

ECOFEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIAL READING OF *MEMPHIS AND WEEP NOT, CHILD*

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Abstract

This article presents an ecofeminist and postcolonial analysis of Tara M. Stringfellow's Memphis (2022) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Weep Not, Child (1964), exploring how these novels intertwine gendered violence, land dispossession, and ecological exploitation under racial and colonial oppression. It demonstrates art (Joan's paintings), education (Njoroge's aspirations), and memory as interconnected mechanisms of resistance, cultural reclamation, and postcolonial identity reconstruction for women and communities. Through comparative close reading across American South and colonial Kenya contexts, the study reveals land as gendered, political terrain, drawing on ecofeminism's women/nature critique. The transnational analysis bridges African American-African narratives, highlighting resilience for ecological justice and healing.

Keywords: *ecofeminism, postcolonialism, dispossession, gender, memory*

Résumé

Cet article propose une analyse écoféministe et postcoloniale des romans Memphis (2022) de Tara M. Stringfellow et Weep Not, Child (1964) de Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, en explorant la manière dont ces œuvres abordent les thèmes de la violence sexiste, de la dépossession foncière et de l'exploitation écologique dans un contexte d'oppression raciale et coloniale. Il démontre que l'art (les tableaux de Joan), l'éducation (les aspirations de Njoroge) et la mémoire constituent des mécanismes interconnectés de résistance, de récupération culturelle et de reconstruction de l'identité postcoloniale pour les femmes et les communautés. À travers une lecture comparative approfondie des contextes du Sud des États-Unis et du Kenya colonial, cette étude révèle que la terre est un terrain politique et genre, en s'appuyant sur la critique « femmes/nature » de l'écoféminisme. L'analyse transnationale établit un pont entre les récits afro-américains et africains, mettant en avant la résilience pour la justice écologique et la guérison.

Mots-clés : *écoféminisme, postcolonialisme, dépossession, genre, mémoire*

Introduction

The enduring legacies of colonialism and patriarchy profoundly shape intersections of land, identity, and memory across cultures, with literature revealing marginalized experiences of injustice. Tara M. Stringfellow's *Memphis* (2022) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) offer rich terrain for ecofeminist and postcolonial analysis, probing: How do these novels depict ecological injustice, gendered displacement, and postcolonial identity? This study deepens discourse on disproportionate impacts of environmental exploitation and colonial legacies on women and marginalized groups.

Scholarship on ecofeminism and postcolonialism grows, yet comparative African and African-American narratives via gender/land/memory lenses remain sparse. Recent works bridge this: Huggan and Tiffin's postcolonial ecocriticism (post-2020) exposes « slow violence » in settler contexts; Nixon's extensions (2022) highlight gendered environmental traumas; multispecies ecofeminism (Power 2020) posits land as resistive agent. Existing studies portray African American women's art/memory as Black feminist ecology (Shodiya-Zeumault *et al.* 2025; Kaplan *et al.* 2020) and Ngũgĩ's land alienation/education in anti-colonial Kenya (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989; Gikandi 1987; 2023). However, these bodies of work rarely consider ecofeminism's focus on the gendered nature of ecological issues or integrate an analysis of land from both African and African American perspectives.

Theoretically, ecofeminism critiques women/nature oppression under patriarchy (Merchant 1980; Shiva 1988; Tizzoni 2019; Nagar 2022), while postcolonialism unpacks colonial identity/land effects (Said 1978; Spivak 1988; Deirmenci Altın 2022). Intersectionally, they reveal enduring ecological/gendered harms, per dialogical ecofeminism.

Structured in three chapters: The first contextualizes texts/theory; the second examines gendered land/displacement/memory (Joan's art; Njoroge's education); and the third explores memory's

resistive role. This weaves ecofeminist-postcolonial threads, framing land as gendered/political terrain amid colonial/environmental violence, for global scholarly impact.

1. Contexts and theoretical foundations

The first chapter establishes the historical-cultural contexts of *Memphis* and *Weep Not, Child*, explicates core ecofeminist and postcolonial concepts, and demonstrates their intersectional synergy. By grounding the novels in African American and Kenyan colonial experiences, it lays an important theoretical base for analyzing land-gender-memory entanglements.

1.1 African american experience and legacy in Memphis

Tara M. Stringfellow's *Memphis* (2022) unfolds across three generations of Black women navigating trauma, resilience, and belonging in the American South. Memphis emerges as a living character, etched by racialized violence, from lynchings to systemic poverty and communal resistance. The North family's saga, haunted by domestic abuse and environmental degradation, mirrors broader African American struggles against historical and ecological injustices. Joan's artistic practice ties personal healing to the Memphis landscape, reclaiming space through painting as an archive of pain and beauty.

