

POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM AND THE POLITICS OF THE BODY IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *PETALS OF BLOOD*

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Abstract

There is a growing scholarly attention on the intersection between environmental degradation and the exploitation of women as well as postcolonial environmental studies and gender studies in Africa. Previous writings on environmental exploitation in Africa often occlude how women are connected to and affected by the environment. Thus, this study explores the feminisation of nature in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood* and interrogates the patriarchal notions that genders nature in order to foreground its exploitation the same way women are exploited. The intersection of postcolonial ecocriticism and gender studies is explored and serves as the theoretical framework of this study. The theory is used to show the interconnection between the exploitation of women and the environment. Through critical analysis of the female characters and nonhuman nature, the paper explores the connection between the exploitation of the bodies of African women and nature in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*. It argues that in the *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi recognises the impact of environmental exploitation on African women, the similarity in the patterns of environmental and women exploitations; and the colonial, patriarchal and capitalist notions that foreground them. Ngugi thus imagines a form of environmental consciousness and activism that is championed by 'gendered-people' who are averse to all forms of exploitation and hegemony. The study establishes a nexus between environmental justice and gender equity; and suggests that in *Petals of Blood*, the exploitations of women and the environment are foregrounded in the notion that women and nature are material objects and thus exploitable.

Keywords: Africa, Postcolonial, Environment, Intersection, Women, Exploitation.

Introduction

Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Postcolonial African Novels

This paper focuses on African women and the environment, and argues that Ngugi wa Thiong'o establishes a connection between environmental exploitation and the sexual, economic and social exploitation of women. It argues that in *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi articulates that though African women suffer more from historical and social systems (colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy) that foreground human and environmental exploitation, environmental consciousness and activism are more embraced by gendered or feminized humans (males and females); gendered and feminized are highlighted in the sense that such people must be averse to all forms of exploitation and hegemony (colonialism,

patriarchy, and capitalism) which perhaps favour the men. It is within this context that Gurreet Kaur writes that “it would be necessary to recognize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism” (189).

Through the episteme of postcolonial ecocriticism, this paper explores the connection of the African women and the environment, and how the African woman is exploited like the environment and also doubly dispossessed by patriarchy, colonial and neo-colonial structures. Thus, the cultural and social systems employed in the exploitation of African women and the environments are interrogated. Additionally, it looks at the dualisms and ambivalences of connecting women and nature in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood*, noting that while this connection shows a wholesome African woman’s affinity to nature, such connection and feminization of nature could reinforce exploitation through patriarchal and capitalist notions. These issues are examined through the theory of Postcolonial ecofeminism which accommodates the peculiarity of African women and environment.

While the theory of post-colonialism has flourished in the criticism of the African novel, ecocriticism as a theory has not been adequately utilised in the interrogation of the environmental history and peculiarity of African women. This has led to a growing literary discourse of African literature in postcolonial ecocriticism (Cilano and DeLoughrey 77) which takes its footing in the African novel tradition. Environmentally conscious writing is not new in postcolonial Africa. According to Gurreet Kaur, “if we were to look at some of the postcolonial countries such as those in Africa and South Asia, particularly India, we realize that these nations have a history of environmental activism and movements even before ecocriticism emerged as an academic discipline in the Western world” (188). However, the scepticism of African literary critics over approaching environmental issues from an eco-critical viewpoint stems from the fact that ecocriticism tends to globalize environmental problems and thus de-emphasizes the importance of the local and indigenous historical and cultural peculiarity of Africa, a problem and complexity postcolonial-ecocriticism tends to address (Caminero-Santangelo 7-8).

In Africa, while the environment is exploited, degraded and plundered, women are also exploited, abused, treated as the “other” by what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin describe as “various forms of patriarchal domination” (249). This is why the two theories that have often been adopted to explore the exploitation of postcolonial women and environment—Postcolonial Feminism and Postcolonial Ecocriticism—seem to have followed distinct but convergent paths in their critical and theoretical enterprises in showing a connection between the exploitation of women and nature. The intersection of these two theories has been called different names, including “postcolonial ecofeminism” (see Kaur, 2012). Kaur, in defence of his treatise on postcolonial ecofeminism, asserts that: “For many women around the world, their day-to-day lives depend on the survival of the forests and land that sustain their daily activities. *Thus*, their interest to conserve and preserve the environment around them stems from a daily effort to survive materially” (189)

