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## Discursive Ecology of the Sacred: A Postcolonial Study of Ngugi Wa Thiongo's 'Mugumo'

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### Abstract

This paper has assessed a discursive ecology of cultural and spiritual experiences in Ngugi wa Thiongo's 'Mugumo' using postcolonialism and critical stylistics as its theoretical lens. It has critically explored the connection between man and the spiritual realm through spatial-temporal coexistence of flora and fauna. Man, ultimately resorts to the intervention of a spiritual being in resolving social tragedies, as exemplified in the life of Mukami, who has been chastised by society for her inability to give birth to a child in the first three years of her marriage. Her encounter with the Mugumo tree that serves as an embodiment of spiritual liberation of the Gikuyu people assuages her immediate travails.

**Keywords:** African Literature, Identity, Language, Mugumo, Ngugi wa Thiongo,



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## Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiongo, *The Mugumo tree*, has fallen. It is undoubted that Ngugi wa Thiongo has been a literary colossus out of Africa. He did not only reject the use of English to contextualize the 'Africanness' of his work, but he was intentional about entrenching his cultural and spiritual authenticity, as can be seen in 'Mugumo', a short story from his collection titled *Minutes of Glory and Other Stories*. The setting of this story is compelling as it announces itself in snippets of geographical locations entwined with spiritual visualizations. 'Mugumo' is seeped and almost entirely shaped by its ecology. Oliver Lovesey et al. opine that:

The story's setting is deeply rooted in Kenyan landscape, particularly through the symbolic mugumo (fig) tree, which serves as a sacred site for acts of dedication and cultural rituals. This tree is not just a backdrop but a central element that embodies the spiritual and historical identity of the Gikuyu people (139-168).

The pulsating narrative and emotional roller coaster that Mukami, the protagonist, goes through is orchestrated by the setting. The reader notices names like Muhoroini Ridge, Masailand, and Ukambani, which are real geographical and cultural areas referring to the traditional homeland of the Masai, who can also be found in Kenya and Tanzania. The narrative also contains names like Murungu, Gikuyu, Mumbi, Kerinyaga, Gumba, Mikongoe, and Mugumo, the spirit-filled tree.

The captivating ecology, a fine tapestry of culture inclusive of flora and fauna and spirituality told with a postcolonial agency, is what has caught the attention of the present research, prompting an investigation into how the creative use of this ecosystem has foregrounded the rich African worldview. This eco-spiritual nexus is crystallized in Mukami's realignment with Murungu - 'the God of her people'. Consequently, the discursive metaphysics within the Kenyan landscape as contained in the short story 'Mugumo' is unearthed; thus, a true Gikuyu spiritual identity is rekindled.

Wielechowski Benjamin asserts that 'as important as characters are, characters are both influenced by and hold influence over the places they inhabit and visit'. Further explanation is put forward revealing that place and time as related to the setting should be looked at as a spectrum encompassing geographical location, the people, culture, politics, the physical landscape, weather, flora, and fauna as to how characters interact with these features. Yang Hannah simply captures the setting as 'a broad term for the world the story takes place in'.

## Synopsis of 'Mugumo'

The story is seen through the eyes of Mukami, the central character. She is married to Muthoga, a man she once admired but can no longer call 'her hus - No! not her husband, but the man who wanted to kill her, who would have crushed her soul. He could no longer be her husband' (18). Mukami has made up her mind to leave Muthoga and his retinue of wives. She knew about his reputation for treating his wives harshly, but she remained adamant about marrying him regardless of her father's disapproval. Through flashbacks, the reader understands that Mukami was drawn to Muthoga, a self-made man whose gait, bass voice, and athletic dancing held her spellbound. She was kidnapped by three men and taken to his house as customary marriages prescribed.

Muthoga paid full attention to her, neglecting his other wives who received beatings from him as a result of their jealousy and inability to accommodate a new wife. Life was beautiful for her until the third season of their marriage, when it became obvious that she did not have a child. The narrator breaks into poetry to reveal this as the inciting incident that propels the main character on a journey of self-actualization:

A *thata!* A barren woman!

No child to seal the bond between him and her!

No child to dote on, hug and scold!

No child to perpetuate the gone spirits of

Her man's ancestors and her father's blood. (20)

The flame in their marriage had gone out just like that, and Muthoga began to beat her. She was the subject of violent and emotional abuse as her husband shunned her company completely.

Mukami resolved to run away, and so she did, in the dead of the night. In her despair, she calls on spirits of the dead to come for her as she's lost and disillusioned in the darkness of the night. But her end was not near, rather, 'through the lightning and thunder, she espied a tree in the distance - a huge tree it was, with the bush gently but reverently bowing all around the trunk. And she knew; she knew, that this was the tree - the sacred Mugumo - the altar of the all-seeing Murungu' (22).

