

EDUCATING CHILDREN ON ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION: A CASE OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S NJAMBA NENE SERIES

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Abstract

One of the major challenges of the twenty-first century is environmental crisis. A child lives and grows in an environment, which not only influences its development but also provides a child's needs such as air, water, food, shelter, landscape and natural recreational facilities. It is, therefore, important for a child to learn to respect the environment. This paper uses ecocriticism as a framework to examine Ngugi wa Thiong'o's children's books, viz. *Njamba Nene* and *the Flying Bus* and *Njamba Nene's Pistol* and analyzes how they can educate children and inculcate in them the right attitude towards the environment. In *Njamba Nene's Pistol* Ngugi uses fantasy to promote environmental consciousness.

Keywords: Children's literature, environment, ecocriticism, Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Introduction

Children's books, as noted by Hunt (2005), are used for different purposes, including entertainment, acquisition of literacy, expansion of a reader's imagination, inculcating general social attitudes, or coping with problems. Sutherland (1985) has also opined that stories are used in various cultures to socialize children. Children's literature, therefore, attempts to socialize children into the society so that they grow up into responsible citizens. The socialization entails infusing children with societal values so that they grow up knowing the right and the wrong. Respect for other people, for example, is encouraged. However, that respect should not be limited to humans only; children are also taught to respect the environment, to preserve, protect, and adapt to it.

According to Warutere (2018), Kenya's biggest challenge today is the restoration and protection of forests that have been degraded by years of deforestation and poor management. Indeed, the Kenyan Constitution encourages the state to achieve and maintain a tree cover of at least 10 per cent of the land area of Kenya, which is a far cry from the current 1.7 per cent.

This paper explores how Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kenya's acclaimed writer and critic, uses realism and fantasy in his children's books to introduce environmental messages. He seems to appreciate the fact that children's literature can socialize the young environmentally to have pro-environmental attitudes and practices. Speaking about fantasy, Tatar (2009) noted that it

is a popular genre in children's literature because it "engages both the intelligence and the imagination of its readers" (p. 20). This study focuses on two children's stories by Ngugi wa Thiong'o -- one of which uses fantastical elements to encourage an ecocentric mindset. The two texts are *Njamba Nene's Pistol* and *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*. Both stories are intended for children aged nine to twelve.

Definition of Key Terms

It is important to define key terms such as environment and children's literature.

Environment

The term environment, whose equivalent in Kiswahili is mazingira, suggests "a man's immediate surroundings and the available resources he manipulates within that environment" (Otiende & Ezaza, 1991, p. 1). Environment, therefore, includes the biophysical (ecology) and the cultural. Man's survival depends not only on the soil, water and atmosphere, but also on the cultural attitudes that determine how he relates with the environment as a whole.

Children's literature

Children's literature is difficult to define; however, this paper will draw on Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson's (2008) definition which observes that "children's literature is good-quality books for children from birth to adolescence, covering top-



ics of relevance and interest to children of those ages, through prose and poetry, fiction and nonfiction” (p. 4). This definition suggests that children’s books address childhood experiences and emphasize hope for a better future. The language and style and the characters are also interesting and memorable.

Ecocritical theory

Ecocriticism, according to Lawrence Buell, as cited in Bressler (2011), is a “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (p. 232). In other words, ecocriticism invites and challenges us to do something about our environment. Indeed, it calls us to activism. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) have observed that,

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman (p. xix).

Therefore, ecocritical theory assumes that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. The purpose of ecocriticism is to raise awareness and find solutions for the environmental crisis. Environmentalists have noted that “all life is interconnected” (Bressler, 2011, p. 231). Moreover, ecocritical theory “relates who we are as human beings to the environment” (p. 231). There is an interconnectedness between the culture of humans and nature.

Environmental Lessons in *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*

Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus uses magic realism to criticize deforestation practices and teaches young readers about the interdependence of different organisms. The protagonist, Njamba Nene, is a knowledgeable boy who educates the reader on many environmental issues. He understands nature and encourages others to protect it. Readers can’t help but identify with him. While he and his classmates are stranded in

the huge, thick forest, he teaches them about the importance of trees and wild animals that dwell therein. Teacher Kigorogoru always insensitively ridicules Njamba Nene in class. Since Njamba Nene is a small boy just like the child readers, young readers are bound to identify with Njamba Nene whose poverty is touching. Some pupils such as John Bull tease him and laugh at his skinny legs, patched clothes, and githeri. But after the bus catches fire in the forest and the children are stranded, it is Njamba’s githeri (not the money they had carried) that saves them from hunger. The narrator says, “They all sat down and shared the githeri. Most of them were surprised to see that Njamba Nene did not leave himself the lion’s share” (Ngugi, 1986b, p. 22). While in the forest, Njamba shows love to his erstwhile teasers.

