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Ecocriticism And Postcolonialism: An Analysis Of Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's *The Perfect Nine*

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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The Perfect Nine* is a groundbreaking narrative that merges traditional epic storytelling with a contemporary feminist lens. Set in the origins of the Gĩkũyũ people of Kenya, it recounts the mythic journey to find suitable partners for the ten daughters—dubbed "The Perfect Nine." This verse narrative intricately weaves folklore, mythology, adventure, and allegory, creating a tapestry which is rich in cultural resonance.

The story brims with classic elements of the epic form: suspense, danger, humour, and the sacrifices made by both the protagonists and their suitors. These suitors, numbering 99, must navigate challenges that test their courage, unity, and perseverance. These trials are not just physical but metaphorical, representing the values and ideals central to African philosophy and the communal ethos. Ngũgĩ views the epic as a celebration of beauty—not merely as aesthetic appeal but as a principle guiding life and human migration. Reflecting on its genesis, he describes the work as a divine revelation of values such as courage, perseverance, unity, and familial bonds. Through *The Perfect Nine*, Ngũgĩ reimagines the epic genre as a vehicle to explore human struggles with nature and nurture, while placing African heritage and the feminine divine at its heart.

The relationship between human beings and nature is deeply intertwined, with nature providing sustenance and being integral to human existence. However, cultural perspectives significantly influence how humans interact with the natural world. Indigenous cultures, such as those of Indians, American Indians, and Africans, have traditionally maintained a reverential attitude towards nature, viewing it as sacred and inseparable from human life. This harmonious relationship faced a profound disruption with the advent of colonialism. Colonial powers, guided by a Western worldview rooted in a Judeo-Christian belief system, often regarded nature as existing primarily for human exploitation. This perspective starkly contrasted with the indigenous reverence for nature and justified the extensive exploitation of natural resources. During colonial rule, the environment of colonized regions was devastated, its resources extracted to fuel the economic and material ambitions of the colonizers. In this process, nature became a victim alongside the colonized peoples, both

subjected to relentless exploitation and domination. This shift underscores the destructive impact of colonialism on both ecological and cultural landscapes.

Postcolonialism, as an intellectual movement, traditionally centers on the cultural, social, and political repercussions of colonialism on the colonized. However, its engagement with environmental concerns has been limited, often overshadowed by its focus on identity, hybridity, and displacement. In contrast, ecocriticism emerged as a field dedicated to analyzing the interplay between literature and the environment, emphasizing ecological awareness and sustainability. Despite their shared activist impulses, these two schools of thought have historically operated in isolation from one another.

Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2013) introduces the concept of "slow violence" to describe the long-term impacts of environmental harm. Unlike overt acts of violence, slow violence unfolds gradually, often invisibly, over extended periods. It includes phenomena like soil erosion, desertification, and the lingering effects of toxic waste, which disproportionately affect disadvantaged populations. This idea underscores the insidious nature of ecological harm, revealing how the legacies of colonialism and continued exploitation manifest as persistent injustices in both social and environmental realms. Postcolonial ecocriticism, therefore, seeks to highlight and address these overlapping dimensions of injustice.

Professor Rob Nixon identifies four key points of divergence that have contributed to this estrangement. First, postcolonialism's focus on hybridity contrasts with ecocriticism's concern with purity and the concept of wilderness. Second, while postcolonialism prioritizes themes of displacement and diasporic identities, ecocriticism tends to anchor its analyses in a sense of place and rootedness. Third, postcolonialism has embraced transnational perspectives, whereas ecocriticism has predominantly developed within an American context. Finally, postcolonialism has concentrated on recovering marginalized histories, whereas ecocriticism often erases these histories by framing colonized landscapes as pristine, uninhabited wildernesses.

The schism between these two disciplines has gradually begun to close through the interdisciplinary approach of postcolonial ecocriticism. This emerging framework synthesizes the ecological focus of ecocriticism with postcolonialism's emphasis on historical and cultural critique. By doing so, it enables a more nuanced understanding of environmental issues within the context of colonial and postcolonial histories, addressing the ecological devastation wrought by colonial exploitation alongside the cultural and social displacements it engendered. This confluence enriches both fields, fostering a deeper, intersectional analysis of literature and its relationship to environmental justice.

