

Humanity and Mother Nature: Ecological Reading of Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*

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Abstract

In the recent past, literary critics have had varied readings of Henry Ole Kulet's literary oeuvre from radical feminism to ecocriticism. Although some underscore Kulet's focus on the nexus between humankind and nature, and the environmental consciousness and responsible exploitation of natural resources, the general attitude has been that the writer is a mouthpiece of the civil society and donor agents. Other critics have dwelt on selective ecocritical studies of Kulet's novels that leave out *Blossoms of the Savannah*, which is greatly acclaimed for winning prestigious awards. It is the contention of this study that whereas ecological readings of Kulet's other works of fiction has been exhausted, *Blossoms of the Savannah* has been neglected. The focus of this analysis is on the nexus between humankind and the ecological environment in Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*. The continued association of the novel with radical feminism with scanty or no application of the tenets of ecocriticism runs counter to its subjects. This analytical study is, therefore, a close textual reading of the primary and secondary texts while L. Buell (2005) serves as a theoretical framework for the interpretation. One major finding of the study is that its feminist content, notwithstanding Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*, occupies an essential place in ecocriticism.

Keywords: Kenyan literature, feminism, climate change, eco-criticism, Ole Kulet

INTRODUCTION

[Ole Kulet] is a self-conscious modern writer who demonstrates that women who live in cultural backgrounds that cause them suffering shall be their own liberators. (Muriungi & Muriiki, 2013, p. 118)

Henry Ole Kulet is a Kenyan novelist whom some literary critics consider as primarily a feminist writer with a craving to appease voices of the civil society. Such critics view this writer as a smart aleck whose oeuvre cannot be placed alongside Kenyan classics' authors, like Ngugi wa Thiong'o or Meja Mwangi, owing to Ole Kulet's obsequious attitude towards Western ideas that present some Maasai values in the negative light. This is possibly why Muriungi and Muriiki (2013) consider Kulet a writer whose principal concern is to elevate the position of a woman, particularly in the Maasai community and African societies in general.

Kulet's insistence on Western radical feminism has prompted literary scholars, such as Migudi (2019), to investigate the influence of civil society and donor agents in his fiction. From Migudi's perspective, Kulet lacks an original voice in his attempt to dissuade African audiences with regard to gender disparities, female circumcision and other outdated cultural practices. As much as Evan Mwangi singles out "ethnocentrism" to account for Kulet's relegation from Kenyan

literary scene (Lusinga, 2016, p. 3), Migudi's assertion could suggest the major reason Kulet's works have not occupied the same rank with those of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Meja Mwangi and Francis Imbuga.

Emerging voices, however, do not just exhibit divergent views on Kulet's literary oeuvre, but identify him with other literary canons aside from feminism. Kabaji (2013) writes:

If Chinua Achebe brought Igbo culture to the world [,] then Ole Kulet did the same tthe Maasai culture [;] he started by experimenting on the biographical mode and slowly and steadily found his unique style. His subject is culture and he writes about it with the sensitivity of a surgeon. (p. 22)

Kabaji challenges Migudi's association of Kulet's fiction with foreign voices and instead views it as a representation of Maasai values. In other words, Kabaji crowns Kulet as the voice of Maa subalterns in post-colonial literatures rather than previous identification with radical feminism and Western voices that jeopardize Maa culture and African traditions. While Muriungi and Muriiki delimit the cultural subjects to Kulet's constant assault on patriarchal traditions and female circumcision, Kabaji possibly takes Anderson's (2009) definition of culture as what humans do (p. 3), including their exploitation of natural resources and their effects thereof. Kulet does not explore the social aspects of the Maasai people without their land, forests, rivers, and animals and how they influence the destiny of characters. Lusinga (2016) observes that "Kulet's works celebrate the rich biodiversity of Maasai's natural environment. He has a knack for knitting powerful images of the community's flora and fauna in his fiction" (p. 3). Whereas Lusinga's focus is on ecological representations in Kulet's *Vanishing Herds* and *The Hunter*, the focus of this analysis is on the impact of the natural environment on characters in *Blossoms of the Savannah*. The choice of this text is based on the premise that literary critics have demonstrated a dearth of works on ecological criticism in Kulet's other novels, such as *To Become a Man*, *Moran No More* and *Vanishing Herds*; however, most scholarship on *Blossoms of the Savannah* is largely feminist.

