

Aesthetic Representation of Contested Environmental Spaces in Contemporary Kenyan Fiction: An Eco-Aesthetic and Postcolonial Reading

Boaz Owino¹, James Odhiambo Ogone (PhD)², Otieno, Odhiambo George (PhD)³

^{1,2,3} Department of Languages, Literary and Communication Studies, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Kenyan fiction increasingly presents the environment as more than a backdrop to human life. Land, forests, oceans, rivers and other environmental spaces are often places where questions of identity, belonging, livelihood, development and power come together. Yet, less attention has been given to the ways in which the aesthetic representation of these spaces also exposes the unequal power relations through which they are contested. This article examines the representation of contested environmental spaces in Henry R. Ole Kulet's *Vanishing Herds* (2011), Ng'ang'a Mbugua's *Angels of the Wild* (2015), Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *the Dragonfly Sea* (2019), and Ian McKenzie-Vincent's *Aziza and Bakari in the Climate of Change* (2019). The analysis is grounded in eco-aesthetic and postcolonial theoretical perspectives and uses a qualitative interpretive approach based on close reading of the selected texts. Particular attention is given to imagery, symbolism, personification, narrative form, memory and indigenous ecological knowledge. The analysis shows that environmental spaces in these works are closely tied to memory, identity, livelihood and cultural belonging, but are also sites of dispossession, commodification, conservation struggles, infrastructural expansion, marine exploitation and pollution. The texts challenge the idea of nature as an object existing primarily for human use by giving the environment an active presence in the lives of characters and communities. The article contributes to Kenyan environmental literary scholarship by showing how aesthetic representations of nature can reveal the continuing effects of colonial histories and contemporary forms of economic and political power. It concludes that reading Kenyan fiction through eco-aesthetic and postcolonial lenses brings ecological concerns into conversation with cultural memory, social justice and struggles over the ownership, use and meaning of environmental spaces.

KEYWORDS

Eco-aesthetics, contested spaces, Kenyan fiction, postcolonial Eco criticism, environmental justice

I. INTRODUCTION

Environmental concerns have become increasingly prominent in contemporary African literature. Across different genres and national traditions, African writers have engaged with land dispossession, deforestation, wildlife conservation, climate change, pollution, resource extraction and the transformation of local environments through state, corporate and transnational interests. These concerns, however, cannot be understood simply as literary

responses to ecological deterioration. In many African contexts, environmental change is closely bound up with questions of livelihood, cultural identity, historical memory, political belonging and access to resources. The environment is therefore also a social and political space in which different understandings of ownership, development, conservation and belonging come into contact and, often, conflict.

This interconnectedness has become increasingly important within African Eco criticism. Recent scholarship has argued that environmental criticism in Africa needs to remain attentive to the continent's distinctive historical and cultural experiences rather than simply reproduce theoretical assumptions developed elsewhere. Egya (2026), for example, observes that African Eco criticism is increasingly engaging questions of decoloniality, Indigenous studies and the agency of the nonhuman world while responding to particular African histories and ecological futures. Similarly, Adeniyi and Onanuga (2023) emphasise the need to bring African understandings of human–environment relationships into wider Eco critical conversations. Such scholarship provides an important basis for examining Kenyan fiction not simply as literature that contains environmental themes, but as literature in which ecological relationships are aesthetically constructed and politically negotiated.

The environment, therefore, need not remain a passive backdrop against which human stories unfold. Literary texts can represent land, forests, rivers, oceans and atmospheric spaces as places with histories, meanings and material consequences of their own. Buell (1995) argues for an environmental imagination capable of moving beyond the treatment of nature as mere scenery, while Iovino and Oppermann (2014) draw attention to the material participation of environments in processes of meaning-making. In African literary contexts, such perspectives become particularly productive because ecological spaces frequently carry cultural memory, spiritual significance and forms of Indigenous knowledge. Iheka (2018), for instance, demonstrates how African literary representations can place ecological agency, violence and resistance within the same field of analysis.

This article examines these relationships in four contemporary Kenyan prose-fiction texts: Henry R. ole Kulet's *Vanishing Herds* (2011), Ng'ang'a Mbugua's *Angels of the Wild* (2015), Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), and Ian McKenzie-Vincent's *Aziza and Bakari in the Climate of Change* (2019). The selection brings together different environmental settings and different forms of ecological contestation. *Vanishing Herds* foregrounds pastoralist relationships with land, cattle, grazing and wildlife; *Angels of the Wild* explores forests, wildlife conservation and environmental responsibility; *The Dragonfly Sea* expands the environmental imagination towards the Indian Ocean and its cultural, historical and geopolitical significance; while *Aziza and Bakari in the Climate of Change* brings pollution and climate change into children's and young-adult fiction. These texts provide a useful basis for examining how Kenyan fiction makes environmental spaces visible, meaningful and contested. They also allow the study to move beyond a narrow understanding of environmental literature as writing that merely "addresses" ecological problems. The central concern here is the literary construction of environmental space: how imagery, metaphor, symbolism, personification, memory, narrative perspective and Indigenous ecological knowledge shape the reader's understanding of particular environments and of the struggles taking place within them.

This study is guided by the following question: How does contemporary Kenyan fiction use aesthetic strategies to represent environmental spaces as contested ecological, cultural and political terrains? It argues that literary aesthetics provides an important means through which writers challenge the idea of nature as passive matter available for unrestricted human use. Through personification, metaphor, sensory imagery, symbolism, irony, memory and Indigenous cosmologies, environmental spaces acquire presence and ethical significance. At the same time, the texts reveal that ecological conflict is rarely detached from histories and structures of power. Questions of land ownership, conservation, development, infrastructure, commercial exploitation and pollution are connected to unequal relationships among communities, governments, corporations and other powerful actors.