Apart from the environmental challenges women face, Kirsten Holst Petersen maintains that the postcolonial and neo-colonial exploitation African women face is peculiar and distinct from that of their Western counterparts. According to her, “whereas Western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminism versus class emancipation, the African discussion is between feminist emancipation but also versus the fight against neo-colonialism, particularly in its cultural aspect” (250-252). The Postcolonial African woman struggles with a patriarchal culture that portrays her kind as invisible. The African woman’s experience is not a simplistic narrative but a unique complex construction of material, political, economic and religious oppression and exploitation that has been adequately addressed in postcolonial and feminist writings. Irrespective of the important roles they play which include food production, the African woman struggles with institutionalized barriers that inhibit expression, material growth and visibility. For instance, the institution of progeny and lineage in African culture is such that sees the female as under perpetual erasure whereas the male child is culturally recognized as an embodiment of filial succession and an important agent in maintaining the family lineage. On this ground, the African woman is disinherited of material wealth and properties which include land in most cultures. Citing an instance with the Gikuyu nation, Brendon Nicholls asserts that “becoming a woman among the Gikuyu meant submitting to exclusion from the ownership and inheritance of land and from access to political decision-making” (36).

Additionally, the postcolonial African woman’s body is a site for both patriarchal oppression and (post)colonial struggles as seen for instance in the Mau Mau prostitute during the emergency period in Kenya (Nicholls 72). Ngugi articulates cultural and historical peculiar challenges of the African woman as a colonized and tradition conditioned subject and dramatizes her rape, oppression, exploitation, dispossession, and the suppression of her active role in the historicization of Kenya’s nation building. This is what Anne McClintock articulates as “uneven gendering of the national citizen” (358). *Petals of Blood* therefore re-imagines and re-historicizes the peculiarity of the mediated construction of African women, showing, in Bina Agarwal’s terms, how “the processes of environmental degradation and appropriation of natural resources by a few have specific class-gender as well as locational differences” (150).

While there have been different theoretical frameworks that have been used to address the interconnection between the environment and women, the enterprise is one that is dynamic, open and ridden with new directions and development (see Gaard 2010). It is worthy of note that most of these theories (feminism, post-colonialism, ecocriticism, and post-structuralism) do not adequately address the core of postcolonial women’s oppression in relation to historical and contemporary environmental exploitation.

Following Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, and Rob Nixon, it has been argued that “the African experience and environment cannot fit into a global environmental epistemology” (Isiguzo 44) because of Africa’s colonial history and postcolonial experiences. Anthony Vital notes that for ecocriticism to really fit into African literary and critical consciousness, it must address African issues and “pose African questions *that centre on African experience* and find African answers, *and* will need to be rooted in local (regional, national) concern for

Africa's social life and its natural environment" with emphasis (88). Thus, critics in environmental humanities are embracing postcolonial ecocriticism for its imagination of the African place. This approximates what Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley describe as "infinite meanings": geographically, genealogically, and phenomenologically (4). Recent works such as Laura Wright's "*Wilderness into Civilized Shapes*": *Reading the Postcolonial Environment* (2010), Byron Caminero-Santangelo's *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology* (2014), and Cajetan Iheka's *Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (2017) are critical endeavours that re-read and address Postcolonial Ecocriticism, locating the postcolonial environment in the African novel. In this regard, African novels like the ones written by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, J.M Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, and *The Lives of Animals* and the more contemporary novels such as Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness* and *The Whale Caller* in recent times are being read as repositories of the complexities between post-colonialism and environmentalism.

It is important to note that Ngugi wa Thiong'o has been consistent in capturing the colonial legacy not just on human subjects but also on material nature. Apart from his attempts at addressing decolonization, he captures the environment as sites for (post)colonial exploitation and the contention between the idyllic past and consumerist present. While there are many readings of Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, Brendon Nicholls' political reading of the novel stands out for its location of the connection between women and land.

In his *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o observes land from the angle of environmental justice and directly connects Kenya's history of anti-colonial struggle with the activism against the destructive legacies of colonialism on the environment. Historically speaking, the novel resonates with what Caminero-Santangelo describes as "postcolonial regional particularism" (9) with its focus on (post)colonial Kenyan discourse on land expropriation and appropriation, the ecosystem of Ilmorog (Kenya), and how these issues link to global discourse on environmentalism, gender oppression, and capitalist consumerism from the pre-colonial Ilmorog to the postcolonial New Ilmorog.

Apart from its gender activism; *Petals of Blood* recognizes a compelling environmental agency. To echo Caminero-Santangelo's description of Ngugi's *The River Between*, *Petals of Blood* "represents an unambiguous or uncomplicated progression— even in terms of environmental discourse" (49). The pertinent issue in the novel is how colonial practices transform Ilmorog's ecosystem from its pristine nature as seen in the narratives of the old woman, Nyakinyua, and how the drought affected the environment and people of Ilmorog. Thus, *Petals of Blood*, according to Laura Wright is "an indictment of the environmental damage produced by colonialism and neocolonialism" (32).