Blossoms of the Savannah is the story of Resian Ole Kaelo, the central character and second born of Ole Kaelo. Right from birth, Ole Kaelo is bitter because he had expected his wife to beget a boy to perpetuate his family name given that his firstborn, Taiyo was female. Disappointed, Ole Kaelo develops colossal distaste for Resian and constantly discriminates against her in front of other family members. Taiyo takes note of her father's tantrums in the presence of Resian. When she sits down to study a book, he accuses her of laziness. When she trembles in his domineering presence almost letting her glass fall, he calls her an idiot. Consequently, Resian undergoes internal fragmentation and gradually becomes a grumpy and hypercritical child. After being laid off at Agribix Limited in Nakuru, Ole Kaelo moves to Nasila, a village with conservative dwellers at the heart of Maasailand and relapses to the practice of Maa traditions. Resian is also surprised at his father's decision to enter a business partnership with a despicable man named Oloisudori. He becomes a guarantor to enable Kaelo take loans to invest in his business. When he fails to pay his loans, Kaelo gives Resian to the man to get rid of her. Resian refuses and, in the ensuing conflict, she flees from her Nasila village home with the help of an eccentric man called Olarinkoi. During her flight from Nasila to Inkiito (Olarinkoi's home), Resian is shocked to see the dust, aridity and other aspects of environmental degradation. The place looks neglected without roads and vehicles. Before their departure, Olarinkoi orders her to sit at the back of his pickup truck. As the truck picks pace through the dusty and bumpy road, Resian realizes that the two men, Olarinkoi and the driver, are very harsh and too absorbed in their troubles to notice her. When they

speak to her, they are terribly insolent. When they reach Inkiito, Olarinkoi's village, Resian is shocked at the poverty in Olarinkoi's hut. Even the food he provides is not the kind Resian was used to in Nakuru. Shockingly, Olarinkoi takes advantage of Resian's desperate situation and attempts to rape her. Resian fights back and bites Olarinkoi's thumb. She is taken in by Enkaabani, who cares for her and finds means by which Resian is taken to Minik Ene Nkoitoi, a female manager of a sheep ranch and patron of a home that looks after girls fleeing early marriage and female circumcision. The story ends after Minik Ene Nkoitoi saves Resian from a forced marriage and makes arrangement for her to further her education at Egerton University, Nakuru.

Thus, in spite of having started publishing in 1971, Kulet has captured the attention of literary critics belatedly. His first novel, *Is it Possible*, was released in 1971 and followed it with six others: *To Become a Man* (1972), *The Hunter* (1985), *Daughter of the Maa* (1987), *Moran no More* (1990), *Bandits of Kibi* (1999), *Blossoms of the Savannah* (2009) and *Vanishing Herds* (2011). With his belated recognition on the Kenyan literary scene, Kulet won the Jomo Kenyatta Prize in 2011 and 2013 with *Blossoms of the Savannah* and *Vanishing Herds* respectively. *Blossoms of the Savannah* became the first of his works to be selected by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development as a set text in high school in 2017. He died on 17th February 2021 after a short illness just after he had started making an impact on the Kenyan literary scene. Although *Blossoms of the Savannah* has mostly been identified with the feminist discourse, this analytical study adopts Buell (2005) trajectory to show how Kulet establishes the nexus between humanity and the ecological environment. From Buell's perspective, ecological texts demonstrate that "the human interest is not the only legitimate interest, human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation and the nonhuman environment is not just a framing device" (9). This analysis will, among other tenets, ascertain these three attributes of ecological tenets with reference to *Blossoms of the Savannah*.