Colonialism, which once dominated over 80% of the world's landmass, has left enduring consequences that resonate in contemporary society. While the impacts of colonialism have traditionally been examined through an anthropocentric lens—focusing on its effects on human societies—there is an equally significant, often overlooked ecological dimension to consider. Colonial practices profoundly altered the natural environments

of colonized regions. The extraction of resources, establishment of plantations, deforestation, and introduction of invasive species were all driven by the colonizers' economic motives and disregard for local ecosystems. Landscapes were reshaped to serve imperial interests, disrupting indigenous ecological balances and traditional relationships with the land. This ecological legacy of colonialism underscores the necessity of analyzing history not just in terms of human suffering and cultural loss but also through an environmental perspective. Understanding this intertwined history can provide a more holistic view of colonialism's far-reaching effects and contribute to addressing the environmental injustices rooted in its legacy. Postcolonial theorist Helen Tiffin trenchantly observes:

“Destruction of wildlife and wildlife habitats frequently deprived invaded human communities of their primary means of subsistence, while their „resources“ were exploited for imperial profit. The importation of sheep and cattle, cash-cropping and other European agri-practices replaced local hunting and gathering or systems of crop rotation, thereby damaging established ecosystems, reducing soil fertility, and even, as in the case of African settlements south of the Sahara, causing famine through desertification.” (xii)

Postcolonial ecocriticism emerges as a critical framework that integrates the methodologies of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism. It examines the dual impact of colonialism on both the colonized peoples and their environments, spanning the colonial period and extending into the neo-colonial era. By intertwining the concerns of social justice and ecological justice, postcolonial ecocriticism offers a nuanced lens to explore how environmental degradation and social inequities are interconnected.

This framework emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between human actions and environmental changes. Human-induced environmental damage, whether immediate or gradual, often leads to significant socioeconomic consequences for those living in affected areas. Conversely, ecological disruptions—such as deforestation, pollution, or climate change—can exacerbate social vulnerabilities, especially among marginalized communities.

SYNOPSIS

This passage beautifully encapsulates the legendary origins of the Gĩkũyũ people, as reimagined in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's epic. It highlights the strength, self-reliance, and symbolic power of Gĩkũyũ and Mũmbi's daughters, portraying them as foundational figures in a society rooted in justice, beauty, and resilience.

The emphasis on names and their meanings reinforces the cultural significance of identity and lineage. Each daughter's attributes align with virtues essential to community-building, from courage and creativity to wisdom and fairness. The introduction of the ninety-nine suitors and their symbolic struggle for the daughters' hands suggests a test of worthiness, reinforcing themes of merit and destiny.

The quest against Mwengeca, the human-eating ogre, extends the epic's mythic quality, tying personal and communal struggles to a broader existential battle against oppression and destruction. The lesson learned—

that ogres exist not just in stories but in real life—implies an ongoing vigilance against forces that threaten the well-being of the people. The ending, marked by ritual blessings and marriages, signifies renewal and continuity, though the unfulfilled union of Warigia and Kīhara serves as a poignant reminder of loss and the unpredictability of fate.

CONCLUSION

This paper aims to examine Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's novel *The Perfect Nine* through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism. By adopting this perspective, it explores the intricate interconnections between human lives and the natural environment, emphasizing the novel's ecological and cultural dimensions. *The Perfect Nine* serves as a powerful narrative that not only reclaims indigenous myths and histories but also highlights the importance of living in harmony with nature. Through its analysis, the paper seeks to demonstrate how the novel reflects the profound relationship between humanity and the environment, illustrating the ecological wisdom embedded in indigenous traditions. It argues that Ngũgĩ's work champions the ideals of sustainable development by presenting a worldview that values coexistence, respect for nature, and the interdependence of all living beings. By situating the novel within the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, the paper underscores its relevance to contemporary environmental and social justice discourses, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities of creating a more sustainable future.

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