Using the seemingly inextricable link between the African woman and land, Ngugi framed an anti (neo)colonial and patriarchal discourse. In *Petals of Blood*, mechanisms of gender exploitation enable a discourse that is material-nature dominated. The subaltern woman: a poor and exploited woman, voiceless and displaced to the fringes of the society, and excluded

from the hierarchy of power, is figured as a contested site as the land while (neo)colonial patriarchy is portrayed as their violator.

As pointed earlier, Ngugi wa Thiong'o identifies binary constructions in *Petals of Blood*, the gendered binary, which includes women, land, and gendered men; and the patriarchal binary which is both colonial and cultural. There is a fundamental juxtaposition between the gendered conservative subjects (Nyakinyua, Njuguna, Wanja, Abdulla, Karega and Munira) and the patriarchal consumerists (Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria Hawkins). In the same vein, there is a difference between the pre-colonial idyllic past and the postcolonial consumerist present; and the old Ilmorog rooted in communalism and a conservative eco-conscious culture (Caminero-Santangelo 52), which is contrary to the corrupt, individualistic and consumerist modernism of the New Ilmorog. Also, the preservative and therapeutic sexual relationship between Wanja and the gendered men is at odds with the exploitative sexual relationship Wanja has with the likes of Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria Hawkins. These binaries are rooted in patriarchy, capitalism, and the destructive colonial legacy and its impact on human and material nature. The particularity of the novel's stance on the historical exploitation of postcolonial Africa alludes to the apocalypse in the Bible's book of Revelation which Ngugi quotes at the beginning of the novel. Ngugi's reference to the crown, blood, conquering and destruction of the earth in Revelation, Chapter 6 resonates with his eco-activism in *Petals of Blood*. It also points to the environmental and human exploitation structured through imperialism.

The interconnection between the bodies of women and nature

It is important to note that while Ngugi constructs binaries in *Petals of Blood*, the dichotomies are fluidal. For instance, he feminizes some of his male characters in order to fit them into the episteme of nature to show that patriarchy should not be simplistically read as the men folk but rather as a complex structure that enables exploitation of women and the environment. Ngugi explores what, according to Cajetan Iheka, is a "notion of collectivity where like-minded men and women work together for their common interests" (126).

Contrary to Ngugi's inclusion of men in discussing exploited nature, some African writers have maintained a stricture between the connection of women and nature in their activities and writings. Writers like Tsistsi Dangaremba and Wangari Maathai, among numerous others, have shown how women in the strict sense of gender and the environment are exploited. Wangari Maathai, in her memoir, captures how the African woman through environmental activism can face oppression. Rob Nixon notes that "Kenya's Green Belt Movement, co-founded by Wangari Maathai, serves as an animating instance of environmental activism among poor communities who have mobilized against slow violence, in this case, the gradual violence of deforestation and soil erosion" (128). Following Ngugi, Kaine Agary in *Yellow Yellow* demonstrates where expatriates from the multinational oil companies do not just exploit and degrade the Niger-Delta environment, but also ravish their women and men (Akung and Iloeje 71).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* vividly captures the complexity of the African woman and the environment by demonstrating the politics of colonialism, neo-colonialism and African collaborators in the exploitation of the bodies of women and the environment. This exploitation poses a great threat to the subaltern African woman. Nixon observes that the "threat had its roots in a colonial history of developmental deforestation, most memorably evoked in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's epic novel *Petals of Blood*" (134). Of all the exploitations experienced in the novel by the major characters, the climax of the exploitation of the major two female characters, Nyakinyua and Wanja, is related to the land. In fact, the two female characters are the major characters that legitimately own land in the novel. Nyakinyua's ownership of land is through legitimate traditional transfer before losing it to the bank. Wanja re-acquires the land when the bank auctions it unlike the major male characters that appropriate lands illegitimately the way they rape women. The exploitation of land and women is a recurring pattern in Ngugi novels. In *Weep Not Child*, Ngugi genders land; land is conceived as the subject (or object) of struggle between the colonizer and colonized. The gendering of land in *Weep Not Child* provides the male characters a place upon which the conflict in the novel is built on. Also in *A Grain of Wheat*, Mumbi's body (sexuality) is imagined as a place of political contestation and national dialogue.

