

Critiquing Anthropocentrism in Henry Ole Kulet's *Vanishing Herds*¹

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Abstract

Vanishing Herds (2011) is Henry Ole Kulet's novel that hovers around the ecological depletion caused by the anthropocentric attitude of the human beings. Set in the East African Savannah, the novel grapples with the critical issue of anthropogenic environmental degradation. The novel is based on the tribulations of a young Maasai couple –Kedoki and Norpisia whose epic journey through the wilderness provides a window through which the destruction of the physical environment can be viewed. Additionally, the text catalogues the challenges faced by a pastoralist community's attempt to come to terms with the socio-economic realities of a fast-evolving contemporary society. The paper is an attempt to study this novel under the surveillance of green lens and throw light on the ecological destruction especially the clearing of the forest by human self centered endeavors and to critique the anthropocentric attitude of the human beings that render the environment at the verge of destruction.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, eco-criticism, ecology, Mother Nature

This paper is an effort to reveal the anthropocentric issues and to critique it drawing the impetus from eco-critical insight in the novel *Vanishing Herds* by Kenyan writer Henry Ole Kulet. Eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and environment. Cheryl Glotfelty (1996) argues "ecocriticism studies the relationships between things, human culture and physical world"(p. xx). She clarifies that ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (p. xvii). Eco-criticism is based on the assumption that human world and physical environment are closely interlinked and that one is shaped by the other affecting other and being affected.

The relationship between human beings has always remained very close and intricate with the natural environment since antiquity. The nature is the source of beauty and inspiration for the human beings. However, the natural environment has been endangered by human activities that are guided by anthropocentrism. As a result, the world reaches on the brink of an impending environmental apocalypse. The harmonious coexistence between humans and non-human environment is ruptured by the anthropogenic attitude. This paper tries to provide a glimpse of ecological ruin caused by the depletion of Mau forest which embodies nature culture dualism, an attempt to call for the need of bio-centric consciousness that recognizes the equality and interconnectedness of human and other non-human life forms.

Kulet deals with the various issues like representation of nature, impacts on nature, bio-centric outlook and ecological ruin caused by the so called rational human beings. Highly inspired by ecological activism of Wangari Mathai, Kulet persistently repletes nature with multiple facets of representation. He has a stout belief that nature is a spirit, an epitome of beauty and a pharmacy which provides healing to human beings. The present study attempts to figure out Kulet's representation of nature and the anthropomorphic attitude lurking in the novel.

Nature is represented as an active self-articulating subject; a conscious living organism that is highly sensitive and responsive to anthropocentric misuse and abuse. Kulet's representation of nature as an active and speaking agent subverts the privileged human subjectivity reinforced by Western Enlightenment principle of scientific truth and rationality that repudiates religious beliefs, myths, and traditional social order as irrational and unscientific (Carey and Festa, 2009, p. 8). This hegemonic epistemic perspective perceived as a sign of progress and modernity has upset the relationship between humans and nature through ecological degradation. Fundamentally, the natural order is an egalitarian one in which there is no hierarchy that puts humans on top of everything else (Dryzek, 1996, p. 195). This basic deep ecological principle reverberates in the novel's representation of the natural world. An appreciation of the spiritual underpinnings of the relationship between humans and the physical environment is central to understanding Maa's communal reverence for nature. As such, the text celebrates the interconnectedness of the physical environment and the supernatural realm. This holistic perspective of human collective destiny with other living creatures on earth has a religious expression among indigenous communities (Tangwa, p. 389). In the novel, the manifestation of nature's consciousness is premised on two female characters – Norpisia who is the novel's

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protagonist and her unnamed grandmother; a renowned enkoiboni (medicine woman) reputed to possess supernatural powers. Kulet uses Norpisia's grandmother as nature's 'voice' in the text. She is the link between the physical landscape and the supernatural realm. Her presence in the text therefore undergirds Maasai's traditional view that regards the natural and the supernatural realm as interwoven and interdependent domains. Throughout the text, the grandmother uses her supernatural powers to prevail upon Norpisia to scheme with nature to fight against anthropogenic ecological degradation. The fight against humans is a crucial motif in the novel. It foregrounds Mother Nature's fury at man's ecological transgression. The novel makes several references to Norpisia's dreams as a plot device to foreshadow nature's grand scheme to set free devastation to humans for defiling that are disgusting to the cultural sensibility of the Maa people that has evolved from a tradition that cares for the landscape with respect and reciprocity.

