
Ecological Imagination in Henry Ole Kulet's the Elephant Dance

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To cite this article:

Ahmed Osman Warfa, Lester Mwetu. Ecological Imagination in Henry Ole Kulet's the Elephant Dance. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 10, No. 4, 2022, pp. 252-256. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20221004.18

Received: July 15, 2022; **Accepted:** August 1, 2022; **Published:** August 15, 2022

Abstract: The discourse surrounding the environment is an important one because mankind has a symbiotic relationship with nature. Preservation of the indigenous environment is therefore a key aspect in ensuring quality of life. Human beings thus have a duty to protect the ecosystem in order to make the universe a safe haven for man, flora and fauna. While this is so, a lot of human effort is required to mitigate environmental deterioration and ensure optimal ecosystem through conservation of the indigenous environment. At the heart of Ole Kulet's *The Elephant Dance* is the question of ecological sobriety. This paper is therefore a reading of Ole Kulet's indigenous art and eco-literary thoughts depicted in the novel. The paper interrogates the impediments of a suitable ecology as represented in the novel and examines the ways in which Kulet resolves the issues. The analysis of the text is guided by eco-criticism theory which illuminates the nexus between literature and ecology. Kulet's literary engagement with the environment in this novel contributes to the debate around nature conservancy and the need to protect the indigenous environment. This research concludes that Kulet captures precisely the environmental crisis in *The Elephant Dance* and offers hope of a better ecosystem. The paper will be a modest contribution to extant studies on ecology.

Keywords: Ecology, Ecocriticism, Indigenous Environment, Imagination

1. Introduction

The environment which is the "conditions you live or work in and the way they influence how you feel or how effectively you can work" consisting of the "air, water and land in or on which people, animals and plants" [1]. United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) defined environment as the "sum of all external factors, both biotic and non-biotic, to which an organism is exposed" [2]. In all, man is the mold of the environment above all other creatures because he has the intellectual and moral capacity to protect and nurture the environment. Yasin argues that "both aspects of man's environment, the natural and the man-made, are essential to his well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights, the right to life itself" [3]. Timothy Clark sums up that "the 'environment', after all, is, ultimately, 'everything'" [4].

Ecological crisis is a salient feature of perhaps all the postcolonial countries. Case in point is the environmental

situation in Niger Delta Region in Nigeria. The oil and gas industry economy has largely contributed to environmental degradation in the region. The oil companies, which are Western owned have operated in complete disregard for the environment. The Ogoni people have been the biggest casualties in the environmental disruption around the Niger Delta Region and have continuously fought for the restoration of their environment to attain dignified living standards through agitation for proper governing of the oil and gas industry. United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) published in August 2011 and its review published in May 2012 vindicates the position taken by the Ogoni people. The UNEP scientific report studied more than 200 locations, surveyed 122 kilometres of pipeline rights of way, reviewed more than 5,000 medical records, had meetings with thousands of people, and analyzed more than 400

samples including water from 142 groundwater wells and 780 boreholes, indicated that the oil companies had contaminated no fewer than 1,000 km² of Ogoniland [5].

The case on the environmental status of the Congo basin paints a picture of a diminishing forest cover as a result of deforestation. In the Congo Basin, the deforestation rate varies between countries. However, as a whole, the Congo Basin displayed a net deforestation rate of 0.09% between 1990-2000, compared with 0.17% between 2000 and 2005 [6]. Extension of infrastructure, agriculture and extraction of timber in the Congo Basin have been identified as the immediate causes of deforestation [7].

In Kenya, there is a striking impact of the growing population of refugees and its net effect on the natural environment. These refugee camps are often located in “semi-arid and agriculturally marginalized areas or (as the case is in Congo) near national parks or forest reserves” [3]. This therefore means that the concentration of a huge number of people in one place stretches the natural resources in that area to the limit. Such resources include water, shelter and forest cover. This in turn leads to environmental distress because conservation of ecosystem is rather complex. Yasin argues that the influx of refugees fleeing their mother countries overburden the ecosystem of their host nations and make environmental decision-making difficult.

To this end, ecological predicament in the world has been a major concern for environmental activists. Various disciplines including literature have come in to contribute to the growing ecological discourse in an attempt to mitigate environmental chaos.

2. Method of Analysis

Phillips assertion that “nature is thoroughly implicated in culture, and culture is thoroughly implicated in nature” [8] forms the basics of understanding eco-criticism theory. Ecocriticism as a terminology was first coined by William Rueckert in his “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” [9]. Rueckert argues that ecocriticism aligns itself to ecology or ecological tenets into the analyses of literature while Lawrence Buell sees ecocriticism as “as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist’s praxis” [10].

Eco’s question, “where does the truth of ecology lie?” [11] inspires Phillips to speculate, “does the truth of ecology lie in literature?” [8]. Without environmental crisis, Phillips insists “there might be no environmental imagination...nor might there be ecologists struggling to understand and repair the mechanisms of a damaged real world” [8]. This supposition places ecocriticism literary theory at the centre in studying Ole Kulet’s *The Elephant Dance*.

