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**Love and Mother Nature: Ecological Aesthetics in
Naivo's *Beyond the Rice Fields***

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Abstract

Most studies on *Beyond the Rice Fields* (2017) by Naivo focus on the text's exploration of Madagascar's colonial history, the clash between tradition and modernity, and the dissolution of Malagasy society. The studies also depict the resilience of a forbidden love affair between the lead characters amid an intense wave of change in this society. However, this paper takes an ecocritical approach to delve into the rich tapestry of Madagascar's physical and cultural environments, exploring how love plays a crucial role in advocating for environmental stewardship. It further shows how humans are interconnected with their environment and how land defines their individual and collective

identities. Grounded in the principles of ecological aesthetics—a framework that considers the relationship between aesthetic experience and environmental values—this study was conducted on a contemporary novel from Madagascar to interrogate how literary representations of love and nature can promote ecological awareness. Naivo's *Beyond the Rice Fields* (2017) was purposively sampled and met the inclusion criteria. The study employed a qualitative narrative analysis design. Data from secondary sources facilitated the theoretical comprehension and qualitative analysis of the primary text. The study proceeded with a close textual reading of the primary text, while the ideas of Buell (2005) served as theoretical foundations for interpretation.

Key Words: Naivo, Love, Ecocriticism, Madagascar Literature

Introduction

This paper presents an ecocritical reading of Naivo's *Beyond the Rice Fields* (2017), the first Malagasy novel translated into English. It explores how the novel intertwines themes of love with human relationships to the natural environment. By examining how emotional bonds influence and reflect environmental attitudes, the study seeks to understand how literature can frame love as a force for ecological consciousness and stewardship. Drawing on ecocritical theory and the nature-centered philosophy of William Wordsworth, the paper situates its analysis within a broader literary tradition that views nature as deeply connected to human emotion. Wordsworth, often regarded as the father of nature poetry, suggests that nature mirrors human feelings and that a harmonious relationship with the natural world fosters goodness and truth. He asserts that human beings learn more by communicating with nature and that harmony with nature is the source of all goodness and truth (Wordsworth, vol. 16, 1990). His ideas provide a meaningful context for investigating how Naivo's novel portrays the environment not merely as a setting but as a responsive and sentient presence within the narrative. Through this lens, the paper aims to explore how *Beyond the Rice Fields* challenges conventional boundaries between human and non-human experience by presenting the natural world as capable of receiving and reciprocating care.

To better understand our argument, here is a brief synopsis of *Beyond the Rice Fields*. The text follows the lives of Tsito and Fara, the lead characters in the story. Tsito is an enslaved person brought to Sahasoa by Fara's father, Rado. Rado, a livestock trader, is often absent, and Fara and

Tsito spend most of their childhood together. Sahasoa becomes a haven for Tsito and Fara, and their childhood is characterized by children's games and stories in the quiet of the rice fields, which form part of their cherished childhood memories. The narrative begins slowly, and the plot unfolds through the different perspectives of Tsito and Fara. While Tsito's is characterized by nostalgia, Fara's perspective marks desires from a denied past and a somewhat chaotic one, always marked by uncertainties and ill-willed forces that are against her existence. Through Tsito's memories, we delve into the effects of slavery in Madagascar and how it continues to gnaw at him. The setting of the text shifts from Sahasoa, a rural place encapsulates a quiet and traditional life in the City of Thousands, where the effects of creeping modernization and the disruption caused by European invasion are first felt. Tsito is driven by the desire to buy his freedom because, despite Tsito and Fara's friendship, there is a clear difference in their relationship. Despite Tsito's affection for Fara, Tsito is enslaved, and Fara does not understand Tsito's anger and indifference when she broaches the subject of Faly, Tsito's sworn childhood enemy, as her preferred lover. When Big Faly finally robs Fara from Tsito, Tsito moves from Sahasoa and aligns himself with Andriantsitoha, the Lord of Ambohimanelo, with whom he finds favor and who eventually grants him his freedom. Following King Radama's death, Queen Mavo rises to power, and tensions escalate throughout the kingdom, intensifying the colonialists' greed for power and the land's disintegration. In an attempt to restore traditionalism, the Queen prohibits Christianity in the land, and anyone suspected of practicing it has to undergo the trial of the tangena, a prosecution by poison where one is deemed guilty or innocent. Those found guilty are killed, and the novel ends with Fara succumbing to the trial of the rice and Tsito going back to Sahasoa to see Bebe, Fara's grandmother, who dies soon after.

