



Original Article

## An Evaluation of Environmental Symbolism used in Children Literature: Case Study of Kijiji Cha Ukame and Mazingira Maridadi

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*Environmental Symbolism, Environmental Ethics, Environmental Rights, Kiswahili Literature, Ecocritic Lens, Death.*

This work has delved into an evaluation of environmental symbolism used in children's literature in Kijiji Cha Ukame by Hamisi Babusa and Mazingira Maridadi by Rebecca Zawadi. These two books are part of children's literature. The language used in the two books is Kiswahili and hence is part of Kiswahili literature. The authors used environmental symbolism to communicate to the young children in a language that they would understand, appreciate, and identify with it in relation to their day-to-day activities. Symbols used are more accessible for the pupils to understand and interpret. The authors have used; various colours, animals, birds, insects, and human being symbolical to communicate to the learner on the ways, significance and benefits of environmental conservation using simple language. Thus, the work examined environmental symbolism employed with the view of grasping how the various symbols were interpreted and ultimately viewed by not only children but the community at large, using a child's lens. It is scrutiny anchored on an ecocritic lens. Some of the pillars of ecocriticism theory that steered this work are; environmental rights, environmental ethics, poor leadership and governance, death, and tradition. The importance of inculcating an environmental eco-conscious in a child at an early age during the learning process cannot be emphasised enough. This is the more reason why ecocriticism theory guided the study from a child's perspective.

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## INTRODUCTION

Symbolism in artistic works, not just in children's books, helps convey definitions or concepts without writing or spelling out words. Consequently, this assists in giving; larger objects, ideas, institutions, communities or societies, counties, countries or even continents and the planet at large a deeper meaning. Symbolism attaches additional meaning to an activity, animal, colour, human being, place, object, or name. In essence, symbolism has always played a significant role in literature and art and hence contributes to the depth and meaning of children's literature, spiced by fantasy (Waithiru, 2019). Some of the symbolic colours are; white for excellent purity and innocence, black for evil, red for love or courage, blue for beauty and loyalty, purple for royalty, gold for wealth and power, green for hope, growth, and new life. Sometimes natural phenomena are used as symbols for a season of life and other different things.

For example, some of the natural elements and other different things have various symbolic definitions such as; dawn is a symbol of liberty and a new era while night symbolises death. Sunrise, on the other hand, symbolise a new beginning. Sunset symbolises the end, while fall symbolises middle age. In addition, spring is a symbol of youth and new life, while summer symbolises young age. Last but not least, winter is a symbol of old age. Further, there are elements including creatures such as animals, birds, and objects, which each has its' unique symbolic meaning. The colours and pictures used by the respective writers of *Kijiji Cha Ukame*

and *Mazingira Maridadi* represent the contrast between the effects of a well-conserved environment, a well-polluted environment, and the struggle against environmental pollution. The authors have used symbolism to connect the child with the story through something familiar. The study used an ecocritic approach in its analysis.

Ecocriticism is a style that views representations of all living things in a setting that has all fields, beliefs, cultures and traditions by concentrating on attitudes according to all residing things together with the rhetoric used as soon as that style is practised. It associates itself with environmental education and societal beliefs (Nayar, 2010). Ecocriticism calls for a paradigm shift from human-centric to bio-centric. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. Ecological thinking about literature requires us to take the nonhuman world as seriously as previous modes of criticism have taken the human realm of society and culture (Robert and Christine, 2016). The major cause of pollution and other environmental damage is the bulged population in the universe, and it is clear that all human activities have effects, including negative and harmful, on the environment (Larsson, 2019). This analysis has been anchored on ecocriticism theory. Ecocriticism theory was developed by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996). Some of the tenets that guided the scrutiny are; death, environmental right,

environmental ethics, poor leadership and governance, and tradition.