Ecocriticism or environmental criticism thus:

begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof – by virtue of their grasp of the power of the world, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and

direct environmental concern- can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems... [10].

Buell, Heise and Thornber posit that ecocriticism is a multidisciplinary approach which concurs with other forms of environmental humanities. The study of *Ecological imagination in Ole Kulet’s The Elephant Dance* is therefore an attempt to resolve the eco-cultural imbroglia and restore indigenous nature through literary persuasion as espoused in the novel. The study therefore explores Kulet’s quest to mitigate environmental adulteration through eco-critical eyes and re-imagine a sustainable ecology, indigeneity and nativeness as the ecological correctness for the earth’s environmental future.

3. Discussion

Kulet’s *The Elephant Dance* is a story surrounding issues of the environment conservation against a backdrop of ecological injustices in the fictional Konini area. More precisely, the novel tackles the emotive issue of land grabbing and the risk posed by human related activities on the wildlife. From the onset, the Konini residents are faced with eviction notice from their land which is to be leased to foreign investors in favour of tourism and hospitality. Ole Kulet’s puts it thusly:

At first, they refused to believe what the letter was telling them: that a hundred and fifty thousand acres of land that included the entire Konini forest in which they lived, had been leased out for ninety-nine years to a white man called Dick Jones. Henceforth, the letter told them, all the trees in that forest, all the elephants, all the rhinos, buffaloes and all other animals that they believed were given to them by God, at the beginning of time, now belonged to Dick Jones [12].

This assertion from the text clearly subverts the will of the indigenous people of Konini forest people who must now put a spirited fight to protect their land. Firstly, neocolonialism is at play here because the African person, in an independent state still undergoes postcolonial subjugation. The white masters represented by Dick Jones in this novel continue to control the African environment by forcing and illegal occupation through evicting the Africans. This cultural injustice surrounding land ownership is what puts the Konini residents at loggerheads with the corrupt government and the white man. The worry of the African individual is that a Whiteman will not protect the natural Konini forest, because being a foreigner, there will be minimal motivation to do so.

The presence of a former colonial master in Kulet’s novel portends an ecological crisis in Africa rooted to the continents colonial past which disrupted the cultural norms of the African people. Dick Jones can thus be read as a white settler who is bent on exploiting the African land. The penetration of the Europeans was aided by the coming of the missionaries who introduced Christianity as a mechanism to deprive the Africans among other things, their land. In this regard, White argues that:

Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion that the world has seen...Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religion...not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that men exploit nature for his proper ends [13].

The assertion above gives Dick Jones the impetus to conquer African land because he finds justification from religion to rule over and exploit the natural environment. Jones is thus keen to cut down the trees and turn the forest into a large scale farm for his own personal benefit. This shows the Eurocentric appetite for economic exploration, grounded in religion, at the expense of Africa's environment. In this aspect, the indigenous environment of Africa faces an ecological crisis upon the visitation of the European powers to the Konini forest area.

The indigenous people however vow to challenge the European incursion and "a delegation of thirty elders was formed and dispatched to meet the white man with instructions to tell him in no uncertain terms that Konini forest was not only their home, but their inalienable birthright and heritage for which they would rather die than forfeit" [12]. This state of the psychology of the Konini community is well captured by Lan who says that concerning land:

a strong emotional bond exists between individuals and the territory of their ancestors. The desire to live there is equaled only by the desire to be buried there. An important notion in the organizing of political and moral experience is the idea of living "at home". Home is essentially the home of the dead. Life is good if you live where your ancestors lived before you [14].

Sulenyia declares that "once we have told the white man that this is our land and that we are going no-where, we must come back and hunt warthogs as we did then" [12]. Sulenyia cannot allow to lose the land which has been a source of livelihood for the local community. The centrality of Konini forest to the indigenous community is key to understanding their cultural environment. The forest is quite significant because the "inhabitants argued back by saying the trees on which they hung the beehives grew on land and the waterbucks and the wild pigs they hunted for meat roamed the forest" [12]. Allowing destruction of the forest would mean losing a vital part of their culture which is tied to the forest ecosystem.

The poaching menace in novel is propelled by the security agencies who have insatiable appetite for elephant tusks. Meshach, Simon, Abednego and Shadrach are leading agents of poaching activities. Such characters thus participate to decimate the wildlife, such as the elephants, that are already facing extinction. Kulet underscores the enormity of the poaching escapades in *The Elephant Dance* when he vividly captures our imagination that:

When Shadrach and his men converged at the killing site, they counted eighty-five buffaloes that they had killed. They set up a butchering camp and for hours all the one hundred and fifty men worked tirelessly, butchering,

skinning and extracting sinew from the flesh and marrow from bones. The whole escarpment turned red with blood [12].

This tampering with the wildlife has an overriding negative effect on the environment. The poaching also presents a human-wildlife crisis and has a negative effect on the ecological equilibrium of Konini forest.