Literature Review

The focus of this literature review is to analyze scholarly works on the primary text and identify the gap in this study. Contemporary environmental stewards view love as an essential force in addressing climate change. Clayton (2020) underscores "...the vital role love plays at a time of crisis," demonstrating that human beings should not view love as purely anthropocentric. The love humans share should be mirrored in their relationship with nature, and human beings should stop putting barriers between themselves and nature" (Cronon, 1996). Campbell

(2023) believes that love can inspire individuals and communities to take action, caring for the planet and one another. While these studies demonstrate how love is utilized to address societal issues and remind human beings of their responsibilities in caring for the environment, the current study aims to explore the specific nexus between love and the environment, as presented in Naivo's *Beyond the Rice Field* (2017).

The novel's translator, Allison Charette (2017), refers to Naivo's *Beyond the Rice Fields* as a novel that "...delves into the upheavals of Malagasy past as it confronted Christianity and modernity..." According to Charette (2017), the book is a retelling of nineteenth-century Madagascar's colonial history, where the society was grappling with a brutal social transformation amid influences from outside forces, the British Christian Missionaries and French Industrialists. While this study is essential to the current research, as it offers a background for understanding the complexities of Malagasy history, the current study seeks to analyze the text using an ecocritical lens and explore how love has been intertwined with the Malagasy physical landscape in the novel, advocating for environmental stewardship.

Studies exist on the impact of colonialism and its modernist influences on Madagascar's ecological environment. Christie Margrave (2022) argues that Madagascar's unique environment has been altered since its first encounter with humankind, with many tribes settling and cultivating the land. She further observes that "the ecological devastation caused by the arrival of the Europeans in the Indian Ocean (from the sixteenth century onwards) has caused the greatest suffering to the land and consequences to the climate." (p.4) While Margrave has done an extensive study on the nexus between the environment and Malagasy literature, the current research primarily focuses on how Naivo's *Beyond the Rice Fields* (2017) utilizes the love motif to advocate for reverence and restoration of the Malagasy rich and unique natural environment.

Most critical works present *Beyond the Rice Fields* (2017) as a postcolonial text. In her review, Rachel Taube (2018) describes the text as "...a story of colonization told from the point of view of the colonized." She argues that the book "...challenges Western readers to see themselves as the foreigners, centering Madagascar in its introduction to the English-speaking literary world." Taube clearly expresses her decolonial views in the text and sees the novel as an attempt to elevate the Malagasy language when she argues that "...by employing Malagasy words, and especially those that do not exist in French or English, Naivo constantly reminds the reader that the storytelling language is not the

language of the story," showing the depths of disintegration of the Malagasy traditions and culture during colonialism. This study is significant to the current research as it adds to the understanding of how Naivo embellishes the story with Malagasy's rich folklore and oral traditions. However, the current study differs in that it examines how Naivo intertwines love with Malagasy culture and physical landscapes to help preserve the Malagasy environment.

Theoretical Framework

Literary studies have increasingly explored the connection between literature and the ecological environment. Glotfelty (1996) defines this exploration as ecocriticism, emphasizing that a primary concern for ecocritics is the interplay between humans and the environment, particularly how our ideas about the land shape our treatment of it. Ecocriticism moves away from an anthropocentric viewpoint, advocating instead for an ecocentric perspective that prioritizes nature over humanity. Buell (2005) illustrates this point by arguing that human interests are not the only valid concerns within literary texts, suggesting that literary scholars should broaden their perspective to encompass "the entire ecosphere," as Glotfelty (1996) describes.