The article consequently brings an eco-aesthetic orientation into dialogue with postcolonial theory. Eco-aesthetics is used here as an analytical orientation rather than as a rigid or universally codified theory. Its concern is not only with what environmental problems literature represents, but also with how literary form makes environmental relationships perceptible, emotionally compelling and ethically significant. Postcolonial theory complements this perspective by drawing attention to the historical and contemporary structures of power that shape environmental conflicts in formerly colonised societies. The combination makes it possible to ask two related questions: how does a literary text aestheticize the environment, and whose interests, knowledge and values are privileged in the resulting representation?

The article's intervention lies in bringing these two questions together in the context of contemporary Kenyan fiction. Existing Eco critical scholarship has established the importance of literary representations of nature, while African and postcolonial Eco criticism has demonstrated the need to connect environmental questions with colonial history, capitalism, Indigenous knowledge and social justice. Yet there remains room for closer attention to the aesthetic construction of contested environmental spaces in Kenyan prose fiction. The present study addresses this space by treating the environment simultaneously as a material setting, an aesthetic construction and a political terrain.

In doing so, the article does not assume that the selected writers set out to produce ecological manifestos. Rather, it reads their fictional worlds for the ways in which environmental relationships become embedded in narrative form. This distinction is important because environmental meanings often emerge indirectly: through a fence that divides pastoral land, a forest that carries memory, an ocean that connects communities across generations, or polluted air and water that make environmental injustice physically perceptible. The ecological significance of the texts is thus located not only in their themes but also in the imaginative and formal choices through which those themes are made meaningful.

The article contributes to Kenyan literary scholarship by showing that environmental representation is simultaneously an aesthetic and political practice. The environment in these texts is not simply something that characters inhabit. It is a site through which writers negotiate competing ideas of development, modernity, belonging, memory, knowledge and responsibility.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in eco-aesthetic and postcolonial theories. The two perspectives are brought together because the article is concerned with both the ways environmental spaces are aesthetically represented in contemporary Kenyan prose fiction and the historical and political forces that shape those representations. Eco-aesthetics provides the principal lens for examining how literary form gives the environment presence, meaning and agency, while postcolonial theory helps situate those representations within histories of colonial appropriation, unequal power, development and competing systems of environmental knowledge.

Eco-aesthetic theory emerges from the wider intellectual conversation associated with Eco criticism, which has long examined the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) established Eco criticism as a field concerned with the relationship between literature and the more-than-human world, while Buell (1995) drew attention to the environmental imagination and to literary representations in which nature cannot be reduced to mere background scenery. Garrard (2012) further demonstrated the breadth of environmental literary criticism through concepts including pollution, pastoral, wilderness, animals, dwelling and environmental futures. Whereas this interventions provide an important intellectual background for the present study, the article moves more specifically towards eco-aesthetics, since its primary concern is with the literary and aesthetic processes through which environments are made visible, meaningful and active within narrative.

Eco-aesthetics theoretical framework brings together ecological consciousness and aesthetic form. Its concern is not simply with the presence of environmental themes in literature, but with the ways literary language, form and imaginative representation shape how human beings perceive, experience and value the more-than-human world. In this sense, the framework asks two closely related questions: What does a literary text say about the environment, and how does the form of its representation make that environment meaningful to the reader? Carlson (2000) argues for the aesthetic appreciation of nature as an environment rather than simply as an object of detached contemplation, while Berleant (1992, 2005) develops a more participatory understanding of environmental aesthetics in which the perceiver is physically, sensorially and imaginatively involved in environmental experience. Saito (2007) further expands environmental aesthetics by connecting aesthetic appreciation with everyday environmental experience and ethical responsibility. These interventions are significant for literary study because they suggest that the environment is not merely something represented from a distance; it can be experienced as a dynamic field of relationships in which human beings are materially and imaginatively implicated.

Literary environmental criticism extends this concern into textual representation. Buell (1995) argues for an environmental imagination capable of recognising the environment as more than a passive backdrop to human stories, while Glotfelty (1996) places the relationship between literature and the physical environment at the centre of Eco critical inquiry. The movement from environmental aesthetics to literary environmental criticism is important to the present study because literary texts do not simply reproduce environments. Through language and form, they construct particular ways of seeing, feeling and valuing them. The emphasis is therefore placed on the aesthetic processes through which

environmental spaces acquire presence and significance. Description, imagery, metaphor, symbolism, personification, narrative perspective, spatial arrangement, sound, rhythm and memory can determine whether land, forests, rivers, oceans and atmospheric spaces appear as lifeless settings or as dynamic elements of narrative experience. The environment may be represented as beautiful, threatening, sacred, damaged, commoditized, remembered, resilient or capable of affecting human lives. Such representations are not merely decorative. They influence the reader's imaginative relationship with the world being represented.

The eco-aesthetic framework also helps in examining the anthropomorphic representation of the environment in the selected Kenyan prose fiction. Anthropomorphism, in this context, is not treated merely as a stylistic ornament. When a river appears to remember, a forest seems to speak, land responds to human activity, or an ocean assumes a presence within the narrative, the environment moves beyond the status of passive scenery. Through literary representation, it acquires voice, affective presence or a form of agency. Such representations complicate the conventional division between the human subject, imagined as active and knowing, and nature, imagined as passive and available for human use. The significance of this strategy is not that rivers, forests or oceans literally possess human consciousness. Rather, anthropomorphic representation provides writers with an aesthetic means of reorganising the relationship between human and non-human worlds. It can make readers encounter environmental spaces as participants in human histories rather than as neutral backgrounds against which those histories unfold. In this respect, the literary device has ecological and ethical implications: it can unsettle anthropocentric assumptions by encouraging readers to imagine environments as possessing significance beyond their immediate usefulness to human beings.