Mother Nature and humanity: Culture and economic condition of characters in Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*

Nature or ecosystem contributes to human well-being. Nature affects the physical, mental, spiritual health, inspiration and identity. (Russell et al., 2013, p. 473)

It is quite conventional among some literary critics to analyze cultural context of works of art with little or to no consideration of the ecological conditions from which they are set. The cultural and economic practices among characters in Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah* have been appraised or condemned in equal measure with least attention to the role Mother Nature plays in their lives. Muriungi and Muriiki, for example, single out female circumcision as oppressive to women with least consideration to the connection between the ecological environment and the cultural practice. This is the trajectory Russell et al. (2013) reject when they suggest that the environment "contributes to human well-being" (p. 6) and by extension human suffering. In this regard, the cultural practices that exacerbate the plight of women and children in literature should not be condemned in isolation from the ecological environment as it affects the "physical, mental, spiritual health, inspiration and identity" of people (p. 6). Indeed, in *Blossoms of the Savannah*, the heroine, Resian, enjoys her life in Nakuru town, located in the Rift Valley. Resian tells her sister, Taiyo, that she prefers Nakuru to Nasila village at the heart of Maasai land because cultural rites, such as female circumcision common in the village, are not practiced in town. When Taiyo praises Nasila village as quieter than Nakuru, Resian says, "I would rather live in the noisiest place on earth than live anywhere near a vagabond who would accost me in the most quiet and serene

atmosphere with the intention of mutilating my sexuality” (p. 33). Resian’s comment refers to an ordeal she and Taiyo experienced in one of their strolls in Nasila when a young man accosts and insults them for being uncircumcised. Resian does not just detest infibulation, highly cherished in Nasila, but also the callous nature of young men in this rural setting. Ironically, while Resian’s father leaves his daughters uncircumcised in Nakuru, but insists on them being circumcised in Nasila suggests the correlation between the ecological environment and the existence of this cultural practice.

To understand the complexity of female circumcision in Maa culture, one must first consider its origins. Based on the myth of origin of female genital circumcision, as told from the perspective of Joseph Parmuat (a young man Ole Kaelo hires to teach Resian and Taiyo Maasai culture in *Blossoms of Savannah*), Kulet suggests that there is a nexus between female circumcision and the hostile ecological environment in which the Maasai live. Because most parts of Maasailand are hot and dry, crop farming (as an economic activity) is non-existent, making nomadic pastoralism and raiding the backbone of Maasai economy. Western and Nightingale (2003) assert “[n]omadic pastoralism is [a] highly specialized system adapted to the harsh ecological and social conditions of the dry savannahs” (p. 4). Thus, using the character of Parmuat, Kulet suggests the impact of Ilarinkon raiders on the Maasai and how nomadism influenced the community to introduce female circumcision. The hot and dry natural environment that promotes nomadism also encourages communities to cherish patriarchy and the warrior system in their defense against would be raiders. As an adaptation to survive in the harsh climatic conditions that border the wild, nomadic communities elevate patriarchy and militarization. Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui (2013) observe that some African communities that practiced crop farming embraced matrilineality, but patriarchy pervaded pastoralist communities (p. 4). This assertion confirms that there is a nexus between ecological conditions and patriarchy in nomadic communities such as the Maasai.

In communities that mainly depended on crop farming, such as the Agikuyu, women play a central role such that their nine clans are based on the nine daughters of their patriarch. Contrarily, nomadic pastoralists underscore the central role of the man to protect land, women, cattle from the hostile environment, and raiders from neighboring communities. Raiders not only steal cattle (perhaps to pay for bride price), but also girls and women from “enemy” communities. Narrating the origins of the myth of infibulation in Maa culture, Kulet describes the militarized nature of Ilarinkon invaders and their lewd motives:

As they (Maasai morans) descended Iltepes hills, they could see files and files of tall muscular Olarinkon morans resplendent in their red ochre-soaked *shukas*. Tall monkey skin head gear swayed as they walked. They carried their heavy decorated shields while their long spears gleamed in the simmering hot afternoon sun. The jingles fastened onto their thighs made a terrifying clanging sound [...]. It was obvious that the Maa warriors were disadvantaged. (p. 84)