Glotfelty and Buell's studies are invaluable to the present study as they adopt an ecological aesthetic approach. The present study adopts an ecocritical approach to explore the rich tapestry of Malagasy physical and cultural environments, examining how love plays a crucial role in promoting environmental stewardship. Toadvine (2010) believes ecological aesthetics concerns the aesthetic appreciation of the world in its entirety, including both the natural and built environments. Toadvine's views align with Steiner's (2019), who argues that ecological aesthetics involve sensual connections to both natural and cultural processes. Such processes elevate our awareness of the socio-ecological interrelationships in our surroundings and enable us to adapt to change based on that knowledge.

Contemporary African literary scholars are paying close attention to the representation of the environment in literary works as the world experiences a climate change crisis. They have seen the possibilities of "healing the climate crisis by amplifying African stories and using them as a framework for curing it," as Twaha (2023) suggests. Nyongesa (2021) offers an insightful ecocritical approach to Henry Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*, adding to the extensive study of Lusinga (2016), whose

focus is on ecological representations in Kulet's *Vanishing Herds* and *The Hunter*. Nyongesa observes that "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," and so does Naivo in exploring the lives of the Malagasy people in *Beyond the Rice Fields*. This study examines how Naivo in *Beyond the Rice Fields* portrays the interconnection between the social and political lives of the Malagasy people and their distinctive natural environment, utilizing love as a catalyst for environmental preservation.

Love and Mother Nature: an ecological reading of *Beyond the Rice Fields*

This section examines how Naivo's *Beyond the Rice Fields* employs love as a thematic and aesthetic device to convey ecological ideas and promote Malagasy environmental stewardship. Love is a central theme in the novel, and it is not only a force that binds individuals, but it is also a force that connects humans to nature. The diversity of themes related to love in different genres of literature demonstrates the complexity of the feeling, and this is also the case in this text. Qasim and Ahmad (2020) state that "...love is a complex phenomenon as it can be felt and cannot be explained." Campbell (2023) contends that "...love should be on the shortlist of emotions we associate with climate change," and this section argues that the complexity of love in *Beyond the Rice Fields* extends not only to human-human interactions but also to human-nature interactions. First, the characters' profound love for their homeland, their reverence for ancestral customs, and their close connection to the land are all manifestations of how love is used as a force for environmental conservation in *Beyond the Rice Fields*. Nicholsen (2003) observes that "Our loving binds us intimately with people and other life forms, and in opening to love, we know that the objects of our love are vulnerable as well" (p. 7). In *Beyond the Rice Fields*, Fara's admiration for the Malagasy land sparks the realization of its vulnerability. Fara says, "[I] like this moment in the late afternoon when the solar eye has partially descended and starts pouring golden light through the backsides of the trees. The fleeing star seems to breathe life back into things, bringing back the light of dawn. The cool evening returns the scent of the earth to the air after the high noon burned it away. It makes you want to fly back over the paths to the fields" (p.16). Upon encountering the City of Thousands, where modernity has taken hold, Fara is aware of the environmental

destruction and the contrast between Sahasoa and the City of Thousands. She observes, "[I]t did not feel as lush as the great forest..." (p.61). She understands that the well-being of the land is inextricably linked to the people's well-being, and her love for the land makes her fearful of any threat that might harm its beauty. Fara's intimate connection with the natural world fosters a deep love for nature, inspiring a sense of environmental responsibility and stewardship.

