; the earlier deaths are replaced by peace, and images of "virgin clouds" replace the gloom that ruled life just hours earlier. Human life still seems to fear the world because of the tumult of the past, but the poem foresees absolute peace as people anticipate "the same familiar beautiful Zimbabwe" where nature (symbolised by lightning) is tame and friendly.

In the poem "This Morning", Rungano presents a female persona recalling a moment of love with the cosmos (Dynamo, the ruler of the night) who is personified as a potent man. The speaker longs for that

moment when she is interlocked with the life-giving forces of the environment in complete harmony. As presented in the poem, nature is caring in this act of the couple's bodily pleasure. "O gentle breeze/ o fireflies that hovered over our nest in protective harmony." The whole universe rejoices their love, as "flowers, the grass, even the little shrubs bloom" to mark the union of the persona with the enchanting powers of the environment.

Beyond love and romance, the African environment is political. If forests served as the sanctuaries for freedom fighters, nature itself seemed to presage and support armed struggle. Liberation African poetry invokes nature to foreshadow the revolution that would rock the continent when the oppressed rise up in arms against the oppressor. Maria Manuela Margarido from Sao Tome, where the Portuguese army and a band of white settlers massacred innocent people in February 1953, uses sharp images drawn from nature to show the environment as sympathetic with the fight for human rights. The land joins in the passionate condemnation of colonial atrocities. In the poem "Landscape", she presents parrots that "explode" as they fly. We experience figures of "tornados" "ploughing the sky with mad/plumes". These symbols drawn from the environment express the anguish of the people struggling against colonialism.

Yet, African literature doesn't blindly celebrate the forests. The forests can be a source of death and impotence if used inappropriately. When Lawino (Acholi for "woman") in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* laments that her husband's house is "a dark forest of books", the metaphor of the forest is unflattering because the books, symbols of Westernisation, that form the forest have rendered Ocol ineffective. The poetry approves of forests only as life-giving natural forms that sustain human development and liberation, not as a place of hiding from reality.

Literary studies are experiencing a crisis because of a "forest" of theories that obscure human values. Then, wouldn't we be worsening the situation by proposing eco-criticism, yet another theory among many others, for the study of African literature? Yes, like "John" in Wakimbizi's song and Ocol in p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, the African elite seize the slightest opportunity to bolt to the forest, away from the realities of their African surroundings. To echo the words of poet Miriam Were, critics want to "run out of mud" and station themselves in sophisticated academic spaces where they can theorise and abstract issues from reality.

Critics now hide in a forest of theories which, through very difficult language, de-emphasise the link between art and the environment, thus claiming that literature reflects itself as opposed to holding a mirror to the world. While current theories would have us believe that the world is a social construct that is primarily mediated through language, and that everything is all but a fictional construct, eco-critics maintain the environmentalist ethical emphasis on a world beyond the text and beyond the reader.

In a word, Wangari Maathai's recognition by the world for her environmentalist efforts gives African eco-criticism a much-needed shot in the arm.

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