

THE SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF NATURE IN TANZANIA'S SELECTED POETRY ANTHOLOGIES

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Abstract: Poetry about man's relationship with nature is a common literary tradition especially among societies that did not experience slavery and colonial subjugation such as Europe. For Africa, these twin most humiliating human experiences have almost eternally influenced the literary productions from the region with many writers in narrative genres, plays and verse interrogating the encounter and aftermaths of Prospero and Caliban. In most of these writings, nature seems to take a peripheral position by both writers and critics. The writers fail to exhibit consistence of engaging nature in their poems which indicates they only use it for the narrow reason of backdrop while the critics fail to demand or point out that the poems are insensitive to nature. Consequently, there is a literary paucity of analyses in the area of the space of nature in Tanzania's poetry. Yet, there's need to shift literary attention from mere documentation of history to appreciating and protecting the environment. Environmental matters in literature in Tanzania and Africa should be engaged as beyond the post-colonial. Human impact on the environment continues to attract varied discourses from a number of disciplines with human beings depicted as major threats to their own environment.

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate the symbolic messages as seen through the lens of particular images and symbols drawn from the writers' natural environment in two poetry anthologies from Tanzania namely; Summons edited by Richard Mabala and Selected Poems edited by Tanzania Institute of Education. I, through close textual reading, examine how particular poems incite against nature or how they exalt it in their use of particular images, symbols and diction. We seek to elevate the experiences of poets and critics in dealing with nature, the need to create consciousness among writers and critics on the importance of nature as subtly and overtly revealed in the analysis of the

identified poems. We aim to showcase the magnificence of the natural environment as man's principal partner and push for new frontiers of evaluating African literature.

Keywords: poverty, natural environment, anthologies, poems

I. INTRODUCTION

Tanzania, like many other African nation-states, was a Germany colony and so most poetry anthologies re-live issues of different historical phases: pre-colonial through colonial to the present that the country has bestrode. Most poems, consequently, deal with the clash between the colonizer and the locals in all aspects of life and, the post-colonial experience. Nature poetry is not that which merely uses natural phenomena as backdrop; rather, it is that which purposely foregrounds nature and the ecological space as man's significant partner with a symbiotic relationship. It is the type of poetry that raises people's consciousness about the environment in which they live and how to make it better. The poetry that moves in this direction deliberately engages the all important multidisciplinary issues on environment conservation.

The informing theory is ecocriticism as broached by Cheryll Glotfelty whose views, I regard as most recent that incorporate the ideas of other ecocritics. The theory's core premise underpins the relationship between literature and natural phenomena.

Poetry published in English in Tanzania is a relatively recent phenomenon that dates back to about three and a half decades. The pace of growth of this writing has been conspicuously slow. This should not be surprising to people who have background knowledge of Tanzania's literary history. But the

country has a rich Kiswahili literary tradition that dates back to over three hundred years. In his efforts to mobilize workers and peasants in the process of national liberation, the country's founding father, Julius Nyerere, thought Kiswahili would be a powerful tool for cultural decolonization - a vital aspect of the process of national liberation. Nyerere's effort bore fruit, for despite numerous ethnic groups - about one hundred and twenty tribes in Tanzania - about ninety eight percent of the entire population competently communicates in Kiswahili, hitherto the national and official language.

II. TOWARDS ECOCRITICAL POETRY IN TANZANIA

Theme in Tanzania poetry, like in its prose and play, reflects not only the political ideas of the country but also the public preference for a particular literature for the kind of society they envisage. The poetry demonizes individuals who are concerned with meddling in and tearing up social systems and replacing them with egocentric ones. Tanzania poets like poets from elsewhere in Africa engage the subject of the pre-colonial and colonial legacy in their verses with varying degree of diction and imagery. Nature is manifested as an inseparable companion of human beings. During independence struggle, for instance, it supported most African freedom fighters by offering hiding places from where they would unleash terror to their tormentors. Our approach sees natural environment as the epicentre of multiple and complex mix of all life with man playing a critical role.

A number of scholars have been, for the past two to three decades, preoccupied with the concept of nature in literary creative works. It is not by accident that literary studies should take such a dimension for, Barry Commoner's first law of ecology sees human beings as eternally bound to their environment and vice-versa, meaning that literature is not necessarily an abstract concept which is detached from the physical world, rather, it has an ethical dimension in a completely super universal context in which matter, energy and ideas relate in dynamic ways. As a result, literary engagement at both the level of creation and criticism continues to fascinate with the way nature informs and shapes human thinking process.