This aligns with Black Feminist Ecological Thought, where Black women's art intertwines nature and trauma: Mitchell (2021) argues such creativity recognizes ecological harms as imbricated in Black communities (Mitchell, 2021: 18). Recent studies amplify this; Shodiya-Zeumault et al. (2025) phenomenologically trace Black women environmental activists' resistance to racism, paralleling Joan's canvases as defiant ecofeminist acts. Nicole Anae (2022) observes African women writers linking ecological and bodily suffering (Anae, 2022: 145), a motif echoed in Stringfellow's portrayal of the home as both sanctuary and violation site, much like Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), where Florens' demise

intertwines with farm dysfunction, rendering misogynoir and ecological harm as intertwined liabilities (Mitchell, 2021: 22). Postcolonial ecofeminism extends this: Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin frame Southern U.S. landscapes as postcolonial “slow violence” zones, where Black women’s embodied memories resist erasure. August, a matriarch, embodies intersectional strength, sustaining family and land amid crisis (Stringfellow, 2022: 132). Thus, *Memphis* positions art as ecofeminist reclamation, bridging personal trauma to collective environmental justice in African American literary traditions.

1.2 Key Concepts of Ecofeminism

Coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne in the 1970s, ecofeminism, as developed by Vandana Shiva (1988 : 38), Maria Mies, and Carol J. Adams posits the dual oppression of women and nature rooted in patriarchal and colonial domination logics. Bianca Tizzoni (2019: 7) stresses addressing all oppressions holistically. Recent postcolonial ecofeminism refines this: Nagar (2022) overviews its critique of colonial resource extraction as gendered violence, while multispecies approaches (Power, 2020) include non-human agency in resistance.

In *Memphis*, the home parallels ecosystem vulnerability: Joan sketches the front porch to « capture the life... imprint it in my memory. A quick landscape » (Stringfellow, 2022: 10), rendering visible wounds on women/land while healing through art. August’s backyard garden offers sanctuary from violence, evoking bell hooks’ (1999: 46) Black women’s gardens as hope/autonomy spaces. This echoes Shiva’s (1988) earth-healing via women’s knowledge, updated in dialogical ecofeminism where nature/gender dialogues dismantle binaries.

1.3 Colonialism’s impact on land and identity in weep not, child

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Weep Not, Child* (1964) immerses characters in Kenya’s colonial era and Mau Mau uprising. Gikūyū land

expropriation by settlers centralizes trauma, reshaping generational conflict: Ngotho laments, « Loss of land meant loss of power, dignity, and honor. It was as if a man's soul had departed from his body ». (Ngũgĩ, 1964: 33). Boro embodies youth discontent, fueling resistance.

Recent ecocriticism reinforces: a 2023 study frames Ngũgĩ's land loss as postcolonial ecological alienation, tying identity dissolution to environmental rupture. Tucker and Bragg (2023) note Ngotho symbolizes landless peasants' plight. Ashcroft et al. (1989: 55) argue colonization « others » the colonized, stripping narrative agency/selfhood; Ali (2003: 191) links identity to landscape under theft/erasure. Deirmenci Altın (2022) globalizes this via postcolonial ecocriticism. In the novel, ancestral ties persist: « Land was... the inheritance of our ancestors, our mothers' milk » (Ngũgĩ, 1964: 33), underscoring spiritual/material bonds disrupted yet resilient.

These sections converge ecofeminism/postcolonialism: Stringfellow links intergenerational trauma/ecological survival; Ngũgĩ ties land loss to identity resilience (cf. Morrison 2008; Roy 1997; Shiva 1988). Literature subverts oppressive histories through ecology/gender lenses, situating novels in African American/African traditions and global theory on oppression/reclamation.

2. Gendered experiences of land and displacement

The second chapter examines how *Memphis* and *Weep Not, Child* portray gendered encounters with land loss and displacement, spotlighting art, education, and memory as resistance tools. It reinforces prior theoretical foundations with targeted textual analysis, engaging existing literature on ecofeminist empowerment strategies.

2.1 Joan's art and cultural expression in Memphis

In *Memphis* (2022), Stringfellow crafts Joan's painting as an individual and collective reclamation act, entwined with the gendered and ecological histories of the American South. Joan's artwork attempts to paint memory onto the landscape, to rescue the beauty and pain embedded in Black soil, as she articulates: « I wanted to capture the life of the front porch, imprint it in my notebook... and in my memory. A quick landscape » (Stringfellow, 2022: 10). This transforms personal violation trauma into visible resistance, aligning with Patricia Hill Collins' (2000: 94) « creative resilience » against dehumanization.