## COLOUR SYMBOLS

The term colour has different meanings depending on whether it is referring to a noun or a verb. In this work, the term colour will refer to the property possessed by an object of producing different sensations on the eye as a result of the way it reflects or emits light (Crystal, 2019). Writers use colours to symbolise distinct definitions in their literary works in many ways. Centuries of years of biological conditioning have created specific associations between colours and feelings, emotions, and bodies. However, some of the links may be somehow skewed to modernity than tradition. Definitions, symbols, and various representations made through different colours emerge from biological conditioning, psychological sensations, and cultural developments. The green colour in particular is associated more often than not with nature because its definition is deeply ingrained in peoples' brains and is commonly visible in biotics and ecology. Therefore, it is universally accepted by many that green colour indicates nature, growth, and harmony. Although, it is also associated with wealth and stability depending on the region, culture, season, shades, and tones, as well as colour combinations (Lundberg, 2019).

Smith (2019) avers that green indicates balance, spring, nature, and rebirth. He adds that it represents prosperity, freshness, and development. Japanese link it with eternal life, while to Islam, it is divine and thus, they associate it with respect and Prophet Muhammad. He further attires it with a touch of rejuvenating associations by mentioning that:

*“We associate green with vitality, fresh growth, and wealth. We generally think of it as a balanced, healthy, and youthful. We use green in design for spaces intended to foster creativity and productivity, and we associate green with*

*progress – think about giving a project the ‘green light’” (Smith, 2019).*

Sometimes colours can be used to describe the clothing of characters or in the setting of the story. For instance, in *Mazingira Maridadi*, Zawadi has used different colours to describe the characters, clothes, houses, walls, food, utensils, domestic animals, and the environment at large. Zawadi has written a book fit for the lower primary school level pupils, specifically for the grade 3 group. Colours are mainly used to provide a better description of the characters or the situations. She has used the green colour to symbolise hope, growth, and new life. Green is globally linked with nature, amalgamated as it is to grass, trees and plants. Symbolically, it also indicates growth, success, and rejuvenation, as well as being the colour of spring and rebirth. Moreover, it is associated with the “act” of proceeding on with an activity or event – to go ahead – and hence conferring it a bearing with springing to action (Tan, 2011).

However, it is worth noting that due to cultural differences, different colours can have different connotations. Americans for instance, link green colour with money since it is the colour of dollar bills as well as envy, which is not universally accepted since, in Germany, for example, the colour associated with envy is yellow and not green. In the US therefore, dark green is linked with money and thus illustrates prosperity and stability. Hence, the same green that represents growth and food stability means different to various continents and countries depending on their conventionally accepted definitions. In the same breath, it is important to note that green is universally associated with growth, prosperity, and stability. Consequently, green gives birth to a sense of visual balance, which in turn delivers a soothing and relaxing influence. This is due to green being seen as a fourth colour above the primary red, yellow, and blue. The amalgamation of green and nature makes it a natural option for matters that are eco-friendly, organic, and sustainable (Lundberg, 2019).

For instance, in *Mazingira Maridadi*, on the first page, the chairs in the room where Baraka and his father are having a conversation are green in colour. This symbolises hope for a better tomorrow without starvation. The bus and the surrounding environment are green in colour, symbolising economic growth and a well-fed community. In most cases, children associate the green colour with safety and fun since it is primarily present on grass and vegetation in and around playing fields. On page 5, the vegetation around is green symbolising a place with good weather and the potential for a new life. In the house of Shangazi, half of the wall has been painted green, symbolising a place of hope. Shangazi's dress is green in colour representing growth from a dirty environment to a clean environment. Shangazi avers that "Nitawafunza wakazi kuimarisha usafi. Magonjwa yatapungua. Wakazi watajivunia mtaa wetu wa Kibindoni" (I will teach the community how to maintain cleanliness. This will reduce diseases and infections caused by environmental pollution and the community will be proud of our Kibindoni Estate) (Zawadi, 2013, p. 15). The door to Shangazi's study room is green in colour, symbolising a space of hope. Hope for a better future. This explains why as soon as Zawadi and Baraka get in the study room, they embark on reading animal storybooks.