Secondly, the Sahasoa land is viewed as "a performance space" (Okagbue et al., 2013) where human relationships are negotiated. According to Ukaegbu, the African performance locale goes beyond the contemporary understanding of performance space in modern theatre, where the emphasis is on aesthetic value. Instead, the emphasis is on the socio-sacral functions of these performance locales. In *Beyond the Rice Fields*, Sahasoa serves as the backdrop for Tsito's and Fara's love, where the complexities of their relationship are explored. The rice fields, the Kalanoro Valley, the rivers, and the entire natural landscape serve as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of love between the lead characters. The rice fields, with their rhythmic flow, provide a backdrop for their shared experiences. Tsito's enduring love for Fara, which remains unspoken throughout their childhood due to the sociocultural and personal constraints they face, can be characterized as a form of "deep silent love, or a secret unrequited love" (Sharhan et al., 2023). Tsito, an enslaved person, loves Fara and hopes that she feels the same. However, Fara, the daughter of Tsito's enslaver, views Tsito as what he is: enslaved. The complexities of initially unrequited love and finally the realization of this love relationship are negotiated in the land, specifically in the rice fields and the Kalanoro Valley, which are essential spaces for interaction among the people of Sahasoa. The land provides a space for the growth and cultivation of Tsito's romantic feelings for Fara, even though he is a slave and she is a mistress. While a thick wall has been erected between Tsito and Fara by humans (who prohibit any relationship between a slave and a master), it is the land that breaks this impossibility. Through their shared joy, a deep bond forms between them, one that transcends the traditional slave-master relationship. When Tsito goes back to the unmolested Kalanoro Valley with Fara and their love is finally realized, he observes that "[a]mong the dense timber and variegated ferns, were enveloped by the forest's unique breath, a rustling of leaves combined with a buzzing of insects. There was life – present, everywhere..." (p.99). It is this life in the rice fields where Tsito swears to love Fara to eternity through a Malagasy hainteny they used to sing during their childhood;

“[H]ow will you love me?” [Fara asks.]
“I will love you like my eyes, the windows
of my soul: without them, I am weak as a child,
but with them, the world smiles at
me.” (p.238)

The eventual realization of their love at the unmolested Kalanoro Valley and the intertwining of their love story with the natural beauty of Sahasoa highlight the powerful connection between human emotion and the environment. Furthermore, it fosters a sense of responsibility towards the natural world, as it is in its undisturbed form that the land reciprocates and functions as a breeding ground for the love of the lead characters.

Tsito’s love for Fara takes different dimensions but is most noticeable for being a constant source of pain and longing. Baumeister et al. (1993) observe that perhaps neither loving nor being loved is enough; only when they are combined in a mutual relationship is there a significant chance for happiness. For the most part, Tsito’s love for Fara is unfulfilled, and this can be read as a metaphor for the disruption of the Malagasy natural world. Just as Tsito’s love is unreciprocated, the Malagasy land is often destroyed and undervalued by colonial powers. Tsito observes, “[F]ara and I were not pearls on the same strand anymore – what good would it do to intermingle any longer? I had sown a hopeful seed, but I did not know how to harvest what had grown. I’d striven for victory, but someone else had stolen the trophy” (p.146). The biggest threat to Tsito’s love for Fara is Big Faly, a shadow archetype that embodies the external forces threatening the beautiful Malagasy natural environment. Significantly, these external forces on the environment are primarily driven by humans (embodied by Big Faly in this text), who prioritize their own needs and overlook the needs of the environment, as per the ecocritics’ argument. Purser et al. (1995) view of the treatment of nature-as-object – a view of control and domination of the natural world is exemplified in Big Faly’s domination over Tsito and Fara and his malevolent drive to prevent their love from thriving. Big Faly is a painful reminder that Tsito is nothing but an enslaved person and, in a sad turn of events robs Tsito of Fara, and Tsito remains the enslaved person he is. Their animosity since childhood is “[t]he painful memories of Tsito’s social status and the impossibility of him ever having Fara as a lover” (p.127). Nyongesa (2019) argues that “[i]t is quite conventional among some literary critics to analyze the cultural context of works of art with

little or no consideration of the ecological conditions from which they are set [...] such critics are biased against the natural environment which plays a vital role in shaping human experiences" (p.37). His argument complements this study, as examining Big Faly's interference in Tsito's and Fara's love serves as a metaphor for human interference in the environment. This approach not only offers insights into how love can be a potent agent for environmental stewardship but also provides a break from the bias Nyongesa refers to. In essence, the pain and anguish Big Faly causes Tsito are primarily the result of the pain and destruction inflicted on the Malagasy natural environment by humans. Humans should, therefore, be cognizant of this fact and endeavor to love the environment and be its protectors and not its destructors.

