

## Face to Face with the Natural Environment:

### A Look at African Literature

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Human impact on natural environment has seriously increased over the last few centuries. However, it is only from the mid-twentieth century that a greater sensitivity has developed around environmental problems. With an eye on the development of the African environmentalism, the paper considers the reaction of some African writers and their efforts towards the conservation of physical environment and climate change through their literary works as narrative and poetry genres.

#### 1. A Brief note on philosophical environmentalist thought<sup>1</sup>

Human impact on natural environment has enormously increased over the last few centuries. However, it is only from the mid-twentieth century that a greater sensitivity has developed around environmental problems. Conservation and sustainable development are the sum of today's vision of environmental management. The philosophical environmental thought of the last thirty years has changed the way we relate to nature. Human impact on natural environment has seriously increased over the last few centuries. Since the mid-twentieth century, the awareness that neglecting or underestimating the ecological carrying capacity of the Earth could lead to tragic consequences for humanity yielded a greater sensitivity to the environment. Among the various environmental philosophical positions, a distinction must be made between anthropocentric, biocentric, and ecocentric theses.

The word "anthropocentrism" was first coined in the 1860s amidst the controversy over Darwin's theory of evolution in order to represent the idea that humans are the center of the universe. Anthropocentrism in fact considers humans to be the most important life form, and other forms of life to be important only to the extent that they affect humans or can be useful to humans (Kortenkamp and Moore 2001: 2). Kopnina *et al.* (2018) highlight the debate concerning anthropocentrism and debate if it is a value restricted to humanity or if it resides in the rest of life,

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<sup>1</sup> As per Italian academic regulations, the authors hereby state that Cecilia Mignanti is the author of section 4, and Graziella Acquaviva of sections 1, 2, 3, and 5.

too. Scholars like Norton (1995) and Cocks and Simpson (2015) make a distinction between strong anthropocentrism and weak anthropocentrism. The first is limited to consumptive natural resources: nature does not appear to have intrinsic value, and its extrinsic values are limited to its obvious contributions to humankind. The second is more encompassing and includes less tangible nature-related human values. Nature allows humans to grow in character and to feel good about themselves by interacting and caring for something outside themselves.

Biocentrism, distinguished in an individualistic and a holistic form, extends the concept of value to everything alive: humans, animals, and plants. It considers the human beings as being just a part of the living world, and promotes the idea of equality at the level of the whole biosphere. Thus, humans have the duty to respect the living nature and to protect it (Caciuc 2014: 94; Koprina 2012: 238).

Ecocentrism states that the whole nature is superior to the individual. It extends the moral sphere even up the non-human entities taking into consideration the nature as a whole with all its moral values and meaning. Ecocentrism highlights the idea that humans are just a part of the ecosphere they depend on, and this is why it is considered the most radical current of that revolutionary movement known as “deep ecology”<sup>2</sup> (Grey 1993), a philosophical movement attributed to Norwegian Arne Naess and based on an ecocentric concept including both an anthropocentric as well as a non-human perspective (Caciuc 2014: 93; Howardas 2012).

## 2. Ecologism in the postcolonial era: the African experience

The relationship between man and nature have become predominant problems, debated not only in academic circles but also amongst the environmental and politically oriented activists. The idea of ecocriticism finds its origins around the 1970s in the United States, following the hypothesis that literary criticism could start from the relation between literature and environment (Mihaljevic and Kakkonen 2016: 13-15). The term ecocriticism was created by Rueckert (1978). In order to promote

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<sup>2</sup> Basic principles of deep ecology formulated by Arne Naess and George Sessions in 1984, and which constitute the DEP (Deep Ecology Platform) are: 1. the well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have intrinsic and inherent values in themselves; 2. richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves; 3. humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs; 4. the flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population; 5. present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening; 6. policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present; 7. ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life's quality rather than to an increasingly higher standard of living; 8. those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes (Ibanga 2017: 101-103).

the ideas of ecocriticism, the ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment) was founded in 1992. ASLE is also responsible for the publication of the Journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* published since 1993 (Mihaljevic and Kakkonen 2016: 16). Kern (2000:30) states that ecocriticism urges literature to connect to the issues of today's environmental crisis and ecological problems and concepts throughout literary texts. Although some scholars suggest that African writers have not been very attentive to nature and most postcolonial African literary text fight the ideologies of European colonialism and neocolonialism, it is equally true that some of them convey environmental themes (Brown 1972; Nwagbara 2010; Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 2011; Ibang 2017), as for example Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whose literary works are closely related to the sacredness of the Earth and trees (Acquaviva 2019), Wole Soyinka's plays *The Lion and the Jewel* (1973), *The Swamp Dwellers* (1973), and *A Dance of the Forests* (1974), in which cultural aspects appear to be used as means to raise environmental awareness and express the need to protect nature. An important role in the diffusion of environmental policies was played by ecological activists and writers like the Kenyan 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Wangari Maathai, founder of GBM (Green Belt Movement), focused on tree planting and environmental conservation (Acquaviva 2019), and the Nigerian Ken Saro-Wiwa,<sup>3</sup> who was leader of MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People)<sup>4</sup> and EMIROAF (Ethnic Minorities Rights Organization of Africa) (Osagae 1995: 327) and author of literary works like *Genocide in Nigeria: the Ogoni tragedy* (1988),<sup>5</sup> and *A Forest of Flower* (1995),<sup>6</sup> which reflect environmental issues such as the relations between ethnicity, land, water, pollution and human rights (Nixon 2007).