Ngugi reverses the patriarchal neo-colonial structure that seeks to disinherit the African woman. The disinheritance of the African woman is a recurring pattern in many African novels. In Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Condition*, Nhamo is chosen over Tambu as Nhamo is seen as the family's successor and should be better equipped than Tambu, seen as a female who will be married off someday. Also, Alpha Shange in the novel *Ifa Lenkululeko* describes the unequal status of women in African culture particularly in matters of inheritance. Thus, Nicholls asserts that "becoming a woman among the Gikuyu meant submitting to exclusion from the ownership and inheritance of land and from access to political decision-making" (36).

Through Nyakinyua's land ownership and its redemption by Wanja, Ngugi interrogates the notion of exclusion and re-imagines the African woman as an agency or custodian and conserver and repositions her as having the economic and cultural power that is often the reserve of men. The women's legitimate ownership of land is in apposition to the illegitimate capitalist appropriation of land by those in the consumerist league of Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria Hawkins. The acquisitive nature of neo-colonial patriarchy is also opposed to the matriarchy of Nyakinyua who "... represents hope as rooted in legitimacy, traditional communal identity and culture formed by a close relationship with the soil, embodying an ideal ecological wisdom and enabling effective environmental practice" (Caminero-Santangelo 43).

Consciously as the ideologue he is, Ngugi creates his major female characters to possess land which Nicholls calls "another contested domain" (18). By making a woman such a powerful symbol of patriarchy, he re-positions the woman's role in idyllic preservation of land. On the contrary, nature is exploited by powerful men like Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria who control the economy in collaboration with the former Western colonialists. Unlike the women who legitimately own and acquire land, these men forcefully acquired choice lands, and convert

them from their subsistence use to degraded sites for industrial pollution. The degradation of Kenyan lands resonates with the utilitarian objectification and sexual exploitation of Wanja by Kimeria and her loss of innocence as a teenage school girl. The trope of the raped land and woman underlies the creative conception of the exploited bodies in the novel.

Consequently, Ngugi's conception of women as nature (land), particularly Nyakinyua in the Old Ilmorog and Wanja, who are dominantly imagined and referenced in idyllic terms in the novel, should not be misconceived. The issue of feminizing nature and connecting it to women comes with its dangers and self - contradictions, particularly with the patriarchal and cultural notion that women are closer to nature. This notion which associates women with weakness, emotion, spirituality, and sees them as utilitarian equally, foregrounds the devaluation of nature and feminized values as opposed to the masculine which is associated with strength and reason, and therefore elevated (Birkeland 18-19).

The idea that women are 'essential nature' is sociological, capitalist, patriarchal and cultural, and not biological. As Joan Griscom puts it, no gender is closer to nature than the other. However, the social construct of gender could influence how one gender experiences nature. Thus, the argument of which gender is "closer to nature" is historical, and a "construct of culture" (Griscom 9). In the sense of consumerism, the allusion of women to nature by Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria in the novel are cultural, capitalist and exploitative.

On the contrary, the feminised eco-conscious men's perception of women as nature is ideal and healthy; that is, women are seen as more attuned and protective of nature. In fact, Munira once declares to Wanja that the women of Ilmorog "are one with the soil..." (75) In his *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta reiterates the cultural affinity of the Gikuyu woman with land and how women are the custodians of land which is associated with spirituality, recreation, sustenance, and preservation of the body:

The Gikuyu consider the earth as the 'mother' of the tribe, for the reason that the mother bears her burden for about eight or nine moons while the child is in her womb, and then for a short period of suckling. But it is the soil that feeds the child for a lifetime; and again after death it is the soil that nurses the spirit of the dead for eternity. (21)

Nicholls' reading of the *Petals of Blood* is instructive here. He points out how Munira's notions of women "are associated with the generative agricultural potential of the land" (123). While Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria association of land with women is to render them exploitable (appropriate and plunder), Munira's association of Wanja with the land is to apotheosize (idealize her power of procreation and sustenance).

Beyond the foregoing, there is an attempt to correlate the productivity of the land with sexuality. It is in this sense that Munira describes an impending sexual intercourse with Wanja as "my harvest" (Ngugi 66). Throughout the novel, the male characters employ gendered ecocritical terms in describing the body of Wanja. The exploration of Wanja's body is akin to the exploration of nature. Ngugi demonstrates this particularly in the night of the sexual encounter between Munira and Wanja, linking Wanja's womb to the moon. In the scene, Wanja anticipates the rising of the moon which she has been told would heal her

infertility. It is with the anticipation of this healing through the rising grandeur of nature that she offers her body to Munira in order to conceive a child with the moon up in the sky. It is a moonless night while they are in the hut. The failure of the appearance of the moon signifies the unhealed womb of Wanja. At the point Munira wants to leave, the moon appears (Ngugi 66).