The above excerpt suggests that communities in the hot and dry savannah have bolstered patriarchy through a formidable warrior system. Living in such a hostile natural environment, it would be far-fetched for Maasai people to elevate matrilineality as some feminist scholars suggest. The Ilarinkon invaders are a trained army of men who raid Maasai villages, abducting their women and pubescent girls. Kulet indicates that in this hostile and wild savannah, communities have to consider patriarchy because women are vulnerable against human predators. Olarikoi, the leader of the invaders, is described as “more of a monster than human” (p. 85). He is eight feet tall and

with a hairy body. Defeated and hopeless, the Maasai watch helplessly as their women and girls are easily lured into sex by the Ilarinkon raiders. Although the women do not love the invaders, Maa people believe they cannot control their sexual desires because they have within them “the source of the salacity that caused the involuntary gravitation towards men when provoked” (p. 87). Kulet, in this context and subtly, refers to the clitoris, which is assumed to ensure a high libido among women in presence of men. Parmuat concludes that the women meet and appoint a female circumciser, *enkamuratani*, giving her authority to circumcise them to have the ability to resist advances of the Ilarinkon invaders (p. 85). On the surface, it appears women have a say by appointing a circumciser to exact the practice, but patriarchy still remains its core. Henceforth, Maasai women have always been circumcised, which confounds Resian because Ilarinkon reign ended centuries before.

Kulet’s myth of origin on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), as told from Parmuat’s perspective, gives a hint into the representative attributes of Ilarinkon invaders. They possibly symbolize men from most, if not all, rival pastoralist communities that seek Maasai cattle and women. Since the Maasai men are nomadic pastoralists, who travel far and wide in search of pasture and water, their wives are easily lured into sex by men from rival communities because they are uncircumcised, justifying the practice of FGM. A study by 28TooMany (2013) indicates that FGM in Kenya is prevalent among the pastoralists, with 97.5% among the Somali in North Eastern and 0.5 % in Western Kenya (p. 20):

FGM is often motivated by beliefs about what is considered appropriate sexual behavior, with some communities considering that it ensures and preserves virginity, marital faithfulness and prevents promiscuity/prostitution. There is a strong link between FGM and marriageability with FGM often being a prerequisite to marriage. (p. 9)

The high prevalent rates of FGM among the pastoralists suggest the existence of a nexus between it and the ecological conditions in which communities live. Contrarily, communities in cool and wet weather conditions (e.g., Luo and Luhya in Western Kenya) have the least prevalent rates and hardly practice nomadic pastoralism. Since they practice crop farming, the Luo and Luhya are settler communities, in which men live with their wives without worrying about raiders who might abduct their women and girls.

Aside from being one of the causes of infibulation, there is a nexus between the hostile weather conditions and the behavior and destiny of characters in Kulet’s *Blossoms of the Savannah*. Characters’ hostility and insolence is not necessarily derived from societal norms, but the prevailing weather conditions. When Resian leaves Nasila with Olarinkoi to flee from a forced marriage, she is confounded at the insolence of Olarinkoi and the driver as the narrator suggests:

At one point, the driver, a short thin man of forty or so with brooding eyes and a twitching mouth—stopped the vehicle, glanced at the back and growled a rude remark at Resian. Like Olarinkoi, he seemed callous and irritated for reasons she did not understand. ‘You woman, the driver called rudely, would you want to stretch your legs?’ (p. 214)

Although at the face value one could associate the two men’s reactions with male chauvinism, the hostile weather conditions are the most probable cause. Resian is honest to conclude that she “did not understand” the men because she had not witnessed such behavior among the men in Nakuru. According to Mullins and White (2019), “cold temperatures lead to decreases in the incidence of negative mental health outcomes and hot temperatures lead to [their] increases” (p. 2). The hostile ecological environment has exposed the driver and Olarinkoi in *Blossoms of the Savannah* to

psychological stress, which results in anger and irritability towards Resian. In a psychological study among desert workers in China, “12.54 % of the workers showed mental abnormality” (Ning et al., 2018: p. 1). The study concludes that although psychological stress exists universally, it can be accentuated by certain “work and life environments” (p. 1). The choice of Xianjiang Desert, as an area of study that mirrors the Maasai landscape, suggests the nexus between ecological conditions and psychological stress amongst its inhabitants.

