

ECOCRITICAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN BOTSWANA

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Abstract

“Conservation” is currently a buzz word the world over because of environmental crises affecting climate, wildlife, forests, oceans, and many human societies. Recently in Botswana, there were reports that more than 90 elephants were slaughtered by poachers as a result of disarming the Botswana wildlife rangers. This study is based on Anne Fine’s play *The Play of Goggle Eyes* which is one of the set texts for the Junior Secondary School English syllabus in Botswana. The study draws from the Revised National Policy on Education (Botswana Government, 1994) that introduced environmental education into the Botswana education system. The paper argues, using ecocriticism theory, that the play can be used to teach environmental conservation through the teaching of the English language as a subject. The paper also posits that the demands and or the aspirations of Botswana’s education system falls short of achieving its intended purpose because the teaching of environmental issues is left to the discretion of an individual teacher who may emphasise more on the “social constructivism” and “social linguistic determinism” of the text. Finally, the paper proposes classroom activities which, if foregrounded in the teaching of the text, would attribute a more experiential character to literature for instruction purposes. The paper concludes that Junior Certificate English Syllabus should be repackaged to make environmental education through literature more proactive rather than leave this vital aspect of humanity to individual teacher’s inclinations. Teachers of English too, should be empowered at colleges of education to think, see, and read the environment in every text they deal with beyond the idea of nature as a metaphor, or just a locale within which characters relate with one another.

Background on Environmental Education in Botswana

Environmental education was introduced into the formal education system through the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE, Botswana Government, 1994). The policy was based on the 1992 Presidential Commission on Education report. The Commission had recommended, among other things, that environmental education be introduced into the national curriculum in Botswana. In April 1994, the government accepted this recommendation. The policy indicates that environmental education should be introduced across the curriculum and into both in-service and pre-service teacher education (Botswana Government, 1994). Environmental education is about including sustainable development issues such as climate change and biodiversity into teaching and learning. Individuals are encouraged to be responsible actors who resolve challenges, respect cultural diversity, and contribute to creating a more sustainable world. (<https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development-esd>).

The syllabi which comprise language and literature components have seventeen (17) aims. Aim number 7 states that on completion of the Three Year Junior Certificate Programme, students should “have acquired knowledge and understanding of their environment and the need for sustainable utilization of natural resources”(Republic of Botswana, 2010: ii). It is clear that the syllabus does not separate environmental education from education for sustainable development as environmental experts do. This in my view is a convenient approach in that the syllabus teaches students environmental consciousness. In other words, policies on environmental education and education for sustainable development converge in the classroom which is an implementation level.

The 1994 RNPE (Botswana Government, 1994) strengthened related national policy initiatives legitimizing environmental education. Among these policies are the World Conservation Strategy (IUCN/UNESCO/WWF, 1980), Agenda 21 (United Nations, 1992) and the National Policy on Natural Resources Conservation and Development (Botswana Government, 1990) to name a few. These policies call for environmental awareness and training to promote sustainable development. The National Vision 2016 (Botswana Government, 1997a) calls for an informed and environmentally educated nation. As a response to the RNPE of 1994, the junior secondary school syllabi were revised to cater for the infusion of environmental education.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. As a literary criticism theory, ecocriticism or “green studies” began in the United States of America and the United Kingdom in the late 1980s and the early 1990s respectively. Unlike many literary theories that lie on the trodden path of literary criticism, ecocriticism lies on academic margins. It does not have a widely-known set of assumptions, doctrines, or procedures. Ecocritics re-read major literary works from an ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural environment. They extend the applicability of a range of ecocentric concepts, using them for things other than the natural world-concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable use of energy and resources. They turn away from the ‘social constructivism’ and “linguistic determinism” of dominant literary theories and instead emphasise ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and claims of the world beyond ourselves (Barry, 1995 p. 264).

The Play of Goggle Eyes

The two-act play is about Kitty Killin, a lively, outspoken, and headstrong girl of secondary school age and her family; mother and sister Jude. Her mother had had a string of insignificant relationships following her divorce from Kitty and Jude's father. The relationships have had no impact at all as they did not interfere with the lives of the family, especially their green issues meetings. However, the family dynamics change when Gerald, the eponymous character arrives. Gerald is a conventional, a sharp contrast to Mum who is unorthodox, chaotic and at times organised. Kitty and Gerald have little shared values. For example, she does not understand why Mum is attracted to Gerald who has no interest whatsoever in green issues. Gerald is a business-minded man who enjoys reading business reports, and views the world the way he would a business plan. The sisters, especially Kitty, hope that Gerald like many of Mum's past boyfriends would quickly vanish into oblivion. However, they learn that he has come to stay. This creates tension in the family.