Art here embodies ecofeminism: rendering wounds on women and land while fostering healing. The novel's opening establishes Joan's sketchbook devotion (Stringfellow 2022, 4), tying her inner world to art amid family violence. August's backyard garden, sanctuary from external threats, recalls bell hooks' (1999: 46) gardens as Black women's hope and autonomy spaces. Nicole Anae's (2022: 145) « ecological memory work » frames this as political restoration, where personal becomes collective.

Recent scholarship deepens this: Shodiya-Zeumault et al. (2025) link Black women's creative acts to environmental racism resistance, mirroring Joan's canvases. Postcolonial ecofeminism (Nagar, 2022) views such art as decolonial, disrupting anthropocentric erasure by animating land's agency through gendered gaze. Thus, Joan's practice counters displacement, weaving matrilineal ecology into survival narratives within African American traditions.

2.2 Education and narrative as empowerment in weep not, child

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) casts education as a double-edged yet vital resistance tool amid colonial violence and land theft. Njoroge pursues schooling to reclaim stolen land: « Njoroge knew that for him education would be the fulfillment of a wider and more significant vision... not only by his father, but

also by his mother, his brothers and even the village » (Ngũgĩ, 1964: 39). He muses, « If I learned all these words... perhaps I, too, would have power to change things » (Ngũgĩ, 1964: 42), elevating narrative, oral or written, as agency against silencing.

Simon Gikandi (1987: 72) terms education the colonial project's « promise and betrayal, » intersecting empowerment/alienation. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003: 188) highlights classrooms as battlegrounds/sanctuaries for colonized women's self-remaking. Though women's voices are subtle, their nurturing (e.g., Nyokabi's prophetic school announcement: « You will begin school on Monday » (Ngũgĩ: 1964: 3) reflects ecofeminism's subdued-yet-essential women/land roles (Tizzoni, 2019: 12).

Recent scholar insights affirm: 2023 ecocritical Ngũgĩ studies tie literacy to land ethics revival; Tucker/Bragg (2023) frame Njoroge as generational savior. This positions education as ecofeminist-postcolonial empowerment, restoring Gikũyũ identity fractured by dispossession.

2.3 Memory and intergenerational resilience

Both novels position memory as endurance resource against displacement. In *Memphis*, matrilineal recall blurs with space: « My memories of staying here felt vague and far away. I'd been only three years old... but now I remembered sitting on the porch and pouring milk for the cats... Mama cautioning me not to spill » (Stringfellow, 2022: 10). Saidiya Hartman (2008: 6) sees slavery's afterlife in care/remembrance practices.

Weep Not, Child haunts with precolonial freedom: Ngotho evokes « land... the inheritance of our ancestors, our mothers' milk » (Ngũgĩ, 1964: 33), juxtaposed against emergency violence. Ashcroft *et al.* (1989) and Deirmenci Altın (2022) emphasize storytelling/rituals as survival, countering erasures.

Literature consolidates: postcolonial ecofeminism (Huggan/Tiffin post-2020) views memory as re-rooting in « slow violence » landscapes; Anae (2022) and Mitchell (2021: 22) link it to ecological healing. Comparatively, Joan's/family stories and

Njoroge's/village tales persist roots amid gendered/ecological trauma, fueling resilience, a shared Black American/Kenyan struggle at ecofeminism-postcolonialism's nexus.

3. The Role of memory in sustaining identity and resistance

The third chapter examines memory as a dynamic site of resilience and resistance in *Memphis* and *Weep Not, Child*, building on prior analyses of land-gender entanglements.

3.1 Collective and personal memory as sites of resilience in Memphis

In *Memphis* (2022), Stringfellow foregrounds memory, collective and personal, as an indispensable resource for survival amid generational trauma. The North family's history of violence and erasure is preserved through storytelling and art. August's reflection captures this: «The house brought back too many memories» (Stringfellow, 2022, 210), embodying ecofeminism's emphasis on memory as ecological/cultural preservation. Joan's paintings serve as mnemonic devices, transmuting trauma into a visual archive challenging victimhood narrative.

Saidiya Hartman (2008: 6) argues Black diasporic memory defies historical violence via care and remembrance. Anae's (2022: 145) «ecological memory work» aligns perfectly, intertwining remembering with trauma-shaped landscapes. Recent multispecies ecofeminism (Power, 2020) extends this by positing land as co-rememberer, where Southern soils «witness» Black women's endurance. Shodiya-Zeumault *et al.* (2025) link such practices to activists' psychological resilience against environmental racism, mirroring Joan's art as defiant reclamation.