Although Stephanie Sarver (1995) states that environmental literature is more or less associated with theoretical apparatus as with a sensibility, Cheryl Glotfelty, chronicles significant questions that could be tested to form the tenets upon which ecological criticism as a theoretical framework may

be anchored. Her questions could be re-shaped and summed up as:

What is the space of nature in this poem?

What's the setting and context?

How realistic is nature represented in this verse?

Do the values expressed in this poem tally with other disciplines?

Does the poem oppose or exalt nature, how?

What solutions are offered for a harmonious existence between man and nature?

What moral or otherwise punishment is prescribed for the destructive man?

In view of this, Tanzania poetry passes for ecocritical poems. In this approach nature is not just used as a food colour the poem. The critic would rather look at the mention of natural phenomena as a special sensibility on ecology and ethics than look at them as peripheral aesthetic air.

Despite this wide scope of inquiry, and varying levels of sophistication, all environmental critics underscore the central premise that human culture celebrates a symbiotic relationship with the physical world, influencing it and influenced by it. Cheryl seems to note that ecological criticism takes as its core function the relationship between man's natural environment and his general culture - both tangible and intangible - which includes literature as a special form of language. Therefore, environment literary criticism oscillates between the physical and the invisible; the human and the inanimate. This approach of literary study complements other studies on environmental conservation in a manner that encourages a scholarly approach complete with informing tenets. The two primary texts in this exercise are *Summons* edited by Richard Mabala and *Selected Poems* edited by Tanzania Institute of Education.

Tanzania poetry manifests the physicality of nature's eternal presence as represented by mountains, forests, lakes, birds, fish, animals and other phenomena. These natural features that contribute to environmentally and ecologically grounded poetry offer sublime scenic panorama and elevate experiences for poets and critics and by making nature the centre as opposed to looking at it as a footnote.

One of the most moving poems on environmental consciousness found in both the anthologies is Alute S. Mghwai's *Voices from the Wilderness*. The poem is a powerful and sensational indictment of man's activities on the environment. It employs personification to give both fauna and flora human quality of talking straight to the offender, the oppressor, to Prospero. The birds protest that they

can no longer rest because their habitat, the forests, has been indiscriminately felled by humans. As a result, the birds are exposed to intoxications that are emitted from industries and detonating bombs.

The major irony in this stanza is that the birds are more knowledgeable than human beings in recognizing the important role of forests. The birds are portrayed as selfless considerate and intelligent. Next are the fish when they protest that their habitat has been equally ruined by man due to submarines and tankers that spew oil into the water making it difficult for them to breathe. Both the birds and the fish protest and chide man for this ecological interference that creates unnecessary and dangerous imbalance in the name of development. They question the essence of development if it comes by ruining the ecological environment in which man co-exists with other different forms of life.

The wild animals: Elephants, hippos, rhinos, great cats and zebras are also aggrieved by man's insatiable greed for ornaments and pleasure at the expense of wild life. They are upset that man has gunned them down for their tusks, skins, and claws. They dismiss man as a savagery being and question his intelligence and sophistication. They argue that man's savagery could only be explained by his having been created last as an afterthought. In other words, man was not meant to be created after all, and that it was by default that he was finally created.

Both fauna and flora finally put man on notice by revealing that their endurance has been stretched beyond limit and they would soon stand up for their animal rights.

In the whole poem, the symbolic ideas that man has the responsibility to conserve and protect the environment are clear. The environmental ecology is represented as an equal participant in the universe. By having the birds, fish and animals talk, the poet seems to underscore the urgency and seriousness the matter deserves. It also shows that the destruction of the environment which leads to ecological imbalance is real because we are made to hear, see, feel and think with the affected parties. At some other level of interpretation, the animals represent the weak and vulnerable third world countries faced with many problems such as pollution, exploitation and imperialism created by the West.

This approach strikes all our senses and calls for human accountability for their environment. In this poem the environment is not a mere metaphor or a static background rather, it is a thematic issue of unprecedented concern. The language use constructs humans as hostile, insensitive, destructive and reckless in their subjective human supremacy. The

symbolic message is that non-human environment is an integral not peripheral partner in the universe. Although the poem is a commentary on the impact of the so called developed world agenda on the developing world, it is an effective ecocritical verse.

Eric Sikuja Ng'maryo's poem entitled the Fountain of Life is a symbolic commentary on the envisaged Tanzania's political ideology at independence. The poet uses the fountain of life, that's, a spring of water, as the effective symbol of the core values of the country's socialist ideology. The centrality of water, good natural water as we find it in springs, is depicted as part and parcel of human survival. Because this natural treasure is limited, people are called upon to be mindful of other people's welfare by allowing sharing, in turns and in equal measures. At the beginning there is harmony and people are mindful of other people's welfare. But with time, some people resort to swindle communal water for private use. They use cupped banana leaves and coconut shell; others come with pots of all sizes and scooped the water for as many times as they so wished. The result is that there is an unequal distribution of this important resource because of grabbing and geocentricism.