### 3. Eco-poetry in the Western and Eastern African context

As evidenced by Nwagbara (2010: 17), Nigeria's political independence was soon followed by a serious crisis at the societal and economic levels, leading the country to a situation of great

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on Saro-Wiwa's life and literary works see: North (2001), Welch (1995), Fyfe (2017), and Nicholls (2017).

<sup>4</sup> The Ogoni are a minority ethnic group inhabiting the Rivers state in Eastern Nigeria. They do not have a myth of common origins as other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Their ethnicity is based on a common language, customs, and farming methods (Osagae 1995: 327-328).

<sup>5</sup> *Genocide in Nigeria: the Ogoni tragedy* (1988) is a collection of newspaper columns and articles written in the 1970s and 1980s, and provides an overview of Saro-Wiwa's political and environmental concerns. The articles document his concerns about the fate of the Ogoni people and their mistreatment by multinational oil companies and collaborating Nigerian Government.

<sup>6</sup> *A Forest of Flower* (1995) is a collection of nineteen short stories in which a nation is seen crashing under the pressure of corporate greed, ignorance, and mercenary self-interest, and its people struggling against government abuse.

environmental and ecological threats and unsolved issues of resource control, in particular in the Niger Delta region. Unsurprisingly, many poets began to use their art to denounce the environmental devastation and contributed to the growth of the so-called ecopoetry (Johns-Putra 2016) – a genre that developed mainly in the 1990s. Nigeria made a great deal of fortune from the oil boom of the 1980s; however, this fortune was made at the cost of the Niger Delta region, whose land and environment have been desecrated, fish poisoned, animals killed and inhabitants obliged to leave (Orhero 2017: 159-160).

Ifowodo's "A waterscape," the opening poem of his *The Oil Lamp* collection (2005), describes a lost and imaginary ecosystem preceding the exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta:

Hung above water, hands in the air,  
whited tongues and breathing fibrous hair:  
roots, white mangrove roots.  
[...]  
Floating hats of lily, yellow plume  
Plankton and shrimp, egg-and-fish in bloom:  
Lakes, ancestral lakes.  
[...]  
And in the mangrove waters, where tides  
Free the creeks of weeds, fishermen glide  
Home to the first meal (Ifowodo 2005: xi).

In these lines, the natural environment's richness of the land appears in symbiotic relationship with the indigenous people who rely on the environment for their daily subsistence. The exploitative environmental policies put in place by the multinational corporation and which destroyed the Nigerian environment are denounced in Ojaide's poetry collection *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (Ojaide 1997). The capitalist and state-sanctioned onslaught on the Niger Delta bioregion and its consequences are highlighted in the poem "Delta Blues," in which the horrors and tragedies caused by multinational corporations' presence are denounced (Nwagbara 2010: 24):

This share of paradise, the delta of my birth,  
reels from an immeasurable wound.  
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow  
from this hurt to the unquestioning world  
that lights up its life in a blind trust.

The inheritance I sat on for centuries  
 Now crushes my body and soul  
 The rivers are dark-veined,  
 A course of perennial draughts,  
 [...]  
 This home of plants and birds  
 Least expected a stampede;  
 There is no refuge east or west,  
 north or south of this paradise.  
 [...]  
 I live in the deathbed  
 [...]  
 My birds take flight to the sea,  
 The animals grope in the burning bush (Ojaide 1997: 20-21).

In East Africa, Swahili poetry has not been insensitive to the problems associated with the degradation and transformation of the environment. The poetry collection *Kichomi* (“Sharp pain,” 1974) by the Tanzanian Euphrase Kezilahabi contains poems such as “Uvuaji wa Samaki Victoria” (“Fishing in Lake Victoria”) and “Namagondo” that evoke serious environmental issues. The first poem, *Uvuaji wa Samaki Victoria* (Kezilahabi 1974: 4-5) tells the story of over-fishing in Lake Victoria presented as a tug of war: *I have never seen a harder tug of war than this*<sup>7</sup> (Kezilahabi 1974: 9). The poem expresses the consequences of greed and the need to reevaluate fishing as an economic activity. As Ranne (2016: 179) remarks, the poem accuses fishermen of too much fishing: “Those people were still there, half naked!/Fishing again/ ‘We do this three-four times a day’, they said” (Kezilahabi 1974: 9). In “Namagondo” (Kezilahabi 1974: 8-11), the village where the poet was born, Kezilahabi underlines how traditional food is no longer available (“where are the sweet potatoes so delicious they stunned their eaters”), and common agriculture techniques have been replaced by new farming technologies (“Where is the cotton we harvested in plenty?/ Rooms filled with it, and people had to move out”).<sup>8</sup>

Another important topic discussed in the ecopoetry genre is climate change.<sup>9</sup> An example is provided by The Benji Poetry and Music Global Concepts, a Nigerian company very much involved in

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<sup>7</sup> English version by Ranne (2016).