The text regards the arrogance and insensitivity exhibited by those who harm the physical environment as an offshoot of colonial scorn of indigenous cultural norms that recognizes the interconnectedness of humans and non-human life forms. The historian Lynn White (1973), views this anthropocentric shortsightedness as a manifestation of Judeo-Christian theological traditions. In an article titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" White remarks:

Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion that the world has seen ... Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions ... not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends. (p. 25)

This anthropocentric notion is evident in the Holy biblical Book of Gen.1:28 where God tells Adam and Eve "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over ... all the wild beasts that move upon the earth". Thus according to White's thesis, western religious traditions have desacralized Mother Nature with anthropogenic attitude and encouraged her exploitation by humans who were seen as separate and superior. This dualistic thinking has therefore given humans a possessive view to arrogantly subdue nonhuman nature to meet selfish ends. Interestingly, most ancient sacred texts as White alludes, offer a counter-narrative to the Christian dogma of human dominion. For instance, the Popol Vuh, commonly known as the Mayan Bible views plants and animals as the first living beings to be created. They later helped in the creation of human beings. Humans were made of corn (plant life), and animals helped to collect the food which entered into the flesh and blood of the first men and women (Montejo, 2001, p. 176). The Mayan creation myth unlike the Judeo-Christian celebrates the interconnectedness that subsists between humans, plants, and nonhuman animals. Kulet is critical of the abuse of this collective survival principle which diminishes the ecological sensibilities of the Maa community as shown by Masintet's discontent at the senseless destruction of the expansive Mau forest. He tells Kedoki:

During the period you were away, people invaded forests, cut down trees, cleared the undergrowth and turned thousands of acres into farmlands. The trees that were not suitable for timber were not spared either. They have been stripped of their barks and they now look like ghostly skeletons. Their only use before they are cut down for charcoal is to provide perching points for flocks of angry staring crows. (p.62)

It is useful to note that the Maa community like most indigenous people around the world has a deep spiritual reverence for the physical environment. The text portrays the myopic invasion and destruction of the Mau forest complex; the most significant water tower in the country by the settler community as a manifestation of capitalistic greed. The impious 'grabbing' of the community's ancestral land is therefore a source of immense discomfort. In an interview with Fitzhenry, Meitames Olol-Dapash; the founder of Masai Environmental Resource Coalition, clearly captures the community's valorization of the landscape:

... land is not just the foundation of our livelihood; it is also the foundation for our spirituality. Land is central to our spiritual beliefs because we believe that God dwells not only in and beyond the deep blue skies but also in the thick forests, rivers, and beneath the earth ... it is from the forest that leaves and barks of holy trees such as the Olorien and Olrete are obtained and used in the process of offering sacrifices to God, the creator of the forests, mountains, lowlands, and the people, their cattle, and wild animals. (p. 1)

Though the Maasai community view the forest with great spiritual reverence, there are sites within the forest ecosystem that are respected as special abode of ancestral spirits. Most of these sites are normally found on slopes, hills, and around natural springs. Mortal beings are strictly prohibited from entering or cutting down trees in such sacred sites epitomized in the text by the Medungi forest. According to legend in the Holy Bible, "if a tree was cut in this forest, it would bleed profusely and the rest of the tress would wail and scream like tormented human beings. The blood of the felled trees would flow to the rivers, turn them red and poison man and beast" (p. 63). Such taboos anthropomorphized the physical environment as a conscious living entity with ability to experience pain, bleed, and react when enraged. More importantly, they helped to discourage

human encroachments on forests thus making sacred groves important sanctuaries for plants, animals, birds, and insects. This probably explains why sacred groves are presently regarded as important sites of biodiversity conservation. The novel therefore depicts the violation of the Medungi forest at the final decline that eventually sets nature on a catastrophic conflicting course with humans. Norpisia is deeply disturbed by the senseless dispossession of animals' habitat. Once again her grandmother appears to her in a vision:

Her grandmother surfaced and pointed at her scolding, accusing her of not obeying her instructions to go to the forest in the highlands and join the animals to fight the forest invaders. Then, the human and animal conflict was replayed. She saw men with spears facing a combined force of angry elephants, rhinos, buffaloes, giraffes, wildebeest, zebras, elands, lions, leopards, cheetahs and many other animals that stood their ground, declaring that they had much right to the forest, just like man did. (p. 70)

This vision voices Mother Nature's anger at the violation of the rights of wild animals manifested in the dream by Norpisia's grandmother's anxious spirit. In the dream, wild animals are represented as rational subjects endowed with the ability to reason and champion for their fundamental rights. This is essentially the 'voicing' of the nonhuman nature in the novel. This vision of nonhuman nature as a self-articulating subject in the text deconstructs the nature/culture dualism inherent in Western philosophic thought. The novel vehemently recants the nature/culture paradigm in favor of a bio-centric consciousness that recognizes the equality and interconnectedness of humans and other nonhuman live forms. This deep ecological concept of the interconnectedness of all life forms on earth is presented in the text as a prerequisite for the restoration of a harmonious co-existence among all ecological citizens of mother earth thereby critiquing anthropocentrism.