White colour is symbolic of truth, cleanness, impartial, blamelessness, integrity, virginity, certainty, unadulterated with corruption; good purity of innocence. However, in some East Asian countries, white represents mourning, different from Western countries, where black is the colour of mourning (Smith, 2019). The rabbits belonging to Sangi were as white as snow. Similarly, the rabbits brought by Shangazi to Baraka and Zawadi were pure white as well. The desire for white rabbits, especially in relation to their ability to clean the environment by feeding on leftovers, indicates a desire to keep the environment pure and clean. Shangazi brought white rabbits to Baraka and Zawadi at a young age to inculcate in them a sense

of purity in their day-to-day interactions with their surroundings. She gave them a rabbit each, indicating that each person is responsible for maintaining a pure environment without defiling it. Ultimately, these symbolise pristine and unpolluted domains.

### ANIMALS, BIRDS, AND INSECTS

Objectively, this paper has been anchored on an ecocritic lens in the process of evaluating environmental symbolism used in children's literature. Ecocriticism is large and contains multitudes. It cannot be argued that there is a single, dominant worldview guiding ecocritical practice; rather, it is the study of explicitly environmental texts via any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relations in any literary text (Howarth, 1996). Howarth goes ahead to argue that the environment possesses the ability to control itself. This ability helps the environment balance its needs and ability to hold a given number of living things, both animals and plants. Babusa has written a novella for upper primary school pupils, particularly for class six pupils – *Kijiji Cha Ukame*. Babusa has used animals symbolically to represent warriors and fighters against environmental pollution. He has used animals, birds, and insects symbolically in the struggle for environmental conservation.

Poor leadership and poor governance and their effects affected the way Africans related to their natural environment. It is therefore believed that African society respected and took good care of the environment before the arrival of the coloniser. The coloniser guaranteed cutting down of trees and forests. The coloniser's policy to improve the standard of villages to cities and industrial areas led to the proliferation of environmental pollution and degradation. A colonised mindset has greatly improved the ravages of climate change due to a lack of or inadequate eco-consciousness. Africans inherited the same policy and governance structure

that supported the eco-apocalypse. Babusa in *Kijiji Cha Ukame* says:

*Mahala pa msitu pakageuka janga na jangwa. Mzee Zuzu alijitapa eti msitu uliongeza umaskini. "Hatuna budi kufyeka misitu, tung'oe miti yote ndipo tuwe na nafasi ya kujenga barabara, viwanda na kupanua miji"* (Babusa, 2017, p. 19). *(Forests turned into deserts and hence pandemics were nurtured. Mzee Zuzu proudly added that forests were promoting poverty. "We must slash down forests; uproot all trees so as to pave way for the construction of roads, industries and expansion of cities and towns").*

Emaciated cows, bare barren grounds on which they are lying, and the scorching sun are symbolic of the negative effects of mass cutting down forests. Some of the negative effects are starvation, diseases, and the death of people and animals. Babusa puts it vividly when he says:

*"Katika kukurukakara za kukata miti, wanyamamwitu wakafurushwa. Ndovu na vifaru wakawa mashakani kwa ajili ya pembe zao. Chui na simba wakajikuta motoni kwa ajili ya ngozi, kucha na meno yao"* (Babusa, 2017, p. 19). *(In the efforts of logging trees, wild animals were displaced. Elephants and rhinos were endangered in the hunt for their horns. Cheetah and lions found themselves on the sharp end of the blade because of their precious skin, nails, and teeth.)*

Through Binti Kitabu character, Babusa vividly shows that poor governance has adverse effects on the environment. For example, Binti Kitabu says to the lion, *"Wewe sasa ni amiri jeshi. Waite wakazi uwafundishe mbinu za vita ili tuimarishe jeshi letu, tung'oe utawala wa kiimla"* (Babusa, 2017, p. 28). (Now you are our Major General. Call the residents and teach them combat skills so as to equip our military and end dictatorship). The lion has been used symbolically to represent the role played by

animals in preventing environmental pollution. Generally, a lion is a species in the family Felidae and a member of the genus Panthera. It has a muscular, deep-chested body, short, rounded head, round ears, and a hairy tuft at the end of its tail. It is one of the most widely recognised animal symbols in human culture. It has mainly been depicted in paintings, on national flags, in sculptures and in contemporary films and literature.