<sup>8</sup> English version by Drury (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Evidence from several studies shows that climate change in Africa affects infrastructure (Ghana, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania, for example, experienced droughts which affected the water levels in their dams and led to low hydropower),

research work on climate change education and which has produced poems on climate change to help promote attitudes and behaviors needed in order to safeguard environment. Anabaraonye's seven stanzas poem "Plant a Tree" is centered on planting a tree for the betterment of the world and in order to curb the menace of climate change – in line with the mandate of SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals):

Trees provide us with oxygen.  
Trees help keep the environment clean.  
Trees help to purify the air.  
Increasing moisture as they transpire.  
[...]  
Trees provide food.  
Trees provide wood.  
Trees combat climate change  
When properly managed.  
[...] (Anabaraonye, Nji and Hope 2018: 82).

In "Go Green, Keep Clean" it is clear how poetry can be used in educating African and also world communities about climate change adaptation and mitigation for global sustainability:

Go make the world a better place  
Beautifully occupy your space  
Go spread joy and beauty everywhere  
Spread like a breath of fresh air.  
[...]  
Go green, Keep clean  
Keep the simple laws of hygiene  
Our planet is our responsibility  
Our vision is to make it green truly.  
[...] (Anabaraonye, Nji and Hope 2018: 83).

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human health (high temperature and severe rainfall events are precarious factors in initiating malaria epidemics in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Madagascar. Extreme day-to-day temperature could bring about increase in food poisoning), and ecosystem. Most common climate events are drought, flooding, desertification and land degradation and, consequently the displacement of people (Awojobi and Tetteh 2017; Anabaraonye, Nji and Hope 2018).

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The poems by the Kenyan Kithaka wa Mberia touch on one of the most sensitive topics: the destruction and the conservation of environment and the threat to the very existence of the human race and creatures. In his poetic collection *Bara jingine* (“Another continent,” 2001) the poem *Jinamizi* (“The monster”) speaks about the devastations resulting from drought: “Cows collapsed/ like dry leaves/Fallen by the wind/during spring” (Mberia 2001: 57).<sup>10</sup> In *Ngao* (Mberia 2001: 59) the poet condemns the poisoning of the atmosphere caused by industrial gas:

<i>Kwa macho ya akili</i>	Use smart eyes
<i>Tazama anga za mbali!</i>	look at the distant sky
[...]	[...]
<i>Kemikali jeuri</i>	Insolent chemicals
<i>Zinatafuna Ozoni</i> (Mberia 2001: 59)	are chewing Ozone <sup>11</sup>

Mberia alerts people on the necessity to protect the environment. In *Mkalitusi* (“The Eucalyptus tree”), the poet underlines the benefits brought by this tree to the health of the planet:

<i>Mizizi yako</i>	When your roots
<i>Inapohimili udongo</i>	Support the ground
<i>Na majani yako</i>	And your leaves
<i>Kusafisha hewa,</i>	Make the air clean
<i>Moyo wangu</i>	My heart
<i>Unaridhika</i> (Mberia 2001: 67).	rejoices <sup>12</sup>

In *Mombasa mibuyuni* (“Mombasa inside Baobab trees”), the sea breeze is compared to a detoxifier:

<i>Upepo laini wa bahari</i>	The sea breeze
<i>Unapuliza taratibu</i>	blows constantly
<i>Na kuufanya huu ukanda</i>	and makes this ‘belt’
<i>Dawa ya kuyeyusha machovu</i> (Mberia 2001: 72)	a drug that detoxifies from tiredness.

<sup>10</sup> English version by Nixon and Ronald (2014).

<sup>11</sup> English version by this article’s authors.

<sup>12</sup> English version by this section’s author.

In the poetic collection *Msimu wa tisa* (“The ninth season,” 2007), Mberia talks about the benefits from the natural environment in his poem *Ukarimu wa Ekweta* (“The generosity of the Equator”):

<i>Asanteni jua, mvua, udongo na hewa</i>	Thank you, sun, rain, soil and air
<i>Ushirikiano wenu na mkono wa mkulima</i>	(for) your co-operation with the farmer
[...]	[...]
<i>Katika miali ya Novemba</i>	With the rays of the November sun
<i>Kwa pamoja, parachichi, chungwa na papai</i>	All together, avocado, orange and pawpaw
<i>Yakishirikana na karakara na ndizi</i>	Joining with passion fruit and bananas
[...]	[...]
<i>Kesho, liamkapo jua, nanasi litachukua zamu</i>	Tomorrow, at sunrise, will be the turn of the pineapple
<i>Likishirikiana na embe, tufaa, pera na plamu</i>	to join with mango, apple, pear and plum
[...]	[...]
<i>Tufurahie ukarimu wa anga la Ekweta</i>	Let’s enjoy the generosity of the Equator. <sup>13</sup>

(Mberia 2007: 78).