Kulet also makes the extensive use of the apocalyptic trope in *Vanishing Herds* to portray the splendid force of nature and to critique anthropocentric attitude. Nature crosses its patience if the human destructions are beyond its capacity to cope with. The novel makes frequent references to the impending catastrophic destruction of mankind for violating ecological laws. Interestingly, the build up to the imminent environmental apocalypse is analogously modeled on the biblical account of the great flood recorded in Gen.7:18 where God is reportedly enraged by mankind's transgressions. The awesome power of nature over humans is aptly captured in the following passage:

When the mist that had hung over the area of devastation had cleared, the green farmlands that they had seen the previous day were no more. Even the shimmering corrugated rooftops that dotted the area were not visible. Either they had been swept away by the raging floods or they were submerged, as the entire valley was now a heaving, swirling stretch of water that moved round in strong circular movements. (p.110)

It is clear from the above passage that nature has the power to subdue human activities through the impending disasters if human actions tend to be coercive and regressive to nature. It is the offending human population that is destined for punishment for its arrogance and insensitivity towards the welfare of nature. This idea has a good resonance with the vision of Lawrence Buell (2005), on environmental apocalyptic. Buell opines:

Just as the metaphor of the web of interdependence is central to the ethical force of the contemporary ecocentric critique of anthropocentrism, so is the metaphor of apocalypse central to ecocentrism's projection of the future of a civilization that refuse to transform itself according to the doctrine of the web. (p. 285)

Buell believes that the anthropocentrism is the main hindrance to the symbiosis and the ecological balance. As the ecology is the formation of the web of the interrelationship between human and non human world, disturbance in the structure causes ultimate ruin. The anthropocentric civilization should turn back to the biocentric civilization in order to avert the doom and to maintain the web of ecosystem on the planet.

The novel vividly presents the ecological disasters caused by the destruction of the forest and the natural elements. The homes and farmlands belonging to the settler community are responsible for the invasion of the forests that are swamped by the flood. Soon after the floods, nature unleashes the second attack of revenge in the form of a sharp drought. The landscape is persistently scorched by the blazing sun drying up streams, crops, and pasture for livestock. The ferocity of the drought is so acute that by the time Kedoki and his companion cross Enkipai river, the narrator says:

...the drought had become so severe, that whole plain across the river had become a sprawling limitless stretch of brown bare land, with patches of desiccated brush that dotted the hillocks. On the distant hills, there appeared an occasional tree, beyond which lay a desolate wasteland. (p.124)

Here, the flood and drought are revenge from nature against the reckless destruction of the physical environment. Seemingly, human activities that undermine and violate the sanctity of nature is analogous to what Anuradha Chaudhary (2009) aptly remarks “by destroying the environment we are digging our own grave” (p. 47). By foregrounding ecological destruction and ruins, the novel aptly depicts the concept of human superiority and self centeredness embedded in the deep psyche and its impact on the overall ecology. The prudential blind spots of anthropocentrism based on the self and other dichotomy according to Val Plumwood (2006), is self destructive and regressive as it jeopardizes the existence of life on the earth. He believes, “A very important feature of the othering model of human centeredness is that it validates the ecological insight that a human-centered framework is a serious problem not only for non-humans but for human beings themselves” (p. 117).

The analysis of Plumwood’s idea provides us ample insight of the destructive vein caused by anthropocentric attitude which encourages the human beings to be enmeshed in ideologies of self centeredness and autonomy that are illusory and hegemonic.

The pieces of literature are discourse and the nature writing texts which are primarily concerned with human perception of environment draw a gloomy picture of human species as they all are anthropocentric. The ideologies, philosophies and attitudes towards nature; its flora and fauna, determine the way non-human aspects of this universe are well elaborated in literature. Man considers himself as an intellectual being and he tries to control over everything. And he thinks that the process of society is a complex phenomenon whereas nature is a simple one. But it depicts his anthropocentric vision, as nature and its laws are not as simple as human being think. So, the need of the hour is to critique this anthropocentric vision to make the human survival inhabitable not only for present but also for descendants. So, literature plays a significant role to bring out the environmental issues to the forefront. Summing up, it can be said that anthropocentric orientation is a major challenge to preservation of natural environment and appropriate treatment to other living beings. In the similar line of argument Kulet’s novel also depicts the ecological ruin caused by the anthropogenic activities and critiques the anthropocentric ethos of human beings as the main factor for the depletion of ecology. While doing so, he also throws light on the multiple aspects of ecology that makes the text complicit to read through the lens of ecocriticism.

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