Naivo also utilizes the childhood love and friendship of Tsito, Fara, and Vero to highlight the beauty and innocence of the unspoiled Malagasy physical environment. The trio's discovery of the virgin and beautiful Kalanoro Valley serves as a metaphor for an innocent, unspoiled land untouched by humans, reflecting the harmony that existed before human intervention. This valley serves as a sanctuary where they can escape the pressures of daily life and strengthen their bonds of friendship. It is described as a place where "[t]hey get away from the slashing and burning of farmers and herdsmen" (p.96). The trio's discovery of the valley is characterized by awe and admiration for the bountifulness of nature. Tsito recalls "[p]icking red and black berries, plump and juicy below leafy branches, bananas as your thumb that looked like children's hands, with fresh sweeter than honey" (p.96) Tsito and his gang are marveled and fascinated by the abundance and generosity of nature, and this slowly becomes their fortress. In this place, their childhood love and innocence are nurtured. The connection of the trio is admirable, and it is only strongly manifested when they are in the Kalanoro Valley. Naivo advocates for human accountability in caring for the environment, as it is a source of happiness, peace, and identity for people. The children are elated when they discover the valley as "they stumbled on it, and it was devoid of people, and the nearest villages were either far downstream or beyond the hills to the west" (p.99). This remoteness makes the valley feel magical, an unmolested space that only children can access. The valley becomes their secret place where their childhood love and innocence are realized. When Tsito and Fara go back to this valley, Tsito admits that it is "an escape that fixed the course of his life" (p.99) Kalanoro Valley serves as a reference point for the innocence and love of Tsito, Vero, and Fara and, by and large, symbolizes

the unspoiled beauty of the Malagasy natural world. Naivo criticizes the destruction of the environment by showing the beauty and tranquility the unmolested Kalanoro Valley offers, thus cautioning humans against environmental degradation.

Another compelling aspect of the novel is the portrayal of familial love and its role as a catalyst for environmental stewardship. The shared love between family members in *Beyond the Rice Fields* transcends mere affection and protection. It serves as the foundation for inculcating values such as reverence and responsibility towards the environment. Jamieson (2016) observes that "The relevance of research on families and relationships to concerns about 'environment' rests on the theoretical claim that families and personal relationships affect macro social change, that is, they play their part in the world-making." Following this assertion, the family unit in *Beyond the Rice Fields*, particularly through the character of Bebe, serves as a conduit through which ecological knowledge is passed. Bebe's role as a custodian of Malagasy traditional way of life – her understanding of the land, seasons, and the spirituality interwoven makes a central figure in the preservation of both culture and the environment. Lusinga (2016) observes the "interconnectedness between land and the spiritual realm," a concept embodied in Bebe's deep reverence for her people's traditions, the ancestors, and the spirituality of the land, which serves as a testament to this "interconnectedness." Bebe's storytelling is a key vehicle through which she imparts knowledge to the younger generations. "[B]ebe is the best storyteller in the village. People say that she's one of the most gifted in the whole region. In the evenings, she brings her stool outside, leans against the old tree, and starts her tales [...] kids come running and quickly make a tight circle around the fig tree" (p. 20). These nightly tales become a space for communal learning and reflection. Tsito and Fara are among the children who benefit from Bebe's rich environmental and cultural knowledge, which helps them become aware of the environment's rhythms and harmony. Tsito reflects, "[t]he Kalanoro valley reconciled me with the ancestors" (p. 99), suggesting that through teachings, the younger generation comes to see the land as not just a source of sustenance but also a spiritual and ancestral presence with whom they are in constant dialogue. Bebe's love extends to a broader ecological stewardship that transcends individual relationships. Even in the absence of her son-in-law, Rado, Bebe's love and wisdom hold her family together. Despite her age, her strength offers comfort to Bao, who, beaten down by loneliness, relies on her mother's love and support

to get by. In this way, Bebe's nurturing love becomes a stabilizing force, reminding her family of their bond to each other and to the land they inhabit. Through Bebe's character, Naivo highlights the notion that love for one's family and love for the land are inextricably linked. Bebe's connection to her family, the land, and the spiritual world shows how environmental values are passed down through deep family bonds. Ultimately, Naivo utilizes the family unit to explore how environmental stewardship can be instilled through love, respect, and the careful transmission of cultural and ecological knowledge. In doing so, *Beyond the Rice Fields* becomes a powerful narrative that weaves familial love with environmental responsibility, urging people to be aware of the profound connection between the well-being of the land and the people.