In the *Blossoms of the Savannah*, Kulet uses the hostile environment as a backdrop to Olarinkoi’s irritability towards Resian, highlighting Buell’s assertion that the “nonhuman environment is not just a framing device” (p. 9). Resian, in this context, can only contrast the degraded environment in her new setting to that which she is accustomed in Nakuru:

The farther they drove towards Nasila, the drier the land became and the dust was appalling. Instead of fresh green pastures that she looked forward to seeing, her eyes were met with a sprawling limitless stretch of brown bare ground with patches of tawny grass. In the distance were hillocks covered by desiccated bushes of *Oleleahua* and *olkinyei* and stunted shrubs [...] Resian saw a lonely and nearly desolate land that stretched as far as her eyes could see [...] By five o’clock, they were still on the road. The road by then had become so rough that the driver had to stop [...] Flies and mosquitoes crawled into her nostrils in search of moisture. (pp. 213-214)

In this scene, Resian, like the men, is also irritated by the dust, heat, flies (insects), desolate land, and the long journey in pick-up truck. The flies do not appear because of dirt, but in search of water. The narrator associates their disturbing presence to the water scarcity arising from the hostile ecological conditions. As much as Resian accuses the men of irritability, the narrator clarifies that she, too, is affected by the “heat” (p. 214) being at the back of the pick-up truck. The conspicuously absence of *matatus* (public service vehicles) like those in Nakuru is attributable to the rough roads that only accommodate four-wheel drive pick-ups. Upon her arrival at his home, Olarinkoi demonstrates irritability towards Resian typical of desert inhabitants when he blurts, “[w]hat are you doing at the back of the vehicle? [...] alight quickly, the driver doesn’t have the whole night to wait” (p. 216). This attitude is contrary to that which she is used from her parents and neighbors in Nakuru and Nasila. Unlike the Nakuru young men Resian and her sister Taiyo know as being romantic and communicative, Olarinkoi maintains a pathological relationship with Resian upon arrival in his village. His attitude reiterates Ning et al. (2018) and Mullins and White’s (2019) assertions that hot environments affect people’s mental health. Upon arrival, Olarinkoi leads Resian silently, believing she is his wife (according to his mother’s prediction) with least attempt to woo or persuade her. As a “wife,” Olarinkoi believes Resian has to cook for him and flings a “piece of meat” her way (p. 218). When he realizes Resian is unwilling to take his directions, since he has reneged on his promise to take her to Minik Ene Nkoitoi, he gets irritated and snarls at her:

‘You woman, look here!’ [...] ‘you can either cook or keep standing stupidly and die of hunger. The choice is yours. Should you choose to, here is a piece of meat. The knife is over there. Of course, you are not blind you can see the *sufurias*. There is a whole bag of maize meal there and water in that container. There is paraffin in that can and you can collect firewood from the stack outside the house. (p. 218)

After haranguing Resian, Olarinkoi, who now views himself as her newly-wedded husband against a Maasai norm to marry an uncircumcised girl, goes out to drink. It is, therefore, probable that

Olarinkoi is an alcoholic and pathological based on the perspective of psychological scholars. Kohut and Wolf (1978) refer to this disorder as the *understimulated self*, a self-devoid of vitality, boring, apathetic and is experienced by others the same way (p. 418). Both Resian and Taiyo view Olarinkoi as boring and aloof (p. 74) from his first appearance in their home.