After Mukami touches the tree, she sees a vision beyond her days and feels deep inside of her the conception of a child who has already been with her for some months. She knows deep inside of her that she cannot quit and is reinvigorated to go back and to take her rightful position in her matrimonial home.

The story has paid attention to its thematic concerns of resilience, an escape from trauma or oppression, the need for cultural identity, and nature as therapeutic in man's search for meaning. This great insight can be associated with the deliberate stylistic choices adopted in developing the setting of the story.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework adopted for this study is eclectic; a combination of Postcolonialism and Critical Stylistics. Sawant Shrikant proffers that postcolonialism 'usually excludes literature that represents either British or American viewpoints and concentrates on writing from colonized cultures in Australia, New Zealand, Africa, South America, and other places and societies that were once dominated by European cultural, political, and philosophical traditions' (120). Additionally, Gandhi Leela asserts, 'Some critics invoke the hyphenated form "post-colonialism" as a decisive temporal marker of the decolonizing process... Accordingly, it is argued that the unbroken term "postcolonialism" is more sensitive to the long history of colonial consequences' (3).

Mishra Vijay traces the theories' historicity to 'Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ...regularly invoked as a triumvirate or a trinity provided solid plinths for the scaffolding of innumerable studies of postcolonialism.' Other influential theorists include Frantz Fanon and Aime Cesaire. Elam Daniel clarifies the theory to be 'a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the 18th through the 20th century... emerged in the US and UK academies... as part of a larger wave of new and political fields of humanistic inquiry, most notably feminism and critical race theory.'

Ngugi's work falls within power dynamics of the subaltern, focusing on the voices of marginalized groups, and becomes significant in the view of Fiveable, who assert narratives that capture 'environmental issues through lens of colonial history incorporated indigenous knowledge and sustainable practices in environmental conservation'. The ecosystem of 'Mugumo' becomes relevant in this regard.

Progressively, greater insight into the postcolonial ideology is gleaned after application of Critical Stylistics to examine the linguistic choices of the narrator.

The following conceptual hypothesis will have to be established. Firstly, Mugumo, the tree, is a gateway to the spiritual realm regardless of religious beliefs that came with colonialism. Secondly, geographical landscapes hold rich ancestry of a people, and thirdly, the spatial-temporal settings do not align with and predate colonial influence.

The most obvious discursive element at the textual level is at the lexical category where names are not translated into English but are used in their Gikuyu form. This clearly changes the narrative to uphold an African perspective in defiance of colonial conditioning. Naming and describing is a key tool in Critical Stylistics as Lesley Jeffries asserts, 'The most obvious thing that texts do is to name – and describe – the animate, inanimate, and abstract 'things' that the projected world of the text contains.' While this function might seem rather banal, it goes well beyond the question of whether you choose to call a politically motivated producer of violence a terrorist or a freedom fighter (408-420).

Naming and describing things also has the power to either foreground or background ideologies. From the narrative, society has labeled Mukami as a failure along the lines of patriarchal structures and expectations for her to give birth within the first two years of her marriage. However, after he contacts the spirit-filled tree, there is a reversal and conquest of this normative. Her lack or inadequacy becomes spiritually replenished, a transformation for her to reclaim her rightful position in the home.

## Narrative Review

The current study visualizes the Mugomo tree as a postcolonial citadel, a safe-haven where the subaltern voice as replicated in Mukami reclaiming her position (sound body and mind) in matrimony and the society. The study further establishes how Ngugi entrenches the concept of the grove not as a place of doom but a connector between the metaphysics and postcolonial African existence. Ngugi's works have attracted attention from literary, linguistic and multi-disciplinary studies over the years as testament to his rich literary significance.

This attention in research has covered a range of political and more recently, philosophical dimensions. Shailja Shailja et al in their 2025 publication observe that Ngugi's *The River Between* is a classic example of African authors who use their craft to reflect on cultural heritage and conflict. The paper foregrounds the setting of a Central Kenya in the 1930s and explores thematic concerns around leadership and the result of European contact with Africans on their culture and religion.

In as much as the spatial locale is Kenya, the verisimilitude can be ascribed with any other African country, as these themes permeate or traverse the African continent with similar colonial experiences- nations where Europeans settled. The paper further highlights the conflict between brethren after they come in contact with a foreign ideology about religion. The disruption of a previous communal existence is not just disrupted but destroyed by Europeans as the seeds of divergent philosophies have been planted and nurtured in the minds of African communities, bringing about a paradigm change in their beliefs and cultural practices (313-319).