This concern resonates with the material turn in environmental criticism. Iovino and Oppermann (2014) argue through material Eco criticism that matter itself participates in processes of meaning-making and storytelling. Their perspective is valuable here, not as a separate theoretical framework, but as a supporting dimension of the eco-aesthetic approach. The land, water, forests and atmospheric spaces represented in the selected texts are not inert surfaces upon which human stories are written. Their material conditions shape livelihoods, memories, identities and conflicts, while human practices simultaneously transform those environments. The environment therefore becomes part of the narrative's meaning rather than merely the physical location in which the narrative occurs.

Pulpwood's (2002) critique of anthropocentrism exposes the conceptual divisions through which Western thought has frequently constructed nature as inferior to culture, body as inferior to mind and the non-human world as subordinate to human interests. Such hierarchical thinking is relevant to the selected Kenyan texts because environmental exploitation frequently depends upon precisely this kind of instrumental reasoning: land becomes property, forests become timber, oceans become commercial corridors and water becomes a resource or receptacle for waste. Eco-aesthetic representation can challenge such reductionism by presenting environments through relationships of dependence, memory, belonging and responsibility. The African context makes this theoretical position particularly important. African environmental literary scholarship has increasingly questioned the assumption that environmental criticism can simply transfer concepts developed in Euro-American contexts to African texts without considering local histories,

cultural practices and knowledge systems. Iheka (2018), for instance, places ecological violence in African literature within histories of colonialism, political power and resistance. Egya (2020) similarly demonstrates the importance of examining African environmental writing in relation to activism, culture and literary representation. Wu's work on literary aesthetics in African environmental literature is especially relevant because it directs attention to how African writers aesthetically represent environments and the relationships communities maintain with them.

Consequently eco-aesthetic analysis gives environmental spaces narrative presence and a perceived form of agency, and shapes how readers encounter, interpret and value relationships between human and more-than-human worlds. These propositions provide the analytical basis for examining how the selected texts transform land, forests, water, oceanic spaces and atmospheric environments from passive settings into active elements of narrative meaning.

While eco-aesthetics provides the principal framework of the study, postcolonial theory (Fanon, 1961; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994) provides the historical and political lens through which environmental representation is contextualised. The two frameworks therefore perform different but complementary tasks. Eco-aesthetics asks how environments are imaginatively and formally represented; postcolonial theory asks within what histories of power, knowledge and unequal relations those representations acquire meaning. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) demonstrate that environmental questions in postcolonial societies cannot easily be separated from imperial histories, unequal economic relations and struggles over cultural representation. Their work makes visible the point at which environmental degradation and colonial histories intersect. Iheka (2018) develops this concern within African literature, showing how ecological violence, agency and resistance are intertwined with postcolonial conditions. Contemporary African environmental criticism continues to emphasise this intersection between ecological questions, colonial histories, indigenous knowledge and power.

For the selected Kenyan texts, this perspective is particularly useful because the environment is repeatedly represented as a site where different interests and systems of value meet. Land may be understood simultaneously as ancestral territory, livelihood, cultural inheritance, private property, commercial asset or development space. Forests may be understood as ecological systems and cultural spaces while also being treated as sources of timber or other commodities. Oceans and waterways may function as sources of livelihood and cultural memory while simultaneously being subjected to tourism, commercialisation or pollution. Postcolonial theory allows these competing meanings to be read as struggles over power, knowledge and authority, rather than simply as disagreements about environmental management. Escobar's (1995) critique of development discourse is particularly useful in this respect. His analysis challenges the assumption that "development" represents a neutral and universally desirable process. Development discourse can establish particular economic and epistemological assumptions as normal while marginalising alternative ways of understanding social and environmental wellbeing. Applied to the selected texts, this perspective makes it possible to ask who defines development, whose interests it serves and what forms of cultural and ecological knowledge may be displaced when particular models of progress are imposed.

This concern is closely related to representations of infrastructure, tourism, conservation and industrialisation. Such projects may be presented through the language of progress and national development, yet literature can expose the unequal consequences that accompany them. An apparently empty landscape may, from another perspective, be a lived cultural space; a development project may simultaneously be an act of dispossession; and environmental conservation may become problematic when it excludes the communities whose historical relationships with the environment have sustained them. Postcolonial theory therefore enables the study to read environmental representation as a struggle over who possesses the authority to define value, progress, ownership and legitimate environmental knowledge. Harvey's (2003) concept of accumulation by dispossession provides an additional political-economic dimension to this analysis. The concept draws attention to the processes through which land and other resources become incorporated into systems of accumulation, often displacing established forms of communal or customary use. In *Vanishing Herds*, for instance, the transformation of pastoral landscapes through enclosure, privatisation and commercial interests can be read not merely as a physical alteration of space but as a restructuring of the social relationships through which that space has traditionally been understood. The conflict is consequently both environmental and political: it concerns who controls land, whose relationship with the land is recognised and whose interests determine its future.