Desperate for happiness, victims of the *understimulated self* “stimulate themselves by addictive and promiscuous activities, perversions, gambling, drug and alcohol induced excitement and lifestyle characterized by hyper sociability” (p. 478). Olarinkoi’s perverted nature is evident when he returns from the drinking spree and declares Resian his wife without any courtship:

You silly thing [...] I tell you to prepare food and you refuse to do so, eh? Today you will know who the owner of this home is. If you are still in doubt, let me tell you frankly that from today you are my wife, hear that eh? You are my wife. For a long time, you have been sneering at me, showing how highly educated you are. Today we shall see how highly educated your body is. Yes, we shall see! (p. 221)

As much as Olarinkoi claims to be a Maasai conservative, his behavior in this instance demonstrates a deliberate contravention of Maa traditions and pathological tendencies. Once again, using the character of Parmuat, Kulet demonstrates how the Maa culture forbids premarital sex and outlines traditional customary guidelines observed before a girl becomes a wife. Love relationships, for example *patureishi* were platonic and those who violated these codes were forbidden from marrying the betrothed (p. 125); however, after Olarinkoi snarls at Resian in the above excerpt, “[h]e got hold of her hand and began dragging her into another room” (p. 221). He unfastens the buttons of his trousers and when she tries to get away, he holds her down brutally and in spite of her screams, he tears “her garments and begins to push her towards the bed” (p. 221). Olarinkoi is determined to rape her until she “thrust his thumb in her mouth and sunk her teeth into his flesh” (p. 221). Olarinkoi’s behavior in this scene is consistent with what most recent studies reveal that “mental health issues underlie sexual violence and offending, particularly rape” (Sarkar, 2013, p. 1). Often, rapists experience “attachment and intimacy problems” (p. 2), which characterizes Olarinkoi from his first appearance in the novel. He would appear in the house, friendless and lonely and give Milanoi (Resian’s mother) a piece of meat (p. 74) without introducing himself. He would disappear for two or three days and then reappear, intruding on Parmuat’s lessons to the girls. His eccentric behavior is possibly derived from his mother’s prophetic lifestyle and training in *moranism*. The latter refers to the warrior system, which is a tenet of patrilineality that Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui (2013) associate with pastoralist communities in arid areas.

Enkoiboni is another character in the novel who exhibits irritation and mental health issues. She is Olarinkoi’s mother whom Resian meets after surviving attempted rape at the hands of her son. What perplexes Resian is Enkoiboni’s constant lamentations against her. Enkoiboni “[r]ailed against Resian complaining that she was deliberately refusing to eat so that she did not gain strength to enable her undergo circumcision” (p. 235). When Enkoiboni visits Resian, the temper tantrums prompt her to violate Resian’s privacy. She had to “hold the hem of her tattered dress [...] pull it up and then thrust and callous claw-like hands under it to feel her stomach” (p. 235). Her intention is to confirm if Resian is pregnant following her son’s attempted rape. When she realizes Resian is not expectant, she resorts to verbal abuse, “[i]t is even better so, for who wants *entaapai* for a wife for her son?” (p. 235). *Entaapai* is a derogatory term in Maa culture for a girl who gets pregnant before being circumcised. Furthermore, Enkoiboni rants against leaders and those who are well-to-do in her society, especially those in urban cities:

‘Tell me, are not people like those in towns?’ she would complain bitterly. ‘You saw the rutted and dilapidated road that you travelled through the other day. Can you compare that road with the roads in town? What about the hospital?’ (p. 236)

As much as Resian assumes her fury is instigated by the leaders’ tendency towards graft, Enkoiboni is a victim of the heat stress arising from the hostile weather conditions of her environment. It would, therefore, be unreasonable to exonerate her from similar challenges the driver and Olarinkoi experience whose unpredictable temper tantrums emanate from the harsh weather conditions of Inkiito.