Wanja's appeal to Munira when he is about to leave to break the moon over her reinforces how her body is one with nature, and establishes a connection between a woman's body and nature's body. Wanja leaves Ilmorog after the sexual encounter; Munira describes the absence of her body presence as an environmental hazard: "For him Ilmorog without Wanja had been a land of drought" (Ngugi 83). This interpretation reveals the important role of the African woman in establishing wholeness of not just the body but also that of the ecosystem.

Karega is not left out in the use of gendered ecocritical terms in describing the affinity of a woman's body and nature. The sexual relationship with Karega is described as "mutual nakedness" which alludes to tender ploughing of the land as the narrator notes that there is "tender readiness" while characterizing Wanja's vagina with "moistness" like a soil about to be cultivated (Ngugi 230). In Karega's thoughts in the novel, Wanja and nature submerge after their sexual intercourse: "So many experiences, so many discoveries in a night and a half harvest time for seeds planted in time past" (Ngugi 66).

The nature of Karega, Munira, and Abdulla's sexual relationship particularly that of Karega with Wanja, contrasts with that of Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria Hawkins which also points to the difference in the attitude of these two groups towards the environment. The healthy and consensual sexual relationship particularly between Karega and Wanja contrasts with the sexual exploitation of the young and unsuspecting Wanja by Kimeria who took advantage of her innocence. Kimeria's first sexual relationship with the young Wanja is symbolic of the unsuspecting way the colonialists invaded Africa and ravaged her pristine ecosystem. Furthermore, Kimeria's rape of Wanja during the journey of people of Ilmorog to Nairobi spells exploitation and control. The rape is symbolic of the many ways a resistant African female is conditioned, frustrated and maligned in her quest for and power and access to better her lot. This is demonstrated by Wanja's participation and leadership in the journey. Her sacrifice of her body and her participation in the journey are a powerful conserving mother figure narrative of an African woman in search of healing for her drought-ridden environment as exemplified in Joseph's sickness. Wanja's role as a force in both the new and old Ilmorog is a reversal of the patriarchal roles women are exempted from in African culture. It also shows how the postcolonial African woman has evolved from the doubly exploited subaltern to a powerful role of agency as it relates to herself, her people and the environment. Her imprisonment before the rape by Kimeria is a metaphor for colonial subjugation and reveals the "technical aggression and the male, militarized possession of the earth" and the exploitation of the African woman (McClintock 4).

While Wanja's sexual relationship with Kimeria, Chui, and Mzigo is consumerist, the site of Karega's copulation with Wanja reveals the novelist's vision of the connection between the subaltern African woman and nature. In the course of such an encounter through her recourse

to the therapeutic power of a nature, Wanja experiences “an inner peace and an inner lightness she has never felt before” (Ngugi 231).

In a similar way, Wanja’s body is presented to reflect both the prostituted woman and the prostituted environment. One is reminded of the colonial narrative of Africa as a wilderness which the colonialist declared an empty land, opened to them for ravaging. McClintock instructively reveals that the colonialist eroticizes the colony, seeing it as a sexually starved native woman in need of sexual satisfaction from the colonialist, thus, offering them “sex and submission” (25). This patriarchal and colonialist notion of empty or virgin land denotes lack of sexual agency and a need for sexual appropriation. It is with this notion that the African environment was violently exploited by the colonialists for raw materials for European industries while trees strange to the African soil were planted as cash crops, thereby changing the topography of the African environment. The native women were not spared; they were equally appropriated and raped by the colonialist.

During decolonization, the environmental degradation continues, particularly in Kenya, during the Mau Mau revolution. The environment and forests become a place of contest between the colonists and the Mau Mau revolutionaries. Women are not spared as they were forced to prostitute their bodies in exchange for information from the Mau Mau and for bullets from the colonialist. The women, according to McClintock were “reduced, in male eyes, to the space on which male contests are waged” (31). The Mau Mau prostitutes did this at great risk to their lives as any form of betrayal perceived by any side led to the execution of these women. As such, the war of decolonization is not only fought on African soil but on the bodies of African women. Wanja is reminiscent of the Mau Mau prostitute in the postcolonial era as she avails herself to the two groups of men in the novel, even though as has been pointed earlier she offers herself wilfully to Abdullah, Karega, and Munira. Thus, the exploitation of the African woman continues even in postcolonial time.