The theoretical position is therefore both aesthetic and political. Eco-aesthetics explains how contemporary Kenyan writers make the environment perceptible, affective and narratively active; postcolonial theory explains how those representations intersect with histories of colonialism and continuing struggles over land, resources, development and knowledge. This combination provides the study with a sufficiently focused literary framework while retaining the historical specificity necessary for reading Kenyan environmental fiction.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on literature and the environment has established that literary texts do more than simply reproduce the physical world. They participate in shaping the ways in which readers imagine, value and relate to the more-than-human environment. Glotfelty (1996) provides an important foundation for this field by positioning the relationship between literature and the physical environment at the centre of literary inquiry. Her intervention helped move environmental concerns from the margins of literary criticism towards a sustained examination of how texts construct relationships between human beings and their surroundings. Buell (1995) develops this environmental imagination further by challenging literary representations in which nature functions merely as background to human action. For Buell, environmental consciousness becomes significant when the nonhuman environment is allowed a presence within the literary work rather than remaining subordinate to human concerns. Garrard (2012) subsequently demonstrates the conceptual breadth of environmental literary criticism through his discussions of pollution, pastoral, wilderness, animals, dwelling and environmental futures. Collectively, these scholars establish an important foundation for reading literature as a site where environmental relationships are imagined and negotiated. The studies leave out aesthetic processes through which environmental spaces acquire narrative presence. The question of how imagery, metaphor, symbolism, personification, spatial representation and narrative

perspective make environments perceptible requires more focused attention. This study adopts an eco-aesthetic orientation. Rather than asking only what environmental issues the selected novels represent, it examines how literary form constructs land, forests, oceans, water and atmospheric spaces as meaningful and, at times, active presences within the narrative.

The development of environmental aesthetics provides a useful basis for this more focused concern. Berleant (2005) moves environmental aesthetics away from detached contemplation towards an experiential understanding in which human beings are physically, sensorially and imaginatively involved in their environments. Carlson (2000) similarly argues for an appreciation of nature as environment rather than simply as an isolated aesthetic object, while Saito (2007) connects everyday aesthetic experience with environmental awareness and ethical responsibility. These scholars are important because they broaden the meaning of aesthetic experience: the environment is not merely something observed from a distance but something within which human beings live and through which they experience the world. However, they do not translate this environmental-aesthetic insight more explicitly into the analysis of literary representation. Environmental spaces in fiction are encountered through language and narrative form. A forest becomes meaningful through description and imagery; a river can acquire memory through personification; an ocean can become culturally significant through symbolism and narrative perspective; and pollution can become emotionally perceptible through sensory representation. The present study treats aesthetic form as central to environmental meaning. It therefore examines not only the environmental content of the selected Kenyan texts but also the literary strategies through which ecological spaces become visible, affective and contested.

This concern is developed further by Iovino and Oppermann (2014) through material Eco criticism which challenges the tendency to treat matter as passive material upon which human stories are imposed. Instead, material environments participate in processes of meaning-making. This perspective is especially productive for African environmental literature, where land, water, animals, forests and other ecological entities frequently carry social, cultural and historical meanings. The importance of this scholarship to the present study lies in its movement away from an exclusively human-centred understanding of narrative. Environmental spaces can shape human experiences just as human activities transform them. However, material Eco criticism does not by itself fully explain the specific literary techniques through which such environmental participation is aesthetically constructed. This article extends this insight by examining how literary devices give material environments narrative visibility and agency. Personification is particularly important in this regard. When a river appears to remember, a forest seems to speak, or land appears to respond to human actions, the material environment is transformed through literary representation from an apparently passive setting into a presence within the narrative. The study therefore brings material environmental agency into closer conversation with aesthetic form.

The question of environmental agency is particularly significant in African literary scholarship. Iheka (2018) demonstrates that ecological violence, agency and resistance in African literature are closely connected to postcolonial histories and structures of power. His work is important because it challenges approaches that isolate environmental degradation from political and historical realities. Ecological violence in African literature is frequently

connected to exploitation, unequal power, colonial legacies and struggles over resources. Egya (2020) similarly emphasises the importance of reading African environmental writing through its particular historical, cultural and literary contexts. Rather than assuming that theoretical concepts developed elsewhere can simply be transferred to African texts, such scholarship calls for attention to the distinctive ways African writers imagine environmental relationships. The African environmental criticism has established the importance of history, culture, ecological violence, agency and resistance, yet there remains room for closer examination of how these concerns are mediated through the aesthetic construction of environmental spaces in contemporary Kenyan prose fiction. This study responds by placing literary form at the center of its analysis. It examines how environmental spaces become contested not only through what happens to them but through how writers represent them – as living, remembered, threatened, sacred, commoditized, resilient or politically controlled spaces.

The postcolonial dimension of environmental representation has received significant attention from Huggan and Tiffin (2010). Their work demonstrates that environmental concerns in formerly colonised societies cannot be separated from imperial histories, economic inequality and cultural marginalisation. Their intervention is important because it prevents ecological criticism from treating environmental degradation as a universal problem detached from questions of power. Iheka (2018) develops a related argument within African literary studies, showing how ecological violence and environmental resistance are shaped by postcolonial conditions. These scholars therefore establish a strong connection between environmental criticism and the histories of colonialism, exploitation and resistance.

The limitation for the present study is that the intersection between postcolonial power and environmental representation can still benefit from closer attention to aesthetic mediation. It is one thing to establish that colonialism and capitalism affect environmental relations; it is another to examine how literature formally represents those relations. This study addresses that gap by asking how aesthetic choices make struggles over land, conservation, development, pollution and resource exploitation perceptible to the reader. Postcolonial theory consequently provides the historical and political context, while eco-aesthetics provides the literary means through which that context becomes narratively and imaginatively available.

The question of land is especially important in this regard. Lund (2011) demonstrates the close relationship between land rights and citizenship, showing that struggles over property are also struggles over recognition and belonging. This perspective is highly relevant to Kenyan literature, where land is rarely simply an economic commodity. It can represent ancestry, livelihood, identity, memory and political belonging. Chimhowu (2019) adds a political-economic dimension by examining the changing relationship between customary landholding and processes of privatisation, commodification and neoliberal reform. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that changes in land ownership can transform not only physical landscapes but also social relationships. The gap that remains concerns the literary construction of these competing meanings of land. Scholarship on land and political economy explains why land becomes contested, but literary analysis must also ask how fiction makes those conflicts visible and emotionally meaningful. The present study addresses this gap through *Vanishing Herds*, where pastoral landscapes are represented

through relationships among land, cattle, mobility, livelihood, conservation, ownership and commercial interests. The study therefore reads the pastoral environment not simply as a setting for social conflict but as an aesthetically constructed space in which competing meanings of land are brought into confrontation.

