

# BOOK REVIEW

**Cajetan Iheka. *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. iii + 166 pp. Notes. Works Cited. Index. \$32.99. Paper. ISBN : 978-1316648643.

Cajetan Iheka's monograph *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* is a critical contribution to the discourse on African ecocritical thought and scholarship. Historically, works of literature that focus on the environment have often focused on the impacts of environmental degradation, oil pollution, natural disasters, and desert encroachment from the human perspective, with little to no account of the effects of these disasters on other biotic components of the environment. Through this crucial contribution, Iheka emphasizes the need to explore and appreciate the complex relationship that exists or that should exist between human and nonhuman elements of the ecosystem. In investigating, problematizing, complicating, and analyzing the relationship between humans and nonhuman agents as represented in African literature, Iheka hopes to "extend the domain of African literary studies from one primarily focused on humans to one that explores the complexities of human-nonhuman relations in the different sites under consideration; rethink the dominant notion of agency based on intentionality and propose ways of conceiving distributed agency or varieties of agency functioning between human beings and other environmental actors" (3).

Considering the paucity of scholarship on the effects of environmental degradation on nonhuman components, Iheka's book is a welcome and timely intervention and contribution to that discourse. Written partly in response to Neil Lazarus's call in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* for a postcolonial study that aligns with relevant contemporary issues, including questions of land, geography, and the environment, Iheka references and expands on different theories from a variety of disciplines. He not only highlights the human effects of environmental degradation but also examines the nonhuman factors—effects on plants, animals, forests, soil, and water—and their interrelationships as a complex whole. The book's arguments unfold in four broad chapters.

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Chapter One foregrounds the interconnectedness between humans and nonhumans in African cultures and argues the need to revisit that interconnectedness in African texts across time. Reading the writing of Amos Tutuola, among others, Iheka proposes a novel term, “aesthetics of proximity,” to capture the ecological sensibility of African letters. This chapter is the strongest in the book for its analytical depth and compelling close reading of newer as well as older works. Iheka’s concept of proximity, defined as “the process by which African literary artifacts depict the interconnectedness of human lives with Others in the environment” (23), breaks new grounds for reading African literature from an ecological angle.


Chapter Two uses the interpretive framework of Somalia’s ecologies of war to examine Nuruddin Farah’s novels and the intricate relationships between the human and nonhuman agents depicted in those novels. Iheka investigates Farah’s *Secrets*, *Links*, and *Crossbones* as critical texts that focus on the environmental effects of the Somalian war by exploring the agency embodied by the human and nonhuman actors. The roles played by various actors in Farah’s Somali war novels represent an endorsement of Iheka’s central argument that environmental degradation, ecological crisis, ecological violence, and environmental disasters affect not only humans but also the entire ecosystem. By extending agency beyond human actors, Iheka’s critical lens challenges the conventional perception of humans as the primary casualties and victims of war in African literary productions and criticism.

Chapter Three focuses on rethinking postcolonial resistance by examining three Niger Delta novels: Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice*, Isidore Okpewho’s *Tides*, and Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist*. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is oil rich, albeit highly impoverished due to the government’s insensitivity to the plight of the inhabitants of that area. Against the tendency to valorize violence as a resistance tool in the Niger Delta, Iheka highlights the limitations of violence. Iheka emphatically asserts that despite the good intentions of the proponents’ violent resistance, those who resist are complicit in the ecological devastation that results. In the most brilliant move of the chapter, Iheka orients scholarship on Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice* away from the novel’s linguistic peculiarities and focuses on post-independence disillusionment, toward understanding the literary work “as a Niger Delta text portraying the incubation stage of the environmental crisis” (86). He further contends that if Okara’s *The Voice* represents the incubation stage of environmental crisis, Okpewho’s *Tides* and Ojaide’s *The Activist* represent “the intermediate and advanced phases of the destruction of the Delta environment, respectively” (86). If there is one weakness to this book, it is that the analysis of Okpewho and Ojaide does not rise to the challenge of the other parts. Despite the brilliance of the Okara reading, this chapter is the weakest in the study.

Chapter Four, suitably titled “Resistance from the Ground: Agriculture, Gender, and Manual Labor,” focuses on the practices and narratives that utilize agriculture as a form of resistance. While the previous chapter explores literature that engages violence as a means of resistance in

interrogating the degradation rampant in the Niger Delta, the final chapter posits what could be described as “a more excellent way” to negotiate the conversation. In this chapter, Iheka engages Wangari Maathai’s memoir *Unbowed*, Bessie Head’s *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* to situate “resistance from the ground,” which is the type of resistance involving the cultivation of land for agricultural purposes. Iheka seeks to portray land cultivation “as an alternative to the destruction that patriarchal systems enact in all three narratives” (126). In so doing, he situates these writers as oppositional strategists in the fight to protect the environment, which is at the core of *Naturalizing Africa*.

Iheka’s *Naturalizing Africa* is a landmark contribution to African literary and cultural studies and ecocriticism. The book will have a long shelf life for its terrific insights, theoretical sophistication, complex but lucid writing, and the inspiration it offers to contemporary readers as well as to those in the future.

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