The characterization of Wanja is such that it exposes the exploitation of women in post-colonial Kenya. Wanja, after she dropped out of school because of an unwanted pregnancy, becomes a prostitute who killed her child. Her involvement in prostitution is symmetrical with the environmental degradation of the post-colonial state of Kenya, where the land/environment is prostituted out to tourists at the detriment of the wholesomeness of the Kenyan women who energize the tourism sector with their bodies. While these tourists tour the Kenyan natural environment they also tour the bodies of the Kenyan women. Wanja gives a lucid testament of these experiences of the prostituted bodies in her tale of the German tourist who wanted to have a bizarre kind of sexual relationship with her that involves the German tourist’s dog. Later in an unsaid reference to the sexual activities of women in a tourist village owned by the German, Wanja notes: “Women go there to sing native songs and dance for white tourists... they are paid ... well... that’s another story...” (Ngugi 292).

The Politics of the body: colonial and postcolonial exploitation

Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist, notes that instead of the development that ought to have come with decolonization it is “reduced to a continuation of the process of

colonialization... an extension of modern Western patriarchy's economic vision based on the exploitation or exclusion of women... on the exploitation and destruction of nature, and on the exploitation and destruction of other cultures" (189-90). In this vein, Elleke Boehmer holds the view that "once the desired social transformation has been secured, political leadership tends to reimpose gendered structures with more or less the same severity as their former capitalist and/or colonial foes" (45). This perception of exploitation is rooted in the patriarchal structure of gendering that establishes a nexus between nature and women, language, and culture. That is, the notion of women and the environment is gendered (feminised) which in turn leads to their exploitation and, to borrow Andre Benneth and Nichola Royle's words for men's "comfort, wealth, and well-being" (148). Benneth and Royle note that "such exploitation is produced partly by way of an identification of one with the other (women are said to be less rational than men, thus 'closer to nature', and therefore in need of civilizing, through masculine control and order)" (146).

There is a parallel exploitation and appropriation of the environment and Wanja's body by the same capitalists: Chui; Kimeria; and Nderi wa Riera. Wanja narrates how the trio took over the sole production of Theng'eta through an appropriation that dispossesses others, and how the environmental and economic exploitation by Mzigo, Chui, and Kimeria is linked to her body.

And the directors of the Kenya branch were Mzigo, Chui, and Kimeria. I could hardly accept this twist of fate.... I don't even know how I came back here... I go with all of them now... I play them against one another... It is easy because I only receive them by appointment... If there is a clash, the girls... they know how to handle the situation... and, strange... they pay for it... they pay for their rivalry to possess me... each wants to make me his sole woman... (293)

Citing the overall exploitation in *Petals of Blood*, Nicholls avers: "The broader implication is that the economic exploitation of Kenyan labour contains overtones of sexual imposition" (124).

The new neo-colonialists and the African patriarchs through consumerism and the cultural erosion of the people enjoy the exploitation of their people and live an excessively materialistic lifestyle. Ngugi wa Thiong'o establishes in the novel that colonial and postcolonial exploitation of the African woman and the environment are the same, and executed with the same patriarchal pattern and structure: "Christianity, Commerce, civilization: the Bible, the coin, the Gun... Holy Trinity" (88). Explaining further, Karega says about Africans: "In the beginning he had the land and the mind and the soul together. On the second day, they took the body away to barter it for silver coins. On the third day, seeing that he was still fighting back, they brought priests and educators to bind his mind and soul so that these foreigners could more easily take his land and its produce" (Ngugi 36). Note how this structured exploitation links the body and the environment: land and body, land and mind, and land and soul. Thus, having used Ilmorog as a metonymy for Africa, the author declares after the invasion of Africa and the consumerist deforestations of its precious trees which opened the earth to the blistering and bleaching sun causing environmental drought:

“But the Ilmorog they now came to was one of the sun, dust, and sand” (Ngugi 107). The narrator reveals that Wanja and Karega were especially struck by the change in the face of Ilmorog countryside: “so green in the past,’ she said. ‘So green and hopeful... and now this” (Ngugi 107).

This same pattern of exploitation is seen in the postcolonial Ilmorog where the Western neo-colonialists and their indigenous African collaborators have replaced the old colonial order. In the new Ilmorog is a new order of patriarchs. To advance their cause they still use the same colonial structure that enables extreme consumerism and exploitation: religion and force. As a harbinger to the new Ilmorog, the authorial narrator notes after the trip to the city: “Then two lorries came almost at the same time and brought men who started erecting a church building and a police post” (Ngugi 202). It was gradual but steady, the peaceful Ilmorog through consumerist modernism turned from “... a deserted village into a sprawling town of stone, iron, concrete and glass and one or two neon-lights...” (Ngugi 203).