The environment has the ability to control itself in the interest of self-conservation and preservation. The ability of the environment to control itself, both biotic and ecological in totality, is one of the important tenets of ecocriticism theory. Both animals and human beings come together in the fight against environmental degradation as a result of poor governance in the Village of Hunger. The army that was born of human beings and animals illustrates the war against environmental pollution by the environment itself. Babusa uses insects and animals symbolically to indicate the fight against environmental pollution. Through the character-Binti Kitabu-he says that all patriots were gathered together to form a formidable army. Insects, reptiles, mammals, and marine animals came together to form a united military equipped to fight environmental pollution. Symbolically, they represent those people who are willing to come together to fight environmental pollution.

Mzee Zuzu and his soldiers are symbols of soldiers of environmental pollution and destruction. The horses used by Mzee Zuzu's soldiers in cultivating environmental pollution are symbols of agents that facilitate environmental destruction and derail all the efforts of environmental conservation. For instance, Babusa says, *"Farasi wakawakanyaga wakazi waliojitolea kupambana kufa na kupona"* (Babusa, 2017, p. 32) (The horses carrying soldiers stepped on the residents who had struggled immensely to preserve the environment). Bees are symbols of people who save the environment and fight against environmental pollution and degradation. This implies that the fight requires the

effort of each and every living thing. The smoke canisters that Mzee Zuzu's troops throw at the bees represent air pollution as a result of industrialisation. Birds of different species symbolise different organisations and institutions that are on the front line against environmental pollution. Blinding the polluters symbolises efforts made to stop all agents of environmental pollution. Babusa shows that both animals and human beings are responsible for environmental pollution. He says that both horses and people collided and stumbled on each other during the fight against environmental pollution.

Considering that a lion is a symbol of strength, royalty and leadership, Babusa has symbolised how African countries are betrayed by their leaders because of greed, selfishness, and corruption. When Binti Kitabu ordered lions to attack the army of Mzee Zuzu, they were consumed by greed and the desire to fill their stomachs. Symbolically, the battle against environmental pollution has been hampered by selfishness, greed, and corruption, which are deep-rooted in most African countries, and steered by poor leadership. Mzee Zuzu, who is a symbol of corrupt leaders in Africa thrives in the scramble for public resources by African leaders. He poisoned the meat that he fed the lions during the war. The lions were intended to be used by Binti Kitabu as warriors of environmental conservation, but greed and desire consumed them. Elephants are symbols of patriotic, determined, and dedicated people who work tirelessly with all their strength and might to prevent environmental pollution. Under the leadership and stewardship of Binti Kitabu – a symbol of genuine, honest, and democratic leaders in some African countries – the fight against environmental pollution is fought passionately, but not without sacrifices.

The ants used by Mzee Zuzu's soldiers to attack and defeat the elephants signify common countrymen and women in various African countries who are usually used by African leaders in promoting and conducting environmental pollution and

degradation. This shows that the very people who suffer and die from hunger, drought, floods, diseases, and landslides as a result of environmental pollution, which flourishes and blooms to its fullest in most African countries, are the same people who get to be misused by their leaders. However, according to Howarth (1996), the environment has the ability to control itself. Hence, the wind is the ultimate weapon, according to Babusa, that was used to win the war against environmental pollution. This indicates that wind is a symbol of a potent agent of ecological conservation. Implying that, as much as humanity may be determined to destroy the environment, the same environment will eventually fight most forms of pollution on its own.