In this poem water is celebrated as an exhaustible human resource that should be responsibly used to ensure it serves all people equally. If some people misuse it for selfish reasons, then the rest should unite to detest, protest, and stop them. The use of coconut shells and banana leaves depicts the community's devotion in making good use of the natural environment by engaging in worthwhile activities such as planting both food and cash crops. These crops not only provide people with food but also serve the important role of checking soil erosion and conserving water. The use of fountain of life, banana leaves and coconut shells – all drawn from the environment - effectively communicate how socialist ideas in Tanzania came to be ruined by a few individuals rushing to enrich themselves at the expense of the majority.

The sacred Groove by Alexander Muigai is an awesome reference to nature. Natural phenomena such as trees and mountains are depicted as superior human companions. The reference to Kirinyaga, a revered mountain by people who live close to it, is an illustration of just how man is a subject of particular phenomena in his immediate environment. The poet celebrates the age-long Holy Tree that has been conspicuous among other trees in the Sacred Grove. Because the tree has seen many days, the persona asks it to narrate life's stories of joy and sorrow, of plenty and famine, of war and peace, of epidemics

and health, and of solemn men offering sacrifices and prayers at its foot, facing the Kirinyaga.

Apart from highlighting the important role of certain trees and mountains in the religious affairs of humanity, the poem foregrounds the need for a passionate care of immediate environment as people need the beauty of nature around them in order to perform certain religious rituals. By calling the trees the Sacred Grove, the poem indicates that it's blasphemous and sinful to destroy trees. The Sacred Tree and the Sacred Grove are turned to when man's soul needs cleansing and nourishment. Since the name of the tree(s) is not revealed, the poem seems to underscore the fact that every tree is sacred and people who cut trees down could be cutting down the sacred trees, their own spiritual lives!

Related to this poem is *Doom Ahead* by Makando Mandia. The poem gratifies Mt. Kilimanjaro as a symbolic representation of traditional values and wisdom that come only with age. The persona relives the beauty in those days and regrets that the beauty is no longer there. Kibo, one of the peaks on the mountain, is used as a symbol of immortality of communal values. Those who live by good societal values live long, as long as Kibo. The peak represents the past people's socialist ideals of being mindful of other peoples' welfare. It is possible; it appears, for these ideals to live forever. But as capitalism intrudes into people's lives, the very fibres that put them together are lost and common interests and decency is over-ridden by selfish imperialist interests, tendencies. Kibo's usage serves as a constant reminder to people to look back to their glorious past in order to address the problems that bedevil them in the present. Their glorious past of communal socialism should resonate into the future in the same way Kibo has been – as in the past is today and tomorrow.

Despite the various attributes of nature depicted from the foregoing poems, nature may also be hostile and fearsome. Manga J.Kingazi's poem entitled *The Tenacity* rebukes nature because the latter threatens life. The poem navigates the theme of appearance versus reality by use of powerful images: the swamp, quick-sand and marshy field. The persona advises on use of a telescope to see them in order to understand how dangerous they are. In other words, nature harbours certain things that are camouflaged to hide the dangers that they pose. The persona admonishes nature despite her generosity. The poem is a subtle commentary on Tanzania's socialist ideals. Although the ideals seem virtuous there are serious underlying contradictions that people need to know. Failure to recognize such setbacks, the people could re-live the experience of a marshy field, a swamp and quick-

sand. A marshy field is barren and hostile; a swamp is inhabitable while quick-sand is perennially unstable and therefore unreliable. All the images represent the dangers that the magnanimous nature may be coated with. Telescope symbolizes man's intellectual capacity to see beyond the normal by engaging in critical evaluation of issues before making decisions.

My experience in the study of the two anthologies reveals that the poets have, to an appreciable degree captured nature in their verses. However, challenge remains that poets need to go a notch higher in sensitizing people about the need to engage their physical environment in a more meaningful way that fosters posterity. The critics have an equally important role to go beyond the socio-political and engage environmental metaphors using the ecocritic's lens in the verses they analyze.

The application of ecocriticism as a theoretical interpretive tool has the potential to lift literary studies in Africa from abstract to reality of times. There is need for environmental sensibility to go in tandem with the global trend today. Indeed, the world faces environmental crises: global warming, deforestation, regionalism, pollution, which are more of the result of a dysfunctional ethical condition than a spontaneous ecosystem failure. Getting through such problems requires a multidisciplinary understanding of peoples' impact on nature with regard to their ethical systems. It is by understanding such ethical systems that people can be sensitized about their role in environmental matters.

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