As evidenced by Nabulya (2018), the poem “July”<sup>14</sup> by the Ugandan poet Tusingiiriwe deals with the impact of meteorological conditions on a subsistence farming community. Although the poem features a landscape characterized by banana plants, nut gardens and trees, the picture is that of a land completely spoiled by drought, as in the following lines:

The thirsty earth gapes wearily at the heavens,  
the limp dry grass droops the earth.  
Dry banana leaves rustle and crackle in the heat  
[...]

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<sup>13</sup> English version by this section’s author.

<sup>14</sup> The title of the poem recalls the driest month of the year in the Lake Victoria’s area (Nabulya 2018: 6).



Trees creak and screech and shriek. (Tusingiiriwe 2000, cited in Nabulya 2018: 6)

Climate change education is vital in order to prepare the society to the impact of climate change, teach how to adapt to it and mitigate it, and reach global sustainability. Poetry may be a valuable tool for climate change education and one that will enable people to achieve the sustainable development goals (Anabaraonye, Nji and Hope 2018).

#### 4. Eco/egocentric criticism: the East African fiction's experience

“Literary environmentalism is an idea that is purely grounded in ecocriticism”

(Nixon and Roland 2014: 29)

Literary environmentalism and ecocriticism open new ways for debating environmental and literary issues: all of humanity is affected by environmental problems and environmental degradation in particular; thus, western literature and overall novels start exploring this theme in different societies and cultures in the 1960s and 1970s. In East Africa, in the 1990s several Swahili authors begin presenting works connected to eco-critical ideologies (Nixon and Ronald 2014: 29-33). This paragraph deals with a few Swahili authors whose literary works focus on environmental issues and highlight an African philosophy of life strictly connected to environmental debate. As reminded by Hillman (1983), telling a story, a human experience, or writing about people needs a deep engagement by the author in his literary itinerary and experience: starting from the 1980s, we witness a change in the Swahili literary expression: while it was a mere tool of nationalist propaganda, it now begins to explore new fields. The Swahili writer now thinks he can complete the meaning of his words through the language of nature. Thus, Said A. Mohamed in his novel *Utengano* (“Separation,” 1980)<sup>15</sup> uses nature’s metaphors such as the rise and fall of the tide, the alternation of wind and rain, and the constant change of the Earth’s landscape (Mohamed 1980: 97) to make the reader reflect on the transience of human existence. Any natural phenomenon that becomes a myth – summer, winter, the moon phases, the raining seasons – is not just an allegory of the event but a “psychic event,” a

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<sup>15</sup> The plot is fairly intricate. Suffice it to say that the rich and tyrannical Makuudi keeps his wife Tamima and his daughter Maimuna prisoners in their own home, to the point that, during her husband’s absence, Tamima suffers labour pains but is too afraid to call a doctor or visit a hospital, while Maimuna runs away from home but is later driven to prostitution. Makuudi, back home after visiting his mistress, blames his wife for Maimuna’s disappearance and, after almost beating her to death, throws her out of the house. After a few years, Makuudi, now alone and impoverished, finds Maimuna and in vain implores her to come back home. Finally, Maimuna meets Kabi and is saved by his love (Bertoncini Zúbkova *et al.* 2009: 471).

symbolic expression of the unconscious drama of the soul that becomes accessible to human consciousness through the reflection of the natural phenomenon itself. In the 1990s, as Gromov (2014: 40-41) states, the Swahili literature witnesses the emergence of the so-called “new” or “experimental novel,” linked in stylistic and formal aspects to post-modern writings and which makes use of an allegorical and parabolic prose. The contents are not limited to East Africa local developments, but extend to the fear of future in Africa and for the human race in general. The main enemies represented are: globalization (*utandawazi*), imperialist ambitions (*ubeberu*) and individualism (*ubinafsi*), that are responsible for destroying the most important human values. Swahili writers elaborate these contents describing apocalyptic and dystopian worlds (global catastrophes, dictatorial powers, famine) in order to exhort the reader to pay attention to the future, leaving him with a hope for a better world.