Furthermore, while Enkoiboni utterly condemns the government and its leaders for neglecting Inkiito without investing in its infrastructure, Berg (2015) affirms that construction of roads is meant to link “producers to markets, workers to jobs, students to schools [...] which are vital to any development agenda” (p. 1). This assertion is an indictment of Enkoiboni’s observation because neither schools, markets, industrial nor agricultural production can be traced to her village. Berg further suggests that the economic viability of a region influences government policies (e.g., to build infrastructure); therefore, environmental degradation has delimited the economic potential of Inkiito and averted government investments. In other words, the government finds it economically viable to construct a road to a tea rich Kericho County to transport produce to factories and to ferry workers to tea plantations than to Inkiito where desertification has dealt a blow to its economic productivity. In a study in Saudi Arabia on road construction, Aldagheiri (2009) observes that roads “bring direct benefits from their role in development of activities such as agriculture, industry, commerce and mining and by bringing in indirect benefits from the enhancement in the value of property and the change it sets in the way of life and thinking of its people” (p. 277). Whereas Enkoiboni focuses on the benefits of roads, she negates the factors that attract road construction, which conspicuously lacks in Inkiito. Aldagheiri enumerates these factors as agriculture, industry, commerce and mining. The government may not build a sophisticated road network to and in Inkiito, an arid region without agricultural potential, commerce or minerals as in oil rich countries like Saudi Arabia. If the region were productive, the government would have built infrastructure and benefited from the taxes emanating from the economic activities from the area.

Kulet demonstrates Aldagheiri’s assertion through the character of Oloisudori, who migrates from Nasila to Nakuru County, where the government has invested heavily in infrastructure, bolstering commerce, and leading to the “enhancement in the value of property and the change it sets in the way of life and thinking of its people” (p. 277). When Oloisudori takes Ole Kaelo and his wife to his home, the narrator observes that:

Ole Kaelo and his wife were not prepared enough to behold the splendid buildings that stood before them. They were humbled. They were in a cluster of red tiled houses whose tall outer walls painted in brilliant white surrounded one large two storied building that was also of the same color. A few meters from the fence that enclosed the homestead was the expansive Lake Naivasha and across it was a scenic sight of hills and a forest that covered them. (p. 189)

Kulet’s description of Oloisudori’s home illustrates that the quality of life and economic condition of his characters is partly determined by their ecological environment. Oloisudori’s affluence is associated with the ambience of Lake Naivasha and the forests, while Olarinkoi’s indigence is associated with land degradation and desertification. The hostile weather conditions have

contributed to the helpless economic condition that, to a greater extent, compel Resian to distaste Olarinkoi. On their arrival at Olarinkoi's home after tedious journey through the degraded land, the narrator describes Olarinkoi's hut as "a small mud plastered house with a rusty tin roof. Around the house was a small wooden gate that was shut" (p. 216). Unlike their well-furnished modern home, Resian takes notice of the furniture in Olarinkoi's hut with "three legged stools that stood next to the wall and a rough wooden rack that stood at a corner where the unwashed dishes, utensils and pots with dried remains of food stared back at her" (p. 217). Burrow and Mogaka (2007) contend that widespread poverty in Kenya notwithstanding, "instances of poverty are particularly pronounced in Arid and Semi-Arid Lands –ASAL" (p. 13). This is accentuated by "intercommunity conflicts over water and rich patch vegetation" (p. 13). Burrow and Mogaka, therefore, establish a nexus between the economic condition of people and their ecological environment.

Kulet creates a number of poverty-stricken characters living in the dry lands such as Nasila and Inkiito, which bolster Burrow and Mogaka's proposition. Enkoiboni is one of these characters. Her first appearance in the story is associated with "flies, and mosquitoes [...] rats, lizards and snakes" that are said to get "into the house at will from outside the fence" (p. 235). These insects, cockroaches and crickets, represent the poverty and misery typical of Enkoiboni's home owing to her failure to exercise any control over the ecological environment. These insects further signify the supremacy of the hostile environment over humankind, hence the rampant poverty. Enkoiboni, in her earlier remarks, tells Resian that they "have looked for a silver spoon [...] in the last few days" (p. 228) without any success to demonstrate the extent of poverty in Inkiito.