In addition, M. Swathi et al. have also contributed to the narrative around Ngugi. They highlight the concept of Ubuntu being an African philosophical concept connoting the interpersonal networks of relations among group interdependencies. Ubuntu alludes to an unwritten fact that a person's identity is fashioned by his or her relationship with others and also that an individual's well-being is shaped by the entire well-being of the community. Ubuntu, they say, promotes compassion, empathy, and teamwork, which in turn promote peace and communal cohesiveness. The researchers opine that Ngugi wa Thiongo's literary contributions combine Ugali and Ubuntu to symbolize an interconnectedness in humanity. They use Ugali which is an African dish, to symbolize a shared community experience. This experience is further likened to the collective struggles of Kenya during colonial tyranny and a desire for independence with a return to African cultural identity (2073-2080).

Stanley Ordu et al. have carried out research related to the symbolic characters and class struggles in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*. The novel is a reflection of post-independence Kenya, and therefore the researchers were prompted to adopt a postcolonial and Marxist framework revealing the colonial injustice perpetuated by crass establishments that formulate unpalatable policies for the people as his dominant themes. The findings from this study suggest that revolutions not only in Kenya but in Africa entirely are the solution to political and socioeconomic liberation by the people. This resolve, the paper suggests, is already a known fact by the people who watch their elite class misrule them and are in wait for the perfect moment to strike (129-139). These studies are divergent from the current study, as it focuses on the ecology of the sacred.

## Discourse

Dul Johnson projects the ecosystem, 'Setting, properly used, enriches your story in a number of ways as much as you can engage it. The story itself needs the aura and atmosphere of the physical setting. The ambience of the city, the village, footpath, playground, pond, river, the grinding mill, block industry, petrol station, train station, you name it' (99). The setting can be made an active character, or its agents can affect the lives of the characters directly. This way, as Dul affirms, 'setting is the beginning of the identity of your story' (98).

The ecosystem in 'Mugomo' functions as an active participant in the story, spiraling the life of Mukami from a familiar domestic space to the wild, threatening rainforest before calm is restored in the presence of the Mugomo tree. This journey mirrors or is parallel to a stable domestic front and wild forests, reflecting the emotional state of the main character.

The very first line of the story establishes the importance of this spatial-temporal fluidity:

Mukami stood at the door: slowly and sorrowfully she turned her head and looked at the hearth. A momentary hesitation. The smouldering fire and the small stool by the fire-side were calling her back. No. She had made up her mind. She must go (18).

The stylistic positioning of the heroine by the door is suggestive of a departure and her return later on in the text. It immediately lets the reader know that one of the major conflicts of the story will be in Mukami's head. Self-conflict in narratives also reveals the well-roundedness of characters, as character flaws add crucial information and revelation of potential anti-heroes. In this case, the conflict in Mukami is not simply an expression of travails of womanhood but a narrative that also reflects the exploitation of the rich Kenyan resources, with liberation coming only from a return to precolonial existence.

The words 'hearth', 'smouldering fire', 'small stool,' 'fireside,' and 'courtyard' are suggestive of warmth and domestic comforts of a home. However, these objects are meant to conspire against Mukami, acting as allies in an oppressive home where she has been abused and ridiculed for her inability to conceive a child, and so she desperately wants to escape. These objects are witnesses to her ordeals and further personified to add their voices in their displeasure with Mukami's decision to leave. The ecosystem becomes an integral factor in this regard.

The patterned advancement of the Kenyan landscape directly propels the plot progression from the inciting incident through rising actions and gets the reader to the climax. The different phases of Mukami's journey are guided by shifts of the setting as reflected in the time of day and season of her marriage. The settings appeal captures Mukami realizing that 'with the shutting of the gate, she had shut off a part of her existence' (18).

The reader is hinted about Mukami's hesitation and probable return home even after she runs away from the very first line: 'Mukami stood at the door.' (18). Standing at the door creates an impression of deep reflection; about having second thoughts on the next line of action. With a resolve to leave the house, 'she plunged into the lone and savage darkness' (18). A certain feeling of dread engulfs the reader who wishes nothing bad to happen to Mukami. The word 'plunge' stirs a total engulfing of the main character in a deep, unending vastness of darkness with danger lurking at every point. Discursively, there has been a re-lexicalization of words where the forest, which should be a place of fear, is now a cultural-spiritual site of rebirth.

The stylistic effect this has on the reader becomes therapeutic, 'a sort of magic pervaded the air' (18). This switch in the ecosystem opens the door to magical realism, and so there is a reassurance that even though Mukami is in the dark, something magical will guide her safely through her travails.