Kezilahabi’s *Nagona* (1990) and *Mzingile* (“The Labyrinth,” 1991) are considered the founding texts of the “new” Swahili novels insofar as they present a dystopian and catastrophic view of the future of humankind (Gromov 2014: 41). *Mimi – I – Ego* is the narrative subject in both novels. The first novel, *Nagona*,<sup>16</sup> narrates of a spiritual hunting directed towards a mysterious gazelle-woman called “Nagona.” In this quest Mimi goes through an unregulated world which is surrounded by an apocalyptic atmosphere altered by political, social and religious traumas. The protagonist of *Mzingile* undertakes a journey to give a message to Kakulu, namely the Creator, who is represented as an old disenchanted man who decides to go back to his village after “the great collapse.” The land has been completely destroyed and it can only be reconstructed starting anew from new bases. The novel’s metaphysical core problem is represented by religion and God, conceived as myths created by human beings. The main character is Kakulu (“Little Giant”). He is born as an old man, and he is no more than 30 cms in height. He is a mythic figure, an omniscient god. When Kalulu thinks he has reached the right age, he summons five elders in order to teach them History, traditions, costumes and local

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<sup>16</sup> The novel *Nagona* is sprinkled with mythological motifs and African symbols, overall those taken by the *kerewe*<sup>16</sup> tradition. As we know, the myth assumes fundamental values in the primitive and archaic societies, namely in the societies in which the myth represents the basis of social life and culture (Eliade 1969: 17-18). The presence of the myth in the novel is due to the author’s choice to connect his literary work to the people’s traditions and origins. Every element of the novel: the heroic task of the protagonist to hunt the gazelle (i.e., the bond between the human and the divine), the connection with the traditional rites, the magic, the wisdom, and the elderly people guide, is bounded to the repertory of the African myth. The novel is full of symbolic universal images (the circle as the sacral representation of the universe, the light as the creative power, and the water as symbol of creation and purification). The use of myths and symbols allows Kezilahabi to observe the world transcending its contradictory manifestations and describing its polyvalent nature, which could not otherwise be conceptualized.

medicine lessons. Then the five make return to their village leaving Kalulu alone. One day the mountain is set on fire and all the plants, the animals and the people are destroyed, producing famine and collapse. All the people of the village start to offer sacrifices to Kalulu, who is seen as a divine man. Suddenly it rains and he becomes a saint: a real human being who is a symbol of eternity. After that, the narrator continues his trip looking for Truth, God and religion. But this journey will not give him any solution, and as the first novel, *Mzingile* has an open end. Mimi finds God in a physical man, a creature who lives in miserable conditions, disappointed by the human being and ready for death. God does not want to leave the mountain where he lives, and the protagonist is forced to go back to the external world alone: he thus finds out that the Earth has been spoiled by a nuclear catastrophe. He goes around to his native village, and there he finds the old omnipotent man who, after the destruction of his mountain hut, has chosen to pass away where the last human being traces were left. The narrator nurses him as much as he can, until a day it starts raining and nature starts growing again. The hero meets a young woman and they become a couple: in the final act they see the old man hiking back to his mountain. This open end can be read as a rebirth and a renovation of the human world, or as life being saved by the very absence of religion. Said Ahmed Mohamed's novels *Babu alipofufuka* ("When Grandfather Came Back to Life," 2001) and *Dunia Yao* ("Their World," 2006) do not differ from the idea of future described in Kezilahabi's *Nagona* and *Mzingile* (Gromov 2014: 42). As shown by Aiello Traore (2015: 22), the first novel depicts an impoverished, depressed country in the near future. K. is the protagonist and he represents the corruption and cynicism of African leaders. One day his grandfather raises from death and takes K. on a journey to a miserable and desperate land which symbolizes the "pitiful present." Back home, K. decides to hang himself in order to be reborn as a spirit and refuse his social milieu. Nixon and Roland (2014: 33-34) consider *Babu alipofufuka* a text of ecological exploration: it denounces the environmental calamity that has befallen the people of Eastern Africa. The village that K. discovers resembles hell and its surroundings are completely deserted, like the *Kingdom of Pate in the Al-Inkishafi* epic.<sup>17</sup> K.'s journey turns into frustration and the sun is incredibly hot because it has been many years since the last drop of rain has graced the land. The situation, as it is described in the novel, is worse than during "El Niño," the unusual ocean current that happens along the western coast of South America every two to ten years, killing large numbers of sea creatures and causing often severe changes in weather conditions in many areas of the world. Moreover, the country's resources have been depleted, so that people have

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<sup>17</sup> *Al-Inkishafi* ("The Unveiling") is an epic poem (*utenzi*) written by Sayyid Nassir (d. 1820), a poet of Pate who contemplates the ephemeral nature of life on earth and the necessity of proper conduct towards God's creation (Topan 2006:104).

nothing to eat (Mohamed 2001: 145-147). For Bertoncini Zúbková (2000), the novel is a protest against the ravaging of the Earth and against a progressive destruction caused by the rich class: it is a protest that cannot leave anyone indifferent. As Roland and Nixon (2014: 34) highlight, the author uses vivid representations that transport the reader into an imaginary world. The language he uses has the capacity to make the reader reflect and ponder about his or her relationship with the environment.