Postcolonial modern Africa, as the new Ilmorog signifies, brings with it a new phase of decadence, spiritual loss, acute exploitation, and degradation of women and the environment as opposed to the pre-colonial Ilmorog of a rich and healthy environment. The narrator observes that the pre-colonial Ilmorog, during the days of its founder, Ndeni, had been a “thriving village” with “nature’s forests” as their environment which the peasants tamed to bring “forth every type of crop to nourish the sons and daughters of men” (Ngugi 120) after which “imperialism came and changed the scheme of things” (Ngugi 6). This healthy environment is destroyed by the colonialist’s commercial and harmful agricultural methodology. Caminero-Santangelo posits that: “the images of a dry, unproductive land suggest soil erosion and infertility, inadequate water supply, and poor crops—which were, and remain, long-term results of the impact of scientific agriculture and conservation in Kenya” (51). Ilmorog becomes a dry land, with its existence being threatened by drought, a situation that points to the increasing lack of subsistence and economic power of the African woman whose existence depends largely on the yields of the land (Ngugi 110- 101).

After the drought and the journey to the city, there emerges a new modern Ilmorog. The narrator notes with consternation: “Progress! Yes, development did come to Ilmorog” (Ngugi 268). But then “Ilmorog and everybody was changed, utterly changed” (Ngugi 269). The New Ilmorog came with a modernist progress which leads to pollution, loss of land and spirituality of the Old Ilmorog. While the people of Ilmorog lose their lands in the new Ilmorog, Wanja loses hope and a chance at redemption (Ngugi 275).

The new Ilmorog changes Wanja. She narrates to Karega how the sexual intercourse they had in the old Ilmorog changed her and made her regain her womanhood; and how she relapsed to prostitution and lost her womanhood in the new Ilmorog: “That time I felt my womanhood come back... I felt accepted... I kept to myself... God knows I am speaking the truth... I wanted to live honestly, an honest trade, an honest profit if that’s possible” (Ngugi 192) There is visible change in the topography of Ilmorog which can be linked to the change in the spiritual resolve of Wanja who abandoned prostitution in the city to seek therapy and spiritual wholeness of what was left of the environmentally rich Old Ilmorog: “Wanja had sworn that

she would really make something of herself in Ilmorog. And as a measure of her determination... she would never again sleep with another man” (Ngugi 126). She loses herself to the sexual exploitation of the industrialists of the New Ilmorog and the spiritual connection the Old Ilmorog offers that keeps her away from prostituting her body. Nicholls affirms that “Ngugi’s association of the land and the sign ‘woman’ enables the reciprocity of political discourses...” and to add to his list: ecocritical discourses (21). The loss of lands and Wanja’s loss of herself bring to fore the burden of the African woman and the environment in the novel. It is also linked to spiritual loss as we can see in the adulteration of Theng’eta, the loss of its production and the appropriation of its production by postcolonial consumerists.

Nyakinyua’s Theng’eta is a product of a wholesome environment and is described as a drink for the spirit and the incorruptible mind, a drink that must be taken “with faith and purity in your heart” (Ngugi 210) for it to manifest its potentials for healing and giving insights: “Millet, power of God” (Ngugi 211). Nyakinyua’s Theng’eta is in contrast to the Theng’eta brewed by the factory owned by the consumerist trio, Chui, Mzigo, and Kemeria, in the New Ilmorog which Munira calls “cheap” and “bagfuls of poison” (Ngugi 281). The commercialization of Theng’eta and the appropriation of the patent right for its production from Nyakinyua and Wanja points to the subaltern African woman’s exploitation, dispossession and contention with the white economic order and her culturally induced disadvantaged position in competing in the so-called industrial progress that has displaced her from the sites of the familiar subsistence agro-economy. McClintock contends that “colonized women, before the intrusions of imperial rule, were invariably disadvantaged within their societies, in ways that gave the colonial reordering of their sexual and economic labour very different outcomes from those of colonized men” (6). She cannot also fit the episteme of an industrial consumerist urbane community. By losing her eco-alliance with the environment to industrial economy, she loses her wholesome spiritual, cultural and moral connection to a redeeming nature.