The wild animals in *The Elephant Dance* do not remain passive under provocation. They respond to poaching by launching deadly attacks to poachers, injuring and even killing others. This wrath presupposes that they, just as human beings fight for their space in the Konini ecosystem. They retaliate against human encroachment in an attempt to mark their territorial spaces. These animals have to safeguard themselves against imminent danger posed by man. Kulet presents to us the fate of Simon Labuto, a poacher who:

walked under the tree, his arm dripping with blood, the animal suddenly jumped down. Within a split second, there was a flash of black and yellow, and a ripple of muscle in one forceful movement, and a leopard caught Simon Labuto's throat and ripped it open. He died without a cry. It dragged the body into the bush [12].

This description of how Simon Labuto meets his death at the hands of a leopard points towards the notion of poetic justice espoused in the novel. Watkins opines that poetic justice is a literary device "through which the just and deserving are rewarded and the undeserving are punished, and these awards and punishments are causally connected in some fashion to deed's, misdeeds, virtues and vices that make them deserved" [15]. In this case, Labuto is "unjust" and "undeserving" because his involvement in poaching is a "misdeed" that makes him an ecological villain. He therefore must be punished to face violent death by the jaws of a leopard. Rymer's poetic justice is interested in the appropriate rewards and punishments awarded to heroes and villains. According to Rhymer [16] it would not amount to much if the villain encounters death by an accident as this would only be a mere event. Rhymer sums up his poetic justice by positing that vices and their punishments must be in sync. Kulet is therefore careful to navigate Labuto's death not as an accident but a deserving consequence of a man out to destroy the environment.

Kulet's disdain for poachers is also captured when he writes that Abednego:

would want to kill all the elephants, destroy all forest and cause the environmental degradation that would destroy mankind, kill innocent villagers...destroy lives of young men like Reson and his brother Sena and take away their land, all in the name of amassing more wealth, while it would only take one bullet to bring his life to a halt! [12].

The above utterance presupposes that the environmentalists in this novel would harbour the thought of killing Abednego in order to protect the good in the society. This extreme contemplation of murder speaks to the rage within the minds of those who are willing to protect Konini

forest at whatever cost in order to resolve the environmental crisis depicted in *The Elephant Dance*.

It is quite striking to notice female characters take centre stage in the quest to conserving nature. Regina Naitore is very particular with her conscience not to aid poaching by taking bribes. She is a stern environmentalist who cannot be enticed with money and gifts to comprise her call to conserve the environment. Naitore is blunt in her refusal to engage in any collusion with poachers and she tells us:

I have just now kicked out of my office three men who brought me gifts – as if I am the Queen of Sheba- just because I have been here as the officer in-charge of the station. It is only a stupid person who would not know those are bribes camouflaged as gifts. When are we going to see the end to this corruption? [12].

Naitore's candidness shows the feminine prowess playing out in natural conservancy. In placing women at the forefront of protecting the environment, Kulet ascribes to women's natural affinity towards the environment. That women, because of their inherent nurturing nature, are more close to the environment more than men. Shiva [17] posits that the women's dalliance with nature is as a result that both the environment and women have been exploited in equal degree and therefore hurting nature is synonymous to hurting women. This explains why Naitore is passionate about protecting the environment to the extent of putting her own life at risk by openly fighting the poaching syndicate upfront. Conservation of the environment is a very hearty matter to Naitore because "women's priorities are usually oriented towards the good of the community thus placing more emphasis on the protection of the environment and the resources within it" [18]. Valley's statement passes Naitore as a natural protector of nature owing to her womanhood.

It is not surprising that Naitore's deputy is also a woman. Naitore offers unwavering advice to her deputy not to participate in bribery schemes so that they protect the endangered species of wildlife. She is very categorical to her deputy, Leah Naipande that "if you do not intend to join them, you must learn to fight your own battles...but if you intend to join them, you can as well begin to pack your belongings" [12]. Kulet's choice of women as liberating the environment is therefore not accidental because the synergy of these two women is seminal in the ultimate dismantling of the poaching syndicate in Kulet's *The Elephant Dance*.

Kulet also employs the use of songs to mitigate environmental destruction. Reson reminisces the song thusly:

Oi, Oi Oi apa Those days when I
Oi apa ara oti; Was young
Leleiyo laleiyo I used
Laleiyo laleiyo To go to the forest. [12]
Naa kalo Entim

This verse of a song reawakens in Reson and the people of Konini forest the strength to fight for the conservation of the natural environment. Music is a very vital aspect of the soul and thus "affects the way we behave" [19] and "directs

and promotes ideas and [solicits] awareness..." [20]. These assertions directly speak to the inhabitants of Konini forest who use music to remind them of their duty to protect the environment which has served them all this time. The song essentiality promotes the ecological consciousness which is at the heart of Kulet in this novel. Kopecky puts it succinctly that "music can affect the ways in which we respond to our environmental surroundings" [19]. This point is therefore critical in understanding Reson's nostalgia of the forest which must be protected in the present times. The song is thus a rallying call to protect the natural environment.

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored Kulet's imagination of the ecosystem in *The Elephant Dance*. Various standpoints concerning nature have been examined in the novel to show the literary position in championing for environmental conservation. Ecocriticism as an analytical tool allows for interdisciplinary approach to ecological issues and places literature at the centre of ecological discourse. Literary engagement with nature is therefore critical in the fight against ecological injustices.

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Biography



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