In *Beyond the Rice Fields*, the love between the people of Sahasoa is beautifully encapsulated in the Fampitaha dance, which not only celebrates their connection to each other but also strengthens their bond with the Malagasy natural environment. The Fampitaha, according to Tsito, “[w]as, of all the old ways, the one that best conveyed the ancestral spirit” (p.117). This dance is a vibrant cultural tradition that unites people and serves as a symbol of collective love, where joyful participation reaffirms their connection to their heritage, their land, and one another. The excitement and anticipation that build up to Fampitaha underscore its importance to the people's social and cultural life. The months of preparation encapsulate the sense of unity in Sahasoa, where the entire community comes together in anticipation of the event. During the dance, Tsito observes, “[p]eople of Sahasoa were there with some of our friends from the pond, including Tovo, and they all shouted gaily to us as we passed” (p.127). This communal involvement highlights that Fampitaha is more than just a dance; it is an event that strengthens the bonds between individuals, fostering a collective sense of purpose and shared identity. The dance itself is intricately connected to the land. It is performed in an open space surrounded by hills, with bamboo spikes encircling the perimeter and decorations of flowers and palm branches that enhance the connection to the environment (p. 126). This locale, outside amidst the hills and in the natural world, creates a space where people and nature interact. The land is not merely a performance space but an active participant in the dance, symbolizing the role the ecological environment plays in the lives of the villagers. Central to the Fampitaha's expression of shared communal love is the music, particularly the traditional instruments of the drum and the valiha, a bamboo flute that Tsito refers to as “[a] long piece of magical bamboo” (p. 130). The valiha

becomes a symbol of Tsito's journey and growth, as it is through his mastery of the instrument that he forges his identity and seeks freedom. The music serves as a conduit between the spiritual, the personal, and the collective, with the rhythms of the instruments linking the contestants, the audience, and the land itself. In this way, dance becomes not only a form of artistic expression but also a medium for connecting the ancestral spirits, the land, and the rhythms of life.

Naivo's portrayal of Fampitaha resonates with Hess's (2017) idea of a "radical decentering of self and giving voice to an experience of nature itself" (p.1). The dance, in celebrating the beauty of the land, allows the people of Sahasoa to transcend their individuality and become part of a collective and communal experience of nature. Through Fampitaha, Naivo masterfully underscores the role the environment plays in uniting the people of Sahasoa. The dance serves as a vehicle for expressing love, not just among individuals but also for the land that sustains them. Therefore, Naivo calls for both individual and collective responsibility in caring for the natural world. Fampitaha is, thus, not only a cultural tradition but also a means of profoundly strengthening people's love for one another. In this way, *Beyond the Rice Fields* emphasizes that passion for the land is entwined with love for one another and that for a community to thrive, there must be harmony between the people and the land.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Naivo's *Beyond the Rice Fields* (2017) transcends the traditional boundaries of representations of love, viewing it as more than just an emotion. Advocacy for environmental stewardship is a contemporary movement that takes different dimensions, and love is one of the integral ways that can be used to advocate for care for the natural world. In "decentering self," the text can be read from an ecocritical perspective, as this further helps to appreciate the Malagasy natural environment and how it has withstood the test of time despite the changing impacts of human activities. Furthermore, *Beyond the Rice Fields* is the first Malagasy novel to be translated into English, and relatively few studies have been conducted on the text. As scholars continue to appreciate this text, they must not overlook the connection between love and the Malagasy environment, as it contributes to the novel's rich tapestry of emotional and cultural depth.

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