The second of Mohamed's novels presented here, *Dunya Yao*, rather investigates the individualistic nature of human beings, and for its contents it is possible to consider it an "egocentric novel." The protagonist, Ndi, is self-centered: he is a former government officer of Tanzania in the near future who chooses to seclude himself in his house out of his disappointment with the practices of the world at large – indeed, "their world" (the novel's title). Aiello Traore (2015: 22-23) claims that the plot construction expresses the delirium and distress of the protagonist through a stream of memories, hallucinations, and visions. The world around the protagonist is full of violence, and Ndi finds his own way to escape it through writing, creating and expressing himself. Ndi will connect again with his society going back to African traditions and symbols, such as the rhino's horn (a symbol of unity), the traditional African food, and the knowledge of the heroes of the past (Gromov 2014: 43). As affirmed by Garnier (2019: 137), it is significant that this novel, completely haunted by global questions, takes place in the individual intimate space. *Dunia Yao* presents a sociopolitical criticism of globalization from an East African perspective and bashes neocolonialism, corruption in politics, class inequalities, the deterioration of education, the Zanzibari violence during the multiparty transition, and the dramatic experience of migration to Europe (Aiello Traore 2015: 22-23).

According to Garnier (2019: 136), the global space described in Kezilahabi's *Nagona* and *Mzingile* and Mohamed's *Babu alipofufuka* is also shared by the Kenyan author Kyallo Wamitila in his novel *Bina-Adamu* ("Wonder man," 2002). As Gromov (2014: 43-44) reports, the protagonist is an unnamed village boy who has to find the three hermaphroditic sons of the prophet of the village. If he succeeds, life in the village will start to prosper again and abject poverty will end. During his quest, the protagonist, accompanied by several magic figures, visits three continents: Europe, which lives in the time of "yesterday", Asia, that is industrialized and lives in the "hope," and Africa, that is living in the "suburbs of the global village" and has been destroyed by wars and famine. Wherever he goes he meets the effects of the irrational actions of a mysterious individual: P-P (an extravagant character who sells Africa to foreigners and poisons the ocean with oil and radioactive material). At the end of his journey the protagonist will find P-P in the USA, defined as *bustani ya eden ya pili* ("the garden of the second Eden") and where the inhabitants, the sharks of global economy, want to live in "today" and in the "reality." Together with P-P they are creating the "man of the future," namely a creature

that does not remember its origins and history, that is not able to think and has as its only interest the consumerism of industrial products. The protagonist thus decides to devote his life to the fight against P-P for the rise of the African Union. As it emerges from the text, the only way for Africans to leave the suburbs of the global village is through Unity and self-knowledge (Wamitila 2002: 154-155). Throughout his novel, the author suggests that nowadays imperialistic powers consider the whole world as their playground, and, as Garnier (2019: 136) states, this global unified world is a world of extreme danger, where specific areas are constantly destroyed by external forces. The space described is a desert, a land deprived of any culture (Wamitila 2002: 123). According to Gromov (2014: 44) *Watu wa Gehenna* ("People of Gehenna," 2012), a novel by the Kenyan author Olali, differs in structure from the previous novels, but it still resembles them for the main elements presented: the human world (the world of the future, ruled by the devil, where Africa is suffering from a never-ending misuse of power, poverty and the exploitation of resources) and another world, the Gehenna (where just corrupt people, criminals and unscrupulous politicians live). This world is well represented by its nature hostile to men: Gehenna is dominated by four volcanoes that afflict the humanity for eternity through their fire. Here it is not possible to avoid pain, there is no freedom of choice and there is no mercy. The only constant element is lava that bursts out everywhere (Olali 2012: 1). Also in this novel, the people's unity and courage are able to defeat evil, and the enthusiasm of a shared rebellions creates a new force, in which young and elder people will fight against the evil and restore their world (Olali 2012: 125).

When analyzing eco-criticism in the Swahili novels, it is important to cite the Kenyan Clara Momanyi's *Nakuruto* (2009), an eco-critical feminist novel set against a backdrop of environmental activism (Nixon and Ronald 2014: 37-39),<sup>18</sup> and Emmanuel Mbogo's *Bustani ya Edeni* ("The Garden of Eden," 2002). In *Nakuruto*, the author analyzes the work authored by women who write on different ecological issues in their artistic expression. The writer uses the female protagonist, Nakuruto, to admonish humanity and educate society giving suggestions for a better future. Momanyi denounces in her novel the destruction of the African indigenous culture, which was able to preserve its ecosystem, by colonialism. The author draws an idyllic picture of the precolonial environment as a

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<sup>18</sup> Ecofeminist theory has provided a critique of the ontology of domination, wherein oppressors are thought to be of a higher order of being than the dominated. In the modern era this ontology has been enabled by a binary epistemological mode and practice that reduces living beings to the status of objects, thereby dismissing their moral significance and permitting their exploitation, abuse, and destruction. In ecofeminist literary and cultural practice, texts are reconceived as vehicles for the disclosure of being, rather than as mechanisms for its elision, thereby helping to reconstitute the "objects" of discourse as "subjects" (Donovan 1996: 161-162).