The relationship between environmental representation and development provides another important area of scholarship. Escobar (1995) challenges the assumption that development constitutes a neutral or universally desirable process. His analysis demonstrates how development discourse can privilege particular economic and epistemological models while marginalising alternative understandings of social and environmental wellbeing. This perspective is valuable for literary analysis because representations of roads, tourism, infrastructure, industrialisation and conservation may appear initially as narratives of progress while simultaneously producing displacement, exclusion or environmental degradation. The gap here lies in examining how literary aesthetics can expose the contradictions within development discourse. The present study closes this gap by examining how the selected texts represent development not simply as an event or policy but as a contested environmental process. Through imagery, spatial contrasts, symbolism and narrative perspective, development can be represented as opportunity for some and dispossession for others. The study therefore asks whose vision of development becomes authoritative and what environmental and cultural relationships may be displaced in the process.

The literature on environmental justice provides another useful dimension. Although not exclusively concerned with literary aesthetics, Schlosberg (2007) argues that environmental justice involves more than the distribution of environmental benefits and harms. Recognition, participation and the capacity of affected communities to influence decisions are equally important. This perspective is relevant to the selected texts because environmental conflicts frequently involve questions of whose suffering is acknowledged, whose knowledge is respected and who participates in determining the future of particular environments. The gap lies in bringing these concerns into closer conversation with literary representation. Environmental injustice does not always appear in fiction as an explicit political argument. It may become visible through polluted water, damaged landscapes, displaced communities, and restricted access to resources or characters whose relationships with their environments are ignored. This study therefore examines how aesthetic representation makes environmental injustice sensory, emotional and narratively visible.

Similarly, Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence is useful for understanding forms of environmental destruction that develop gradually and often remain politically invisible. Pollution, ecological degradation, displacement and the depletion of natural resources may unfold over long periods without the dramatic visibility associated with conventional violence. Literary representation can interrupt this invisibility by giving narrative form to environmental changes that might otherwise remain normalised. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Aziza and Bakari in the Climate of Change*, where environmental problems such as pollution and climate change are encountered through young characters and everyday experience. The significance of the text therefore lies not only in its environmental message but in the ways literary representation translates ecological crisis into experiences that can be perceived and responded to. This article extends Nixon's

concern with the visibility of environmental harm by examining the aesthetic strategies through which gradual ecological damage becomes narratively and emotionally perceptible.

Therefore, scholarship remains insufficiently integrated around the aesthetic construction of contested environmental spaces in contemporary Kenyan prose fiction. The gap is therefore not a simple absence of scholarship on the environment, Kenya or African literature. Rather, it is an analytical gap at the intersection of literary aesthetics, environmental space and postcolonial power. Existing scholarship provides the conceptual tools separately, but the present study brings them together to examine how literary form transforms environmental spaces into active sites of ecological, cultural and political meaning. The four selected texts make this intervention possible across markedly different environments. *Vanishing Herds* foregrounds pastoral land, cattle, mobility, conservation and changing systems of ownership; *Angels of the Wild* brings forests, wildlife and environmental responsibility into focus; *The Dragonfly Sea* extends the analysis to the Indian Ocean as a cultural, historical and geopolitical environment; and *Aziza and Bakari in the Climate of Change* brings pollution and climate change into the experiential world of young characters. Reading these texts together allows the study to demonstrate that environmental representation in Kenyan fiction is not confined to a single ecological problem or landscape.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) particularly descriptive-interpretive textual approach grounded in close reading. Close reading enabled sustained attention to the language, narrative structures and aesthetic devices through which environmental spaces are constructed (Byron, 2021; Watt, 2020). Particular attention was paid to descriptions of landscapes and ecological environments, metaphor, imagery, personification, symbolism, irony, spatial contrasts, narrative perspective, memory and representations of Indigenous ecological knowledge. The interpretive approach was informed by the study's two complementary theoretical perspectives of Eco-aesthetics and Postcolonial theory the methodology therefore did not treat the two perspectives as separate stages of analysis. Rather, they were used in dialogue. An environmental image, for example, was first examined in terms of its aesthetic construction and narrative function and was then considered in relation to the cultural, historical and political relations that informed the environmental conflict represented in the text.

The study purposively selected four contemporary Kenyan prose-fiction texts: Henry R. ole Kulet's *Vanishing Herds* (2011), Ng'ang'a Mbugua's *Angels of the Wild* (2015), Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), and Ian McKenzie-Vincent's *Aziza and Bakari in the Climate of Change* (2019). The texts were selected because each foregrounds environmental spaces in distinctive but interconnected ways. *Vanishing Herds* provides a sustained representation of pastoral land, cattle, mobility, conservation and changing systems of land ownership. *Angels of the Wild* focuses attention on forests, wildlife and environmental responsibility. *The Dragonfly Sea* extends environmental representation to the Indian Ocean and explores its cultural, historical and geopolitical significance. *Aziza and*

Bakari in the Climate of Change addresses pollution, climate change and ecological vulnerability through the experiences of young characters.

The purposive selection was therefore based on thematic relevance, environmental diversity and representational richness. Together, the four texts provide a sufficiently varied corpus for examining contested environmental spaces across terrestrial, forest, marine and atmospheric environments. The selection also makes it possible to identify patterns across texts while retaining attention to the distinctive environmental and cultural contexts of each work.