Healing in *Petals of Blood*: Fertility of the Female Body and the African Woman’s Eco-activities

It was a quest for spiritual wholeness and healing that prompted Wanja to return to the Old Ilmorog. Wanja’s infertility is such that it troubles her and it can be linked symbolically to the drought in Ilmorog. Her infertility and the drought of Ilmorog are reflective of the spiritual drought and barrenness of the capitalists and exploiters. Ngugi’s novel portends that nature can heal even Wanja’s infertility if there is respect for it. For Ngugi, nature speaks and heals if it is treated with care, love and reverence. Wanja’s condition renders her without any hope. But her copulation with Karega consummated on nature’s site brings her healing and re-kindles her hope in regaining her lost self.

Wanja’s healing is a vision of healing for the environment. This healing may be linked to her redemption of her grandmother’s land. Wanja is seen in the novel as a custodian of the land. Abdulla’s song to Wanja lays credence to this claim: “I will sing you a song of a town/And of Wanja who started it../Who said that only in a home with a male child/will the head of a he-goat be roasted in feast?” (Ngugi 264) Wanja’s redemption of the land is a pure

demonstration of this role. She feels strongly attached to the grandmother's land: "And then something happened ... My grandmother died... I had to redeem this land... I felt it the right thing to do (Ngugi 292). Nicholls is of the view that: "Since women are the custodian of the idyllic nature of Africa, Wanja's reclamation of the land can be construed as her first attempt in redeeming herself and the nation" and in demonstrating the eco-agency of the African woman which Nyakinyua also exemplifies (123).

Wanja and her grandmother, Nyakinyua, live out the postcolonial ecocritical vision of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Their participation and attempts to free themselves and their community from human and environmental exploitation, and the politics of rape and displacement in both the colonial and postcolonial times re-imagine the place of the African woman in the politics of preservation. While Nyakinyua tries to rouse the people of Ilmorog to action in the new Ilmorog, her eco-consciousness and activities are met with disdain. Ngugi portrays women as champions of his postcolonial ecocritical visions which are preservation and reclamation from loss and consumerism. In actualizing this vision, Elda Hungwe and Chipso Hungwe insist that "Africans have to empower themselves to repossess their own development and this is to be done by fighting corruption and by insisting on their own cultural preferences" (4).

Nyakinyua and Wanja easily come to one's mind in the imagination of the notion of reclamation. Wanja represents the link between the present and past of the local against the global. She even teaches the people of Ilmorog how to brew Theng'eta, an inspirational drink which helps the users to remain connected to their past. In the same vein, Nyakinyua is a matriarch protecting and rediscovering the old way. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's conception of Nyakinyua is such that she is an authoritative witness to both the colonial and postcolonial exploitation. She also represents the idyllic past of the African woman and the environment. Unlike Wanja, Nyakinyua remains untainted with the corruption of consumerism. She resists the corruption of exploitation of the colonial times and is even more forceful in her agency for preservation in the postcolonial period: "Nyakinyua, the old woman, tried to fight back. She tramped from hut to hut calling upon the peasants of Ilmorog to get together and fight it out" (Ngugi 276).

Conclusion

Ngugi's postcolonial ecocritical vision is one that calls for reclamation of the idyll and a non-commercialisation of the same. Maybe it will be more meaningful to stress this vision with a scene from one of Wanja's sexual tales where she narrates how men spend to buy her body and yet she will refuse to oblige: "I once made a man spend over two hundred shillings buying me imported cider. Cider can never make you drunk you see. I simply walked out on him. I went with another who had not spent a cent on me. It felt good" (Ngugi 77).

This scene, though symbolic, gives credence to the fact that nature is not to be mortgaged to the highest bidder, consumerist or capitalist. The environment and nature must be tended by people who share the vision of preservation. They must not be like the men who think they can buy Wanja's body with money. Such people are only obedient to the colonialists and

capitalists' notion of commercialization; such men who are symbolic of patriarchal consumerism will rather plunder it.

Thus, the subaltern African woman is a direct victim of the problematic displacement by patriarchal (post)colonial plunder and instrumentalization of nature for the sake of profit. As with Kenya, she is a victim of double jeopardy having lost her environment to the toxic industrialization and yet occluded in the new economic order by colonial and cultural structure.

Though Ngugi attempts to reverse the role of the African women by making them agents of his eco vision, their degradation and exploitation together with the environment are indications of the particularity of their experience. This particularity stems from the fact that the African woman's body serves as a place for colonial, anticolonial, and neo-colonial contestations and exploitation, particularly in Kenya, where these contestations, to echo Brendon Nicholls are inscribed in sexual exploitation which resonates with environmental effacement or eco erasure. The violation of the environment causes material impoverishment of the African women who depend on the conservation and preservation of their environment to survive.

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