beautiful scenario dominated by a living and colorful nature, a paradise where all creatures coexisted. However, the arrival of the colonial powers obliterates this paradise and creates a society of boundaries where all creatures fight each other. Through her criticism of colonialism, Momanyi also presents the present political and ecological problems by a female point of view. The author admonishes us about the women's difficulty to take part in the political agenda and suggests that women's participation would be useful in the struggle for the preservation of the ecosystem. Again, it is possible to notice in this novel, too a good use of symbolism: Momanyi draws a parallel between nature and women, affirming that when women suffer in a repressive society, ecology, too suffers, so that the liberation of women from repressive cultures means also the restoration of Mother Nature (Nixon and Ronald 2014: 38; Acquaviva 2019: 41). Mbogo's environmentalist novel *Bustani ya Edeni* (2002) is set in Dar es Salaam, where various kinds of pollution affect the lives of local people: the narrative focuses on the problems caused by a chemical factory called Sagasaga. Factory workers get sick because they do not wear gloves nor masks. The factory dumps waste materials into the river, poisoning plants and animals, while the people who use its water face the risk of contracting cancer. Following the public opposition to the environmental destruction caused by the factory, its managing director is forced to close it and finds refuge in the United States (Nixon and Ronald 2014: 33).

Ecocritical analysis is contemporary to the egocentric examination by Swahili authors who target in their analysis specific social actors. In the novels presented below egocentrism is a feature shared by the elder social class when it enters in conflict with younger people. An example is given by *Kipimo cha Mizani* ("The Weighing Scale," 2004) by Zainab Burhani. The novel tells about Halima and her husband Amini, who live a peaceful and happy life. Suddenly, Amini dies in a car crash, and Amini's brother, Umari, deprives Halima of all her property and even takes her children away, forcing Halima into an asylum. Nevertheless, Halima manages to restore her mental sanity and regains what she lost. Finally, she marries Selemani, her late husband's best friend, and she forgives Umari (Bertoncini Zúbková *et al* 2009: 352). As Wafula (2013: 112) highlights, egocentric features are depicted in the character of Umari, who decides to bribe the Police, and Dr. Juma, the doctor who certified Halima's mental insanity, contravening professional ethics, in order to deny Halima the right to inherit her late husband's property (Burhani 2004: 102). In the novel Umari is described as an extravagant person, selfish and envious of his brother (Burhani 2004: 61). *Kipimo cha Mizani* presents an intergenerational conflict where young characters are presented as active members of the society, capable of determining their own destiny. These values are internalized in Salama's character, a young nurse who fully adheres to professional ethics and decides to intervene when she notices that the corrupted Dr. Juma is contravening it. She prefers to observe social and communal values against

the immoral and corrupted conduct of the elder doctor. The author here expresses how youth is able to change society for the better and can refuse to be intimidated by their egocentric seniors (Wafula 2013: 148).

Another novel which expresses egocentric preoccupations is *Kufa Kuzikana* (“Life Buddies,” 2003) by Ken Walibora. The novel is set in an imaginary country which can be easily recognized as Kenya in the early 1990s. The first person narrator is Akida, a fifteen-year-old student. Akida’s best friend is Tim, who belongs to his opposite ethnic group, and when a tribal war between Akida and Tim’s ethnic groups breaks out the two friends must struggle in order to save their friendship (Bertoncini Zúbková *et al.* 2009: 362-363). As Wafula (2013: 121) notes, in this novel the majority of the elder characters are represented as passive and egocentric people. An example is the figure of Mzee Muyaka, the father of Akida’s friend, who is only interested in personal welfare and does not care about the political events, including war: when Mzee Muyaka’s employer advises him about the killing of the Minister Johnstone Mabende, he answers the young boy’s questions with silence. He does not think that all this deserves the people’s attention, and he actually get furious with the young man’s insolence, and sends him away abruptly (Walibora: 2003: 164-165). Mzee Muyaka’s past experiences account for his indifference and egocentric attitude, and, as in the previous novel, younger generations manifest the will to eradicate this negative frame of mind (Wafula 2013: 121). Egocentric features are also presented in the Shafi Adam Shafi’s novel *Vuta N’kuvute* (“The tug of war,” 1999). The novel is set in Zanzibar at the end of the colonial era during the liberation struggle. The protagonist is a young Indian woman, Yasmin, who falls in love with Denge, a black militant freedom fighter who cannot marry her. The young woman therefore marries another lovely and kind man who takes care of her. Denge himself, after escaping from prison, seeks refuge in China (Bertoncini Zúbková *et al.* 2009: 474). According to Wafula (2003), this novel meditates on two conflicts: the conflict between the former colonial power and the communist ideologies shared by younger generations; and the conflict between a younger generation and the elder one that still promotes ethnic prejudices (Ellboudy 2005). The inter-generational conflict is represented through the clash of different generational values: younger people are represented by critical and patriotic characters, while the elder generation is depicted by naïve and egocentric personalities (Wafula 2013: 123).