Moreover, the new hostile Inkiito environment transforms Resian from the blossoming beauty she was in Nakuru to what Enkaabani describes as a "poor thing" (p. 231). The old lady proceeds to comment that "mosquitoes must have sucked your veins dry" (p. 231). One of the main causes of her frailty is nose bleeding, which is a predisposing factor in hot and dry climate like that in Inkiito. When she regains her consciousness in Enkaabani's care (after Olarinkoi's assault), Resian is described in such a way that the reader infers another miserable and helpless self:

She was lying on a makeshift bed that was built into a corner of a room; in a desolate filthy house. The bed was covered with dirty bloody rags. And she was naked. Her head throbbed with excruciating pain that nearly blinded her. There was a trickle of blood in her nostrils, indicating that she had nosebleed. (p. 222)

The condition of the makeshift bed and the bloody stained rags (possibly from Resian's nose bleeding) further illustrates Enkaabani's impoverishment. One can infer from the above scene that Resian's constant nose bleeding in Inkiito is something she has not experienced in either Nasila or Nakuru. Indeed, studies have established a nexus between nosebleeds and dry, heated indoor air. Comelli (2015) observes that there is a strong correlation between nose bleeding and "indoor heating..." (p. 4), which might lead to the bursting of blood vessels in the nose. Therefore, it is probable that the hot and dry air of Inkiito is the sole cause for Resian's nose bleeding while her nakedness represents her vulnerability, destitution and misery. In this context of harsh climatic conditions in Inkiito, Enkaabani undresses her to fast track recovery from illness. The headache is a symptom of both dehydration and Malaria, which are prevalent in hot and dry weather conditions. The ecological conditions, therefore, contribute to Resian's poverty and misery in Inkiito.

Finally, the three young women Resian meets in Inkiito are victims of abject poverty in an

environment ravaged by Mother Nature. The narrator states that the women live in a homestead “three to four kilometers away” (p. 239) to demonstrate the sparse settlements in the village. This suggests that Mother Nature’s constant onslaught on the land has turned it into unwanted wasteland; therefore, people have no use for it. One of the women aged eighteen is married to “a seventy-five-year old man with a four-year-old” (p. 239), with an infant that cries incessantly with “swarms of flies” crowding around its eyes. Of the women, the narrator notes:

The other two women were even younger. They were probably fifteen or sixteen, but they had all prematurely aged due to poor diet and hardships. Resian was glad to meet them for solitude had bred loneliness in her heart. (p. 239)

As much as most feminist literary scholars single out patriarchy as the cause of early marriages in girls like those described in *Blossoms of the Savannah*, the prevalent indigence arising from hostile climatic conditions cannot be ignored. Buell’s assertion that in ecological texts “human accountability to the environment is part of their ethical orientation” (p. 9), applies to Kulet’s novel. Unless the inhabitants of Inkiito adopt environmental conservation, they will continue to be victims of Mother Nature’s wrath. Since there is no single school in Inkiito (due to government neglect of the arid wasteland), the girls cannot acquire formal education perceived as a deterrent to early marriages. Even the hardships and poor diet Kulet’s narrator describes are a consequence of environmental degradation. The high temperature and breeding rates of mosquitoes, and obstruction to crop farming in Inkiito accentuate people’s hardship. Most only survive on animal products, making them vulnerable to conditions arising from high cholesterol. Their use of *shukas*, which Resian embraces, is dictated by the hot and dry weather unlike the skirts, blouses and dresses women wear in urban areas. When Oloisudori and his friends from Nakuru pay Resian’s home a visit, the narrator describes them:

Right from the designer shoe thrust out of the high-sided vehicle, the blue pin-striped designer business suits, the golden watch that dangled from his hand, the golden bracelet matching cuff links and the golden chain that adorned his neck, all were flaunted in a show of opulence. (p. 177)

The way these individuals described passage is significantly different from the way people in Inkiito dress. Given their gold adornments, the narrator illustrates that Oloisudori and his friends are wealthy unlike most Inkiito residents who live in abject poverty.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, literary scholars who associate Kulet’s *Blossoms of the Savannah* solely with radical feminism negate his arguments on the role of the ecological conditions in the lives of his characters. The plight of women, such as Resian and those from Inkiito, can be attributed to the hostile ecological environment. Importantly, current analyses of patriarchy and female circumcision in Kulet’s works, outside ecological conditions from which they emerge, could potentially misrepresent the Maasai culture. Furthermore, readers need to consider the total setting of Kulet’s *Blossoms of the Savannah*, especially the hot natural environment, which paves way for nomadic pastoralism and the warrior system that encourages cultural practices such as female circumcision.

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