The Botswana literature classroom and environmental issues

Addressing climate change is complex because environmental, economic, social, cultural, ethical, political, scientific and technological issues all come into play. "For this reason, [schools] should include climate action in all subjects - not only in science and social science courses. For example, in language and literature classes, learners can practise the communication skills they need to speak out about the issues affecting their lives. (UNESCO, [DRAFT], p.13). In 1994, Botswana adopted UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) programme in its ten year basic education programme. The education programme lists fifteen (15) aims, two of which concern the environment. The ten year basic education programme states, on issues of the environment, that students should have "acquired knowledge and understanding of their environment and the need for sustainable utilization of natural resources"(Republic of Botswana, 2010:ii) and have "developed desirable values, attitudes and behaviour in interacting with the environment in a manner that is protective, preserving, and nurturing." (Ibid, 2010: ii). These two aims are also listed under the three-year Junior Certificate aims, which make them central to the production of a rounded speaker of the English language.

The teaching of environmental issues through literature is especially complex in Botswana and many other African countries. The reading of canonical texts has always been biased towards political education and or activism. This is not surprising because Africa has a colonial past that it is still struggling with. Therefore, many texts read by literature students are, more often than not, subjected to socio-political and economic interpretations. It is, therefore, not surprising that the analysis of these texts derives from such theories as psychoanalytic criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, post-modernism, feminist criticism, Lesbian/gay criticism, Marxist criticism, etc. For example, the reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is usually done along the idea of a clash between culture/tradition and civilization. One hardly hears teachers interrogating environmental issues in the novel. The casting away of twins, *efulefus*, *osus*, and other perceived curses to Umoafia into the evil forest is not, for instance, adequately critiqued. The evil forest in the novel is treated with equal measure of contempt as the accursed people it receives. However, the place itself is not inherently evil as it is made such by the spirits of the dead who are disposed of there. One would find this a case of environmental pollution by humans. In the story, the narrator tells us that:

[Unoka] died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die.

There was the story of a very stubborn man who staggered back to his house and had to be carried again to the forest and tied to a tree. The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels. He died and rotted away above the earth, and was not given the first of the second burial. Such was Unoka's fate. (Achebe, 1994, p.13)

What an ordinary reader of *Things Fall Apart* will pick immediately is the discrimination against certain groups of people such as the albinos, twins, the poor, and the sick. Issues of environmental contamination become peripheral and would not be raised beyond metaphorical discourses of discrimination. An ecocritical reader, on the other hand, would immediately pick the contradictory act of disposing the bodies of the so-called accursed people into the evil forest. "The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels". In this conflicting representation of the environment, the Earth Goddess would not allow people like Unoka to be buried into her bowels, but does not find anything wrong with them thrown into the so-called evil forest. It is clear that the environment is essentialized to the point that the flora and fauna are alienated from the rest of nature. An ecocritical reader would find the depiction of the earth in this regard an attempt to paint humans' treatment of nature as repulsive. The revulsion could be equated to the act of avarice personified by Mammon and other fallen angels in Milton's *Paradise lost*. The fallen angels' mining activity is described in terms akin to parenticide. The narrator tells us that through Mammon, men also [...] by his suggestion taught, /Ransacked the centre, and with impious hands /Riffl'd the bowels of their mother earth/For treasures better hid (Milton, 1966, p.228). Mammon and the rest of Satan's legion use the gold they dig up from the earth to build Pandemonium from where they would disturb God's natural order of things.

Teachers of *Things Fall Apart*, and indeed *Paradise Lost*, are trained to analyse the texts along the dominant literary theories because ecocriticism lies on the academic margins. In other words, teachers are not adequately trained to teach environmental issues through literature and language. More effort is, therefore, needed towards improving education for both in-service and pre-service teachers regarding environmental education. In Botswana, especially in public schools, environmental education is closely associated with sciences and social science subjects, and not the arts. To add to the problem, learners have to grapple with issues of language first before they can appreciate the text in terms of its thematic concerns.

The complexity of teaching environmental education through the teaching of literature in English is two-folds for teachers who are aware of ecocriticism. First, there is the individual teacher's bias regarding literary criticism. For example, generally, teachers emphasise human relations and ignore themes on environmental conservation in literary texts. I think it is because our understanding of humanities has bias towards human-to-human relationships and it often disregards the human-to-environment connection. This view is shared by critics such as Keith Bishop *et al* in their work 'Developing Environmental Awareness through Literature and Media Education: Curriculum Development in the Context of Teachers' Practice'. They argue that:

Much literature and media education has been concerned with the exploration of social issues. Developing response to text has thus been framed by reference to moral and other social issues of contemporary concern and of relevance to young people. Literary and media theory now valorises readings of texts grounded in particular ideologies or perspectives on social issues: hence Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, etc. There is less evidence of "Green" readings of texts. (Bishop, 2000, p.272)