Love, marriage, and disaster become realigned with spatial-temporal indicators of seasons: the first season is that of attraction and marriage. The second season is one in which not just the couple waited for a child, but the other wives and the community's expectation of a child to seal the union between the new wife who has come to cause disaffection among the older wives. The third season is a period of revelation that Mukami is barren and Muthoga began beating her before walking away from her.

Mukami wonders what the bushes have to say about her. She cares about the 'murmuring stream, the quiet trees... Did these sympathize with her, or did they join with the kraal in silent denouncement of her action? (21). The elements of the setting still conspire as Mukami hears a mournful sound in the distance just before the wind begins to blow in a frenzy. In her bewilderment, the reader hears the cry of the owl and hyena before rain starts to fall. This picture of dread intensifies the predicament the heroine is in. But significantly, this dramatic effect of nature acts as a compare to introduce the appearance of the Mugumo tree, which assures Mukami of peace with 'her God, Murungu, the God of her people' (22).

It is important to note that this night flight taken by Mukami is a reflection of her deliberate attempt to face her fears directly. This speaks volumes to her personality as one who does not shy away from issues. After her encounter with the Mugumo tree, she discovers she is nurturing another life form within her and resolves to go back to her home and take charge.

The clear pattern that runs through the story is a journey progression that starts from the home front with its domestic paraphernalia marked by Mukami leaving the gate, then into the wild hostile rainy forest where trees, a stream, lightning, and thunder intensify the transitional space marked by horror. This horrid

space reflects the inner workings of the heroine who is herself an emotional wreck. However, this dangerous environment ironically becomes a spiritual retreat described with words like 'altar,' 'sanctuary,' and 'God's tree' and a place of salvation. This journey, though physical, has more relevance to the mental and spiritual growth of Mukami.

Mukami's established growth is synonymous with her physical journey from the domestic front as signaled by her airu, co-wives, and four huts of the compound. The courtyard hearth is a muster point for families and acts as a symbolic space within a homestead. The comforts of a fireplace are expressed as a 'smouldering fire' is still alight. These images are foregrounded to highlight the comforts that Mukami is running away from. This also acts on the mind of the reader who wouldn't want that to happen to the heroine.

It is also of importance to note how the hut which belonged to the man of the house is described: 'the silhouette of her man's hut and even her own seemed to have joined together in one eternal chorus of mute condemnation of her action' (18). Muthoga's house is put in a silhouette, blurring him in the background marking a gradual erasure from the life of Mukami. In this paragraph, huts come alive to silently condemn her plans on leaving a marriage, which should be a life partnership. This space is also used to emphasize a communal life characteristic of Africans.

After Mukami leaves her house, she 'took a path that led down to the left gate' (18). This path describes her winding journey through the bushes with thorns. This path encapsulates the darkness she is plunged into: an environment of the unknown. Geographically, we see that Mukami 'wanted to get away from everything that reminded her of Muhoroini Ridge and its inhabitants' (18). She wanted an escape from the Masai spanning Kenya and Tanzania; she wanted an escape in every sense of the word.

There is a spirit in everything under the sun, and they commune with each other. This is seen where Mukami runs in the bush at night, but she is not alone. She listens and follows the 'murmuring stream' (21) and crosses it at its lowest point where she could step on three stones. This path leads her to 'the place where the dead were thrown... where the spirits of the dead hovered through the air' (21). Mukami traverses the unknown, a land of ghosts with eyes that looked at her from different directions. Darkness, doom, and evil are expected to consume her, but ironically, she encounters the sacred Mugumo tree described as the 'altar of the all-seeing Murungu' (22), which is a place of sanctuary.

The story is a one day act, beginning in the pitch-darkness of the night and ending in the morning after Mukami wakes from her reverie by the sound of a cow. Mornings are associated with new beginnings and a fresh start to life. Mukami ran away at night with the weight of society on her shoulders as a result of her seeming barrenness. She wakes up in the morning with the reassuring thud in her stomach of a life form, which dispels all the rumors about her and solidifies her position in her matrimonial home, which she resolves to return to. This stand taken by Mukami brings a resolution to the conflict in 'Mugumo' and announces the stories denouement.

## **Conclusion**

'Mugumo' is a short story that weaves together, in fine tapestry, components of the ecosystem to emphasize a strong belief in the cultural and spiritual growth of Africans from an African perspective. It tells a story of bravery and the emancipation of the woman in a once-thought patriarchal society. This paper has investigated the use of language to reinforce a narrative that is well grounded in native experiences and spiritual colouration devoid of influence from colonial interaction.

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