The principal area of analysis was the aesthetic representation of contested environmental space in Kenyan fiction. The study examined passages in which environmental spaces were represented as sites of ecological, cultural, economic or political significance. These included representations of land, grazing areas, forests, wildlife habitats, the ocean, waterways, atmospheric conditions, pollution and spaces transformed by development or commercial activity. Within these environmental representations, the analysis focused on several interconnected features: imagery and sensory description; metaphor and symbolism; personification and anthropomorphic representation; narrative perspective and focalisation; spatial contrasts; representations of memory and cultural belonging; Indigenous ecological knowledge; and the language of development, conservation, ownership and environmental responsibility.

Data were collected through repeated reading of the four primary texts. The initial reading established the broad environmental concerns and narrative contexts of each work. Subsequent readings identified passages in which environmental spaces were described, symbolised, personified, remembered, transformed or placed within conflicts involving communities, institutions, commercial interests or development projects. Relevant textual passages were then organised thematically according to recurring environmental and aesthetic patterns. The analysis proceeded through four broad stages.

First, the study identified environmental spaces and forms of contestation represented in each text. These included pastoral landscapes, forests, wildlife spaces, marine environments, polluted waterways and atmospheric spaces; secondly, the study examined the aesthetic strategies through which these spaces were constructed. Attention was given to imagery, metaphor, symbolism, personification, irony, sensory description, spatial juxtaposition, narrative perspective and memory. The purpose was to establish how literary form transformed environmental spaces from apparently passive settings into meaningful elements of narrative experience; thirdly, the study interpreted the identified representations through the eco-aesthetic framework. This stage considered how the texts construct relationships between human and more-than-human worlds and how aesthetic representation encourages readers to perceive environmental spaces as dynamic, relational and ethically significant; and lastly, the representations were examined through the postcolonial lens which considered questions of land ownership, dispossession, conservation, development, commercialisation, infrastructure, pollution, Indigenous knowledge and unequal access to environmental decision-making. The analysis asked whose interests were privileged, whose knowledge was recognised or marginalised, and how environmental transformation was connected to broader structures of power.

The findings were subsequently compared across the four texts in order to identify convergences and differences. This comparative process produced the major thematic categories discussed in the findings section: land as cultural and sacred space; environmental commodification and dispossession; the forest as sanctuary, archive and site of resistance; the ocean as living archive and geopolitical space; develop mentalism and oceanic dispossession; and pollution, climate change and environmental justice.

On ethical considerations, the study relied exclusively on published literary texts and publicly available scholarly sources. It did not involve human participants, interviews, questionnaires or the collection of personal information. Consequently, no participant consent was required. All primary literary works and secondary scholarly sources were appropriately acknowledged through in-text citation and reference listing in accordance with APA 7th edition conventions. The study also recognises the ethical importance of representing Indigenous ecological knowledge without romanticising or homogenising local communities. References to Indigenous environmental relationships were therefore interpreted in their particular literary and historical contexts rather than presented as universally uniform or inherently environmentally perfect systems.

V. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The analysis demonstrates that the selected Kenyan fiction represents the environment as an active field in which ecological, cultural, political and economic interests meet. Land, forests, oceans, rivers and atmospheric spaces are connected to memory, identity, livelihood and belonging, but they are also shaped by commodification, dispossession, conservation conflicts, exploitation and pollution.

A. *Land as Sacred Ecological Space and Cultural Identity*

One of the clearest findings is the representation of land as more than a commodity. In *Vanishing Herds*, pastoralist identity is closely connected to land, cattle and mobility. Land provides not only physical space for grazing but also a cultural and symbolic foundation for communal life. The loss or restriction of grazing space therefore carries consequences that exceed economic displacement. It threatens established relationships among people, cattle, territory and memory.

The aesthetic construction of land is central to this representation. Through imagery, metaphor and personification, the landscape is given a presence that connects it with ancestry and cultural memory. Land becomes something to which characters and communities are attached rather than something that can be valued solely according to market price. This representation resonates with Akoth's (2018) argument that land in postcolonial Kenya is deeply embedded in cultural narratives and with Lund's (2011) observation that claims to land are connected to political recognition and belonging. The novel consequently presents environmental conflict as a struggle over meaning as well as ownership. The question is not only who possesses the land but also who has the authority to define what the land is and how it should be used.

The same tension appears in *Angels of the Wild*, where the forest is represented as a space in which ecological and spiritual meanings converge. Through personification and symbolic imagery, the forest acquires a presence that exceeds its economic value. Trees are not merely units of timber, and the forest is not simply an undeveloped resource waiting to be exploited. The destruction of the forest therefore carries a double significance. It represents ecological loss while also threatening a cultural and spiritual world. Once the forest is understood as a repository of memory and meaning, its destruction becomes a form of cultural damage as well as environmental degradation. The significance of this finding lies in the way the texts resist a purely economic vocabulary of environmental value. They make visible forms of attachment that cannot be adequately expressed through monetary calculation.

B. Environmental Commodification and the Aesthetics of Dispossession

A second major finding is that environmental degradation is repeatedly associated with commodification and unequal economic power. *Vanishing Herds* is particularly important because it represents the transformation of communal landscapes through fencing, development and commercial interests. The contrast between open pastoral space and enclosed space is aesthetically significant. The fence is a physical structure, but it also becomes a powerful symbol of changing relationships to land. It restricts movement, fragments previously shared space and marks a shift from communal or mobile use towards more exclusive forms of ownership. The fence therefore operates at two levels. Materially, it changes the landscape; symbolically, it represents exclusion. Its significance lies not simply in the fact that a physical barrier has been erected but in what that barrier says about who may enter, move, graze, and belong and make decisions.