The environment is often mentioned in passing when either setting or conflict is discussed. This, in my view, is attributive to the trodden path of analysing texts by interrogating socio-political and economic dynamics in it. Therefore, more often than not, our measure of humanness is the sum of how, for example, men treat women; adults treat children; the rich treat the poor; heterosexuals treat queer group, etc. Secondly, the Junior Secondary School English syllabus does not make explicit the teaching of environmental issues by way of aims and objectives. The syllabus states:

“In an endeavour to ensure that the syllabus is responsive to the needs of society, cross cutting issues like HIV and AIDS, Environmental concerns, Family Life Education and Gender should be infused and integrated at classroom level. National and global issues like civic and voter education, violence and crime, water conservation, poverty alleviation, road safety, child labour, anti-corruption, Vision 2016, terrorism, globalisation, racial tolerance and human rights can be covered under all the language skills, Literature and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL).” (Republic of Botswana, 2010, p.IV)

In the quotation above, it is apparent that the teaching of how people relate to their environment is included almost as an afterthought under the idea of ‘infusion of emerging issues’. In other words, teachers are encouraged, not mandated, to include where possible, discussions on such topics as HIV/AIDS and environmental conservation. It is my considered opinion that although, the idea of teaching literature is to improve the different linguistic competencies of the learners, the subject has a residual mandate of teaching students to engage with present-day issues. This includes, teaching them about their responsibilities as citizens. Tsekos *et al.* (2012) share similar sentiments. They argue that:

Literature, being one of the Fine Arts, serves not only in shaping personalities but in forming the social structures as well. As a form of Art, Literature holds this asset: whatever is provided by the other forms of theoretical life in a rationalized process, naturally degrading to becoming rather tiresome to the reader, is offered by Literature - and apparently Art in general- in a pleasing way through the enticement of the Fine and the expression of the Beauty (Tsekos et al., 2012, p.188).

This does not mean, however, that issues of conservation are not dealt with in schools. For example, during World Environment Day, children are encouraged to write essays, stories and or poems about the environment.

A proposal of classroom activities for teaching environmental conservation through *The Play of Goggle eyes*

The Play of Goggle Eyes highlights familial conflict at the centre of which is Kitty’s love for green issues. Therefore, teachers of the text should foreground how divergent views about the environment almost tear apart a family to provoke thinking and discussion of environmental issues. In the play, Mum and Kitty care about environmental issues and are involved in various campaigns. They care about protecting the planet from nuclear weapons and pollution, protecting the countryside from road-building and protecting animals against cruelty. Act one opens with Mum receiving a call from Gerald who asks her for a date and Mum obliges, putting the planned green issues meeting with Kitty and other community members on the back banner. This upsets Kitty who feels Gerald is taking

her mother's attention from matters of national importance. When Mum agrees to Gerald's date the following conversation ensues between Kitty and Mum:

Mum: Oh, Kitty. You're going to have to let me off the meeting, just once. I'm going to 'le Chat Noir'.

Kitty: What's that?

Mum: It's a French restaurant next to the Town Hall.

Kitty: I see. You are going to let the whales and dolphins stick up for themselves, while you eat *pate de foie gras*? You are going to let this poor old planet care for itself, while you eat baby veal? You are going to let pollution take over, while you –

The exchange between mother and daughter above demonstrates that their relationship has thus far developed around their care for the environment. It is this exchange that sets the tone of the play regarding environmental debates. The scene projects Kitty as an unassuming environmentalist who is prepared to protect nature at all cost, even if it means jeopardising her mother's happiness in the hands of a new lover. Her attempt to guilt-trip Mum to rescind her decision not to attend the green issues meeting over a date, however, does not succeed. It is then that Kitty realises that Gerald has great power over her mother more than the fear of pollution and other environmental risks has over her. What is particularly interesting to ecocritics of the play is that in the opening of Act One, scene two, Kitty uses pathetic fallacy to express her apprehension about the arrival of Gerald in their home. In a dramatic monologue, she quips "I know a storm warning when I hear one. / So when we finally got to meet this famous Gerald-Mr Gerald Faulker –exactly a week later, I made sure there was nothing she could pin on me in the bad manners line" (Fine, 1995, p.5). Kitty tells the audience that she decided to put on her best manners by way of keeping to herself and speaking only when spoken to by Gerald, who they think is visiting for the first time and would not be long. However, it becomes apparent to Kitty and Jude that Gerald has been in the house before because he knows where household effects such as glasses are stored. The use of pathetic fallacy by Kitty foreshadows the destructive force that Gerald is. He would put not only the family at risk, but would lead to the death of marine life such as whales and dolphins through pollution, while he and Mum enjoy their date over *pate de foie gras*. It is remarkable that this disruptor of the natural family routine is a business man and that suggests that pollution and other environmental problems are attributive to environmentally unconscious business people like Gerald.