##### 5. Final Remarks: African environmental and ecological education programs

According to Lithoxoidou *et al.* (2016: 68-70), the ecocentric approach is centered on the abolition of the separation of humankind from the environment; moreover, humans could not have survived as a species if everyone cared only for himself, and empathy is the impersonal ability to discard impulses

while focusing on the needs of the other or the knowledge of the state of mind of another person and its spontaneous emotional response. Thus, human behavior towards the environment depends on human beliefs about it (Howardas 2012). As Svatina *et al.* (2014) claim, beliefs are a subject of change, in particular during the transition to adolescence, because this is a period when an individual develops the ability of complex and abstract reasoning. Understanding this transition is crucial for predicting the attitudes and course of action in terms of sustainable development later in life.

Batibo (2013: 161-162) emphasizes the importance of including indigenous knowledge in the learning programs of the new generations. Indigenous knowledge is based on the indigenous people's interaction with their physical environment, including fauna and flora, as well as the interaction between themselves and with their supernatural world.<sup>19</sup> In traditional African societies, children acquired their indigenous knowledge through their constant interaction with both the adults and the physical environment. This knowledge included an understanding of the surrounding ecological system and the acquisition of skills in the use of the various tools and devices in the daily activities. However, the traditional mode of preservation and transmission of linguistic, cultural and nature-based knowledge has been affected by the reduction of bio-cultural diversity and the adoption of Western-based lifestyles in most African societies. The reduction of the ecological diversity has been the result of a number of factors and circumstances, such as the deforestation of the equatorial forests for timber and pulp, the clearing of woodlands for cultivation and firewood, and the pollution of water sources (United Republic of Tanzania 2010-2014: 12). As a result of the diminished contact with nature and with the traditional cultural environment, the younger generations are losing the indigenous knowledge of the ecosystem, such as the names of plants and wild animals, their characteristics and uses. Batibo (2013: 165) stresses the fact that although during the Ujamaa period an attempt was made in Tanzania to develop education on the basis of traditional systems through the philosophy of Education for Self-Reliance, not much was done to incorporate local knowledge in the school curriculum. However, in some vocational training institutions or informal learning centres, some traditional skills have been incorporated in modern skills.

Wildlife Clubs were founded in order to overcome the obstacles inherent in curricular innovation in schools, and in compliance with an adequate environmental education, Wildlife Clubs (McDuff 2000). The Wildlife Club movement in Africa is the largest grassroots conservation organization for students, and Clubs are found in seventeen Anglophone countries and ten

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<sup>19</sup> Concerning the topic of indigenous knowledge and environmental conservation most studies relate to East Africa. Very interesting are the surveys conducted by Ayiamba (1981) and Dyson-Hudson (1987) on pastoral strategies.



Francophone countries. In Kenya, for example, the Wildlife Club (WCK) has a history spanning three decades and involving more than one million youth. In the early 1970s, WCK grew in the number of registered wildlife clubs and the initiation of field-based activities that promoted the engagement of Kenyan students with their national parks. In 1980s, WCK received both national and international recognition, such as the 1986 domestic tourism award in Kenya for taking 6000 students into the parks, and in 1990s it began a training program to increase the capacity of its staff and teachers in the participation to the monitoring and evaluation of its programs (McDuff 2000: 386-389). As Glasson *et al.* (2010: 125-126) claim, in response to global climate change, loss of biodiversity and the human impact on the carrying capacity of the earth systems, attention has been focused on a sustainable development worldwide. Also following the 2012 Arusha Declaration 18, the Africa Environmental Education and Training Action Plan (AEETAP) 2015-2024, promoted by United Nations Environment, was initiated in order to support environmental awareness in many African countries. It seeks to promote innovation on the basis of the best sustainability practices through information and communication technology, including the development and implementation of Massive Open online Courses (MOOCs) on sustainable development, as well as the promotion of a positive attitude and behavioral change. The plan's main strategies are related to four areas:

- Formal education (enhance environmental education in all levels of formal education through policy and quality assurance systems; support curriculum innovations; professional development of educators; grants and scholarship programme to promote environmental education research);
- Informal or Vocational Education and Training (promote demonstration learning environments for green Technical Vocational Educational and Trainings (TVETs); establish competence-based models for green TVET; train TVET college lecturers and curriculum developers);
- Lifelong Learning, Youth Development and Community Education (Adult learning; indigenous knowledge and learning for sustainability; small grant system for social innovation through Environmental Education and Training).
- Capacity Building, Networking and Social Learning (media, social media and social e-learning capacity development; network building and support; mentorship and leaders programme; donor and research organization involvement) (Lotz-Sisitka *et al.* 2017).

At the end of this longish overview of ecological issues and concerns in African literature, the reader may have been struck by the shallowness, naivete and, too often, ideological bias of many plots. Still, intellectuals and authors from both West and East Africa have been instrumental not only in promoting among their (admittedly still limited) public an ecological awareness, but maybe even in

bringing about promising changes in environmental policies at large, especially addressing the educational system and the need to promote an environmentalist consciousness in the future generations. By no means an easy feat.

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