## **HUMAN BEING**

Actually, human beings are unique living things. This is because he/she has the ability to conserve and destroy the environment. Basically, according to Stevenson, “a human being is a man, woman or child of the species *Homo sapiens*, distinguished from other animals by superior mental development, power of articulate speech, and upright stance” (Stevenson, 2010, p. 853). Environmental pollution, if ignored, can really bloom and exterminate the beautiful environment known and created for humankind. Bladow and Ladino (2018) assert that, as human beings, we are very determined to sink the world into the bottomless pit of pollution, environmental rape, and poisonous chemicals that industries and factories spit and vomit faithfully to the environment on a daily basis. They warn that today one can actually be forgiven for saying that human beings have succeeded in committing eco-suicide and hence making the planet an inhabitable place that does not benefit the life of any living thing. Waithiru adds that “ecocriticism emanates from a bio-social surrounding of unbridled capitalism, uncurbed exploitation of mother-nature, apprehensive definitions, and configurations of ‘blooming’ and ecological peril” (Waithiru, 2022, p. 370). Thus, there is a need to focus deeply and illuminate the

effects of environmental pollution by employing an ecocritic lens. For instance, Binti Kitabu symbolises leaders who sacrifice and offer themselves to fight for environmental conservation. That is why even the animals come to pay their respect after she is born. She was born to a pure woman – Cheupe. Cheupe did not have intercourse with any man for her to conceive Binti Kitabu. This symbolises purity and innocence. Further, this symbolises that environment needs to be protected from pollution, rape, and fornication as a result of greed, selfishness, and corruption. The environment has the ability to control itself and guarantee its own renewal (Buell, 1995). Binti Kitabu is a symbol of leaders who educate society on the importance of environmental conservation. She had the responsibility of breaking the chains of ignorance, misinformation and lack of information that mostly blind society in their effort to conserve the environment.

Human beings put plenty of effort into their day-to-day livelihood activities, such as businesses, farming and research, which lead to the destruction of the environment in general. As a result of these efforts, men/women engage in activities such as irresponsible dumping of waste materials, unplanned cutting down of trees, construction of buildings and cultivation of swampy areas close to rivers, technological advancement that leads to ecological destruction, and irresponsible leadership, especially on the issues affecting the environment that gives birth to the destruction of the ecosystem (Claser, 2002). The result of these activities is that global warming has aggrandised leading to poor climates, diseases that result from environmental pollution have also flourished, deaths have escalated and rain has diminished or flooded dangerously, leading to poor harvests and ultimately famine and floods pandemic. These effects affect all living things and hence hinder sustainable development, which then leads to the nourishing and flourishing of poverty in the community (Bladow and Ladino, 2018).

In addition, Mzee Zuzu, a symbol of agents of environmental destruction, breeds another agent of ecological pollution called Bin Mzee Zuzu. On arrival at the new village, whose name changed from the village of hunger to the village of the river, Bin Mzee Zuzu shocked everyone that very morning. Bin Mzee Zuzu was accompanied by a battalion of soldiers, ready to die for her cause. This shows that so many environmental polluters are willing to die for their cause of polluting and destroying the environment. Consequently, this calls for more zeal, passion, dedication, commitment, and desire to conserve, cherish and prevent at all costs any form of environmental pollution. Bin Mzee Zuzu boldly and courageously proclaimed that:

*“Mimi ndiye mwana mbee wa Mzee Zuzu. Nimerudi kutwaa urithi wangu ... Pia nimekuja kulipiza kisasi cha mauaji ya baba yangu”* (Babusa, 2017, p. 43 - 4). *(I am the only heir to Mzee Zuzu. I have returned to claim my rightful inheritance. In addition, I have come to avenge my father’s primitive murder.)*

Symbolically, the anger Bin Mzee Zuzu had, showed that environmental pollution is not an easy challenge to solve.

Ojomo (2011) proposes that every human being should give birth to unique ways of self-development without interfering with the environment that feeds him/her. She further argues that African states are now experiencing acute developmental challenges which have impacted negatively on their environment. Besides political issues arising from leadership ineptitude and capitalist aggrandisement, which have brought about vices of corruption, injustice, poverty and underdevelopment of the continent, there is now a new dimension to the African crisis. And this is the environmental imbroglio.