Teachers should emphasize the element of conflict and ask students to think how in their experiences, the environment has been a source of tension amongst family members or the community as a whole. This way, the teacher will encourage learners to appreciate that they have a duty to the world we live in, drawing examples from the text itself. The teacher could also ask the students to list some of the natural resources found in the play and say what people use them for. Some of the examples are:

Trees out of which humans make paper - For example, Gerald reads a business broadsheet

Animals e.g. the stuffed cat that Kitty keeps

The whales that are poisoned by pollution

The teacher can also come up with activities where students participate and experience the environment in terms of its value and its problems, directly and personally. For example, they could

participate in national tree planting day or visit a place affected by deforestation. Students could be asked to write poems and stories in response to photos or videos about climate change. In Other words, the learners should practice, through the reading of the play, the communication skills needed to speak out about local and global issues about the environment. From the play, the teacher should emphasise that everything that characters need comes from the environment. For example, the business paper that Gerald reads is made from trees, and so is the book from which the learners are reading about conservation. The observation that he benefits from the environment that he fails to protect will help the children understand Gerald as wasteful and uncaring. Another good example is the stuffed cat itself, which is a symbol of a world that is devoid of life as a result of indiscriminate hunting or poaching. The cat is representative of futuristic nostalgia for a healthy ecosystem. In other words, humans' continued neglect of the environment will lead to its collapse, and the result will be that the generations to come would have to make do with artificial nature.

Another point to emphasise is the idea of rights and responsibilities. This is an easy point to raise. However, many teachers will most likely talk about rights and responsibilities leaving out the environment because the text is anchored on family life education and gendered roles. Consider the example below. Gerald describes Kitty's bedroom thus:

“Blackened banana skins. Shriveled apple cores, Clothes all over, coated in cat hairs. Half-empty cups of stone-cold coffee, growing mould ... Make-up spilling out on the dressing table. Pens leaking on the rug. Crumpled-up papers everywhere. Blouses and underwear fighting their way out of the drawers.” (Fine, 1995, p.23)

The description of the bedroom is that of a place that needs immediate attention. What is interesting about the bedroom is that it mirrors the larger community within which the Killin family finds itself. There are both organic and inorganic objects that are out of place, for example, the blackened banana skins and shriveled apple core, as well as a pen leaking on the rug. The bedroom, therefore, is a microcosmic representation of Kitty's dreaded view of how the environment will end up if they abdicate their duty towards it. Ironically, Gerald finds the room disgusting but he finds nothing wrong with big businesses polluting the environment. It is this case of irony and common but divergent views represented by Kitty and Gerald that ecocritical teachers of the text should highlight. This irony which arises from the reader's sharp sense of environmental crisis leads one to conclude that both Kitty and Gerald want a clean environment, but they differ as regards the locus. In terms of the landscape schema, Kitty thinks far much better than Gerald because she cares more about the larger environment while he thinks only about their immediate surroundings and the gains that can be accrued out of the landscape. One can conclude, therefore, that the business minded Gerald is not very different from Mammon in *Paradise Lost*. He, Just like Mammon and the rest of Satan's legion do, disturbs the natural order of things. The learners' activities and teacher's way of reading the text suggested above would ensure that environmental education about the environment (reading the play), environmental education in or from the environment (taking part in planting trees), and environmental education for the environment (shared attitudes about the environmental conservation) are attained side by side linguistic competencies.

Conclusion

Literature should be used to shape learners' moral attitudes towards the environment. Events in the text can be used to shape their ecological values, attitudes, and behaviour towards nature. Suggested activities would ensure that the three cardinal aspects of human personality that is the

cognitive, emotional, and ethical aspects are fully accounted for through what I call pedagogical activism by the teacher. The three aspects are in keeping with Bloom's taxonomy of the educational objectives. The paper has attempted to cultivate in teachers and readers an ecocritical-oriented approach to canonical works, even those that we are eerily familiar with. The JC English Syllabus should do more to make environmental education through literature more proactive rather than leave this vital aspect of humanity to individual teacher's inclinations. Teachers of English too, should be empowered at colleges of education to think, see, and read the environment in every text they deal with beyond the idea of nature as a metaphor, or just a locale within which characters relate with one another. The Ministry of Basic Education needs to repackage the Junior Certificate English Syllabus to make environmental education an intrinsic part of the learning outcomes. Leaving the teaching of such an important aspect of humanity to the discretion of an individual teacher's taste under the rubric of infusion would do very little to teach the learners about their moral obligation towards their environment. Environmental awareness is no longer an emerging issue as the syllabus categorises it. Therefore, it deserves to be allocated enough space and time across subject areas.

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