The novel also complicates the language of development. Development projects may be presented as signs of progress, investment or modernity, yet their consequences can include the displacement of communities whose environments are being transformed. The language of progress can consequently conceal unequal relations between communities, state institutions and commercial actors. This pattern corresponds with Escobar's (1995) critique of development discourse and Harvey's (2003) account of accumulation by dispossession. Both perspectives help illuminate the ways apparently legitimate economic processes can transform relationships to land and resources.

Importantly, dispossession need not take place through overt physical violence. It can occur through legal documentation, bureaucratic processes, changing property regimes, economic persuasion and development policies. The aesthetic force of the novel lies in placing official claims about progress alongside the lived experiences of those who bear its costs. Irony, juxtaposition and spatial contrast therefore become important literary devices. The language of investment and development is set against experiences of exclusion and loss. The result is an aesthetics of dispossession in which the reader is encouraged to see the gap between official accounts of progress and the experiences of communities affected by environmental transformation. Environmental commodification consequently becomes both material and epistemic. Communities risk losing not only physical access to land but also the authority to define what the land means.

C. *The Forest as Sanctuary, Archive and Site of Resistance*

The third finding concerns the multiple functions assigned to the forest. In *Angels of the Wild* and, in different ways, *Vanishing Herds*, forested spaces operate simultaneously as ecological habitats, sacred spaces, cultural archives, medicinal environments and sites of resistance. This multi functionality is produced through personification, imagery and symbolic language. The forest is not represented simply as scenery behind human action. It becomes part of the narrative world in ways that encourage readers to perceive it as having presence and significance.

The forest also functions as an archive. Stories, rituals, medicinal knowledge and memories are attached to particular places. When trees disappear and ecological systems are damaged, the loss is therefore cultural as well as biological. Environmental degradation becomes a threat to the continuity of knowledge. This finding is consistent with the direction of contemporary African Eco criticism, which increasingly recognises that environmental spaces may function as repositories of cultural and ecological knowledge rather than as neutral physical settings. The conflict between Indigenous environmental ethics and commercial exploitation is especially significant. The selected texts present local communities as possessing knowledge about their environments rather than as passive populations awaiting instruction from external authorities. This does not mean that Indigenous communities are represented as uniformly harmonious or environmentally perfect. Rather, their ecological knowledge is shown as historically situated and socially meaningful.

The question of conservation consequently becomes political. It is not enough to ask whether a forest should be protected. The more difficult questions are: Who defines conservation? Whose knowledge is recognised? Who participates in environmental decision-making? Who benefits from protection?

These questions bring the texts into conversation with environmental justice scholarship. Schlosberg (2007) reminds us that environmental justice involves recognition and participation as well as distribution. The forest conflict in the selected fiction similarly concerns whose relationship with the environment is recognised as legitimate. The forest's representation as a site of resistance also challenges the tendency to portray communities affected by environmental dispossession simply as victims. Characters question development projects, resist exploitation and defend ecological values. Environmental aesthetics consequently becomes an aesthetics of resistance.

D. *The Ocean as Living Archive and Geopolitical Space*

The fourth finding emerges most strongly from *The Dragonfly Sea*, where Owuor transforms the Indian Ocean from geographical background into a dynamic ecological, cultural and historical presence. The sea connects Pate Island with wider histories of migration, trade, religion and cultural exchange. It is therefore not simply a body of water separating communities. It becomes a living archive through which local experiences are connected to the wider Indian Ocean world.

The aesthetic representation of the sea also unsettles a strict division between nature and culture. Human identities are shaped through relationships with the sea, while the sea in turn influences human histories and possibilities. Environment is thus understood as lived relationship rather than detached physical setting. This relational understanding resonates with Ingold's (2000) account of environment as a lived world produced through ongoing interactions among humans, nonhumans and material surroundings. It also complements Neimanis's (2017) emphasis on water as relational and materially connected across bodies and spaces.

At the same time, Owuor's sea is not outside politics. It becomes a contested geopolitical space in which infrastructure, commerce and strategic interests intersect with local cultural meanings. Maritime space can be treated as a route for investment and connectivity while also carrying histories and ecological relationships that exceed commercial calculations. This tension is central to the novel's environmental imagination. The sea is both lived environment and economic space, both cultural archive and geopolitical resource.

The transformation of oceanic space into a commercial or infrastructural corridor can therefore be read alongside Escobar's (1995) critique of development discourse. When an environment is reduced to its economic function, other forms of meaning can become less visible. The sea's histories, cultural relationships and ecological significance risk being subordinated to external economic priorities. The novel consequently broadens the scope of Kenyan environmental literary criticism. Ecological contestation is not confined to land and forests. It also extends into maritime environments shaped by global economic and political processes.

E. Develop mentalism, Global Capitalism and Oceanic Dispossession

A related finding is the questioning of the assumption that development is automatically beneficial. In *The Dragonfly Sea*, infrastructure and geopolitical projects may promise economic opportunity while simultaneously creating possibilities for ecological and cultural displacement.

The conflict is fundamentally a conflict over meaning. Different actors understand the same environment differently. Government institutions may approach the coast through public administration and development; commercial interests may see investment opportunities; local communities may understand the same space through ancestry, cultural memory, livelihood and ecological dependence. The sea thus becomes a meeting point for competing epistemologies.

This aspect strengthens the postcolonial dimension of the study. Colonialism did not simply occupy territory; it also transformed the ways territory could be mapped, classified, administered and governed. Contemporary development can reproduce elements of this logic when local environments are reorganised according to priorities formulated elsewhere. The novel, however, avoids a simplistic opposition between local tradition and foreign modernity. The Indian Ocean has always been a space of movement and exchange. Owuor's representation recognises this historical complexity while drawing attention to the unequal power that may accompany contemporary geopolitical projects. This distinction is important. A postcolonial environmental reading should not romanticise local environments or treat all

external influence as inherently destructive. Instead, it should examine the unequal relationships through which environmental change occurs and ask whose interests are strengthened or weakened by particular forms of development. The aesthetic representation of the sea makes these contradictions visible. Historical memory, contemporary development and ecological vulnerability coexist within the same space. The result is an environmental politics that is simultaneously local and global.