Depending on the attitude, beliefs and culture of a given community, human beings can be the best

agents of environmental pollution. Equally, they can also be extremely great people who conserve the environment with equal measure. Babusa has used the character Binti Kitabu symbolically as a vital agent in preventing environmental pollution and degradation. Some of the characters in his work that symbolically represent leaders in the society who maintain, conserve, and improve the environment are Mzee Mzima, Mzee Msomi and Mzee Busara. On the other hand, Mzee Zuzu and his only child Bin Mzee Zuzu symbolise leaders who thrive and benefit from environmental pollution. They perpetuate and nurture the politics of poverty, hunger, diseases, and dependence on foreign aid so as to ensure that they are able to control people like puppets and hence eliminate accountability. The soldiers of Mzee Zuzu symbolically represent agents of environmental pollution. The followers of Binti Kitabu symbolically represent society, which prevents environmental pollution passionately. This creates a sense of love and responsibility toward environmental conservation in a class six pupil at the primary school level. Ultimately, the military formed and facilitated by the citizens of the village of the river symbolises the need for each individual in the society to be well equipped and prepared to conserve the environment.

Zawadi in *Mazingira Maridadi* uses a character – Shangazi – symbolically to teach children the importance of environmental conservation. Shangazi is a symbol of those people in the community who challenge the norm of accepting to live in a polluted environment by taking the initiative to clean the environment. That is why, despite living in an estate flooded by pollution, she maintained a clean house, well-trimmed grass, watered flowers in cans and beautiful attended vegetable gardens. Further, she is a symbol of community members who are making an effort and educating the community at large on ways of cleaning and maintaining the environment. She chooses to stay and fight for a good, clean, and beautiful environment. She does not choose the easy

way of quitting, even when her nephew requires her to migrate and move to a clean environment free of pollution. Her nephew Baraka requested her and said, “*Afadhali uhome. Hao watu watakuchafulia boma lako. Utashikwa na magonjwa*” (Zawadi, 2013, p. 14). (It is better that you move. Those people who live around you will pollute your home compound. You will end up getting diseases as a result of pollution.). But Shangazi does not yield; she replies that “*Sitahama bali nitawafunza faida ya usafi*” (Zawadi, 2013, p. 14). (I will not move, but instead, I will teach them the benefits of a clean environment.). Symbolically, this creates and invokes a sense of environmental responsibility, passion, and commitment toward environmental conservation.

## CONCLUSION

Using environmental symbolism, this work has attempted to demonstrate environmental conservation in Kiswahili literature as it thematises the valence of ecological destruction. Children’s literature books authors may not do it like the pure scientists, policymakers in government and other formal agencies, but they write literary works that reflect an accurate picture of environmental degradation in society. The environmental symbolism used is powerful enough to appeal to a child and awaken him/her into ecological action. The authors whose works have been analysed in this work have touched on various environmental symbols that affect and contribute to children’s literature. Some of the representations analysed in this work include colour symbols, animals, plants, insects and human being symbols and the role of children in environmental conservation. Within these literary works, the authors are also concerned with the current and future effects of a polluted ecology. Babusa and Zawadi do not stop at pointing out the challenges facing the environment symbolically but go further to suggest solutions. Through their works, they are encouraging African leaders to consider environmental preservation with the seriousness it deserves.



On the same note, they are pushing for the active participatory role of children in ecological management and personal responsibility towards alleviating environmental pollution. Zawadi and Babusa have categorically pointed out some of the environmental matters affecting sustainable development in most African countries. Eventually, this paper concurs with Glotfelty and Fromm that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact. This implies that literature can play an essential role in environmental protection by educating society on the effects of environmental pollution and hence the need to protect it at any cost. Ecocriticism ought to be emphasised and reemphasised to young children who are not yet defiled with unfounded beliefs, colonised policies, and a dependence attitude. Independent thinking will localise solutions customised for Africa from an African child. Ecocriticism anchors a solid foundation for an eco-conscious individual who fights and works tirelessly to clean and preserve the environment. It inculcates a culture of preserving both biotics and ecology in a child. The child learns and internalises his/her culture as a repository and a faithful custodian of rational environmental practices.

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