To begin with, Ngugi integrates fantastical events into a realistic setting. The realistic setting, for example, is evident when the narrator makes reference to the elements of settler culture such as mother Wacu’s supply of manual labor to the large farm owners (Ngugi, 1986a, p.1), the armed white men (p. 37), and the presence of armed freedom fighters who had long braids (p. 5 & 37). These elements place the setting of the story in colonial Kenya. However, in spite of the realism of the setting, there are episodes that plant the story in the fantasy genre; examples include the flying bus; the peaceful, fierce wild animals that lie down near Njamba Nene (p. 30); and the “wailing and sobbing” trees (p. 32). The world of fantasy not only appeals to the children’s imagination, it also arouses their interest.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o introduces anthropomorphism in the text to promote environmental awareness. Forest trees, for example, embody human qualities -- wail and sob and laugh -- all of which are human qualities. The wild animals in the forest appreciate Njamba’s songs and they in turn lie close to him. Such fantastical elements bring out environmental lessons in a way that keeps readers engaged. Markowsky (1975) has noted that anthropomorphism allows young readers to identify with organisms that “may or may not be familiar to the child” (p. 460). By giving animals and trees human qualities that children can recognize, Ngugi encourages the child readers to sympathize with them. That sympathy makes it easy for the readers to appreciate the ecological lessons infused in the story. Indeed, environmental awareness is crucial for survival.

Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus carries ad-

ditional ecological lessons. For example, human beings should appreciate forests as sources of food. Njamba Nene tells his classmates who are stranded in the forest that “this forest is our store, our granary, our market” (Ngugi, 1986a, p.25). This suggests that forests should not be destroyed because we need them for survival. While trying to find their way out of the thick forest, the hungry pupils learn from Njamba Nene how to trap antelopes for food. Indeed, they caught one, roasted the meat and ate.

Nature not only provides food for the stranded pupils, but it is also seen as therapeutic in function. Trees and herbs have healing qualities. When one boy in the story complains of a terrible stomach-ache and writhes on the ground, he is saved by special leaves that Njamba Nene picks up from the forest. He stops sweating and jumps for joy and tells his classmates that he is ready to continue the journey with them. (p. 34). This illustrates the healing power of nature, showing that nature could serve a medical purpose.

The use of songs by pupils in the forest sharpens the message in the text. The use of songs points to the harmony and unity that can be achieved between humans and animals. The narrator says that Njamba Nene taught his classmates a number of songs. The narrator says:

They sang and sang until they fell asleep, one after the other. Njamba Nene was about to fall asleep, since he was the last one to nod off, when he suddenly heard animals howling close to where they were . . . As each animal came by, Njamba Nene sang to it as best as he could, until each one of them quietened down. The animals came closer and closer, drawn by his gentle voice. They lay down near him (Ngugi, 1986a, p. 30).

This suggests that consonance between animals and humans is desirable and is necessary for a healthy ecosystem. In addition, Njamba Nene quells the pupils’ fear the following morning by saying “since we have slept among the animals, we smell just like them, so when we walk through the forest, the other animals won’t be able to tell the difference between us and themselves. So we’ll be safe. The animals are our friends” (p. 30). Njamba teaches children about relationships in the environment. Children can learn about the importance of co-existing with nature. The relationship between nature and man is emphasized in the story.

Colonialism in Njamba Nene’s Pistol

Colonialism adversely affected Kenya’s natural environment as shown in *Njamba Nene’s Pistol* which is set during the state of emergency in Kenya. Njamba Nene experiences starvation due to lack of land to cultivate. The colonists had grabbed the land and had therefore denied the natives subsistence-based farming. In fact, even the poor natives that worked on white farms were underpaid. Speaking about Mother Wacu, Njamba Nene says she still works for the whites “but the selfish rich men that she works for do not pay her enough for food and clothes” (Ngugi, 1986a, p. 1). The huge plantations owned by the European colonialists are among the retrogressive practices that wounded the environment in Africa.

In Hussein’s (1970) play titled *Kinjeketile*, Kinjeketile and Kitunda’s wives lament at the biting famine whose cause is the absent men. Bibi Kitunda says, “I know. Anyway, famine is inevitable. All the men are working in Bwana Kinoo’s plantation and not on their own. So, of course, there must be famine” (Hussein, 1970, p. 2). Bibi Kinjeketile agrees that, “What you say is true. All the men are spending all their time cultivating for Bwana Kinoo, and not for themselves” (p. 2). Moreover, Saundry (2012) has confirmed that in Rwanda the Belgians introduced the water hyacinth from South America to beautify their homes.

Unfortunately, today the hyacinth not only endangers fish species in Lake Victoria, but it also chokes the shoreline of the lake. Similarly, in Achebe’s (1958) novel *Things Fall Apart*, the Christian missionaries clear part of the evil forest where the Ibo buried their undesirable dead and they put up a church. All in all, the introduction of a plantation economy, of environmentally unfriendly plants, and the clearing of forests to pave way for the construction of churches contributed to environmental degradation.

In addition, Njamba bitterly asks himself over and over again, “How can I die of hunger in my own country?” (Ngugi, 1986b, p. 3). He has not only been deprived of land, but he also cannot find a decent job in Limuru town. Similarly, after chief Kigorogoru had been shot, a screening operation is mounted in Limuru where many native children cry because of hunger and thirst. Meanwhile, the white soldiers mock the hungry as they munch their biscuits, meat



sandwiches, and drink water or whisky. Child readers are taught that there is no animosity and hunger when people work on their own shambas. Children are further taught about relationships in the environment. Because natives rely on land for their livelihood, it is therefore an important resource and being deprived means lack of peace; it means war. Children get to learn this principle about the environment.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the appropriateness of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's children's books as a tool to educate children about the environment. It has shown that the fantastical aspects and historical stories appeal to the children's imagination and persuade them to think about environmental issues. The use of songs too involves child readers at various points of conflict. Ngugi acknowledges that nature cannot be separated from human beings' existence, and children should cultivate a positive attitude towards the environment.

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