F. Industrial Pollution, Climate Change and Environmental Justice

The fifth major finding emerges from *Aziza and Bakari in the Climate of Change*, which represents pollution and climate change through atmospheric, aquatic and climatic imagery. Smoke, contaminated water, damaged vegetation and changing climatic conditions become connected signs of ecological imbalance.

The importance of these representations lies partly in their sensory quality. Environmental crisis is not presented solely as scientific information. It becomes something that characters see, breathe, encounter and experience. The literary text therefore translates an abstract ecological problem into embodied experience. This is particularly important in environmental literature because pollution can otherwise remain invisible or statistically distant. By giving ecological damage a sensory presence, the narrative allows readers to encounter its consequences at the level of everyday life. Water pollution similarly links ecological damage with social consequences. Contaminated water affects aquatic life, livelihoods and human communities. Water consequently becomes a connecting element between human and nonhuman existence.

The novel's representation also has an environmental justice dimension. The burdens of environmental degradation are not distributed equally. Communities with fewer economic and political resources may experience the consequences of pollution more directly, while the benefits of industrial activity may accrue elsewhere.

Schlosberg's (2007) framework is useful here because environmental justice involves distribution, recognition and participation. The issue is therefore not merely whether pollution exists, but who suffers from it, whose suffering is recognised and who has a voice in decisions about environmental risk. The young protagonists are particularly significant because they place environmental crisis within an intergenerational frame. Ecological decisions made in the present have consequences for those who will inherit the future. The children's encounters with environmental problems therefore transform climate change from a distant global issue into a question of responsibility.

The text does not simply reject development. Instead, it questions forms of development that externalise ecological costs. Economic activity becomes defensible only when it takes seriously ecological limits, community welfare and the long-term consequences of environmental decisions.

G. Converging Aesthetics of Environmental Contestation

Taken together, the four texts reveal a coherent pattern in the aesthetic representation of contested environmental spaces. Personification, metaphor, symbolism, sensory imagery,

irony, memory and Indigenous cosmologies repeatedly transform environmental spaces into active participants in social and cultural life.

The study identifies four broad environmental formations: land as cultural and sacred space; forest as ecological archive and site of resistance; ocean as living archive and geopolitical space; and polluted atmosphere and water as embodiments of environmental injustice. These spaces differ materially, but they share an important characteristic: none can be understood adequately as passive settings.

The environment acquires what may be described as narrative agency. This does not mean that rivers, forests or oceans literally speak or act in the same manner as human characters. Rather, literary representation gives environmental processes consequences within the narrative world. Environmental change shapes human decisions, relationships, identities and futures. The selected texts consequently challenge anthropocentric literary conventions without eliminating human responsibility. On the contrary, representing environments as active and relational strengthens the ethical connection between human actions and ecological consequences.

The findings also show that environmental degradation is rarely represented as an isolated ecological problem. Land dispossession, forest destruction, marine exploitation and industrial pollution are connected to unequal access to resources, decision-making and knowledge. Environmental crisis therefore becomes a crisis of justice.

This is where the eco-aesthetic and postcolonial perspectives converge most productively. The aesthetic strategies of the texts make ecological relationships visible, while the postcolonial framework reveals the histories and power structures that shape those relationships. The environment is consequently understood as both a material reality and a contested cultural construction.

VI. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Kenyan fiction represents environmental spaces as dynamic sites where ecological, cultural, political and economic struggles converge. Across *Vanishing Herds*, *Angels of the Wild*, *The Dragonfly Sea*, and *Aziza and Bakari in the Climate of Change*, land, forests, oceans, rivers and atmospheric spaces are transformed through literary aesthetics from passive settings into active elements of human and ecological histories.

The analysis shows that personification, metaphor, symbolism, imagery, memory and Indigenous cosmologies enable the selected writers to challenge anthropocentric and commoditized understandings of nature. At the same time, a postcolonial perspective reveals that environmental degradation is closely connected to unequal relations of power involving state institutions, commercial interests, development projects, conservation practices and global economic forces.

Environmental contestation in the selected fiction is therefore simultaneously a struggle over ecology, culture, knowledge and belonging. The loss of land can signify cultural

displacement; the destruction of forests can threaten memory and Indigenous knowledge; the commodification of the ocean can obscure local histories and relationships; and pollution can expose the unequal distribution of environmental risk. The study consequently argues that an eco-aesthetic and postcolonial reading offers a productive way of understanding contemporary Kenyan environmental fiction. It allows literary criticism to move beyond identifying environmental themes and instead examine the formal and imaginative processes through which environments acquire meaning. The selected texts do not merely document ecological crisis. They make readers see environmental change as a question of relationship, responsibility and justice.

The significance of this argument extends beyond the four texts examined here. As African Eco criticism continues to expand, there is growing need for approaches that remain attentive to the particular histories, cultures and ecological realities of different African societies. Kenyan fiction demonstrates that environmental questions are inseparable from memory, identity, livelihood and political belonging. Ecological sustainability, in this context, cannot be treated as a purely technical or scientific matter. It is also a cultural and ethical question.

The selected writers ultimately invite readers to reconsider the meaning of environmental responsibility. Land, forests, oceans and water are not simply resources waiting to be consumed. They are spaces through which communities remember, belong, survive and imagine their futures. Reading these environments aesthetically therefore also means reading them politically. The environmental imagination becomes a space in which dominant ideas of development and ownership can be questioned and more relational understandings of ecological responsibility can be brought into view.

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