The intimate land-memory bond affirms ecofeminism: healing demands acknowledging bodily/environmental harm and revitalizing place-rooted histories. Thus, *Memphis* illustrates memory as radical identity formation and cultural resistance,

positioning matrilineal narratives against patriarchal/colonial erasures in African American contexts.

3.2 Ancestral memory and the reclamation of identity in weep not, child

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) positions ancestral memory at the core of postcolonial recovery, emphasizing land's spiritual and material centrality to Gikũyũ identity. Ngotho and Njoroge's recollections underscore this unbreakable bond: « Land was not just property, but the inheritance of our ancestors, our mothers' milk » (Ngũgĩ, 1964: 33). Colonial disruption attempts to sever these ties, yet memory becomes contested terrain where resistance nurtures reclamation.]

Postcolonial theorists like Ashcroft et al. (1989: 55) explain how cultural memory counters colonial erasure, restoring physical and narrative agency stolen from the colonized. Selin Deirmenci Altın's (2022: 79) postcolonial ecocriticism highlights ancestral land narratives as healing for ecological/cultural wounds from expropriation. The Mau Mau insurgency depiction reinforces memory, via oral traditions and storytelling, as a weapon against historical rewriting. Recent ecocritical studies (2023) on Ngũgĩ frame this as ethical land revival, enabling Njoroge to envision futures reconnecting place and community beyond dispossession. Women's indirect yet vital roles amplify ecofeminism: maternal legacies in « mothers' milk » evoke nurturing earth ties (Shiva 1988), positioning memory as gendered resilience. Thus, *Weep Not, Child* transforms ancestral recall into identity reclamation, fueling hope amid colonial violence.

3.3 Memory as a catalyst for resistance and renewal

Both novels reveal memory as a dynamic force propelling resistance and renewal across generations. In *Memphis*, intergenerational storytelling and Joan's artistic expressions preserve history while countering racial/gendered violence's silencing: the house « brought back too many memories »

(Stringfellow, 2022: 210), making land/body scars visible for empowerment.

Similarly, *Weep Not, Child* positions memory as cultural continuity and political resistance linchpin. Ngotho's reflections and Njoroge's aspirations reclaim agency: « Land... our mothers' milk » (Ngũgĩ, 1964 : 33) sustains Gikũyũ selfhood against subjugation. Vandana Shiva's (1988: 60) ecofeminism asserts healing land/self as interdependent, requiring historical acknowledgment; Stephanie Mitchell's (2021: 22) Black Feminist Ecological Thought echoes this for dismantling patriarchal/colonial systems targeting women/nature.

Recent dialogical ecofeminism and postcolonial extensions (Huggan/Tiffin; Nagar 2022) frame memory as active process, not passive archive sustaining identity, fostering resilience, and igniting collective healing/transformational justice. Comparatively, both works demonstrate memory's refuge/catalyst roles: Joan's visual archives parallel Njoroge's literate dreams, weaving transnational ecofeminist-postcolonial narratives where remembrance ties land, identity, and resistance against enduring oppressions. This part underscores memory's inseparability from land/identity/resistance, converging frameworks to affirm its necessity for survival and justice in these novels.

Conclusion

This article has conducted an integrative ecofeminist and postcolonial reading of Tara M. Stringfellow's *Memphis* (2022) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964), illuminating the intertwined traumas of gendered violence and land dispossession under racial and colonial oppression. Across three chapters, the analysis reveals how both novels entangle ecological and bodily harm while elevating art, memory, and education as instruments of resistance and cultural reclamation.

The first chapter situated the novels in their respective African American and Kenyan colonial contexts, explicating ecofeminism's

holistic oppression critique (Shiva 1988; Tizzoni 2019) alongside postcolonialism's identity/land dissections (Said 1978; Ashcroft et al. 1989; Deirmenci Altın 2022), backed by recent scholarship like Shodiya-Zeumault *et al.* (2025) and Nagar (2022). The second chapter probed gendered land/displacement experiences: Joan's art as ecological memory work (Anae 2022; hooks 1999) in *Memphis*, Njoroge's education as narrative empowerment (Gikandi 1987; Mohanty 2003) in *Weep Not, Child*, with memory fostering intergenerational resilience (Hartman 2008; Mitchell 2021). The third crystallized memory's catalytic role, collective in *Memphis* (Power 2020), ancestral in *Weep Not, Child* (Tucker and Bragg 2023), propelling renewal against erasures.

Ultimately, *Memphis* and *Weep Not, Child* embody ecology-gender-colonial history interplay, showcasing literature's transformative power for postcolonial futures. This transnational study advances discourse by merging ecofeminist-postcolonial frameworks, revealing shared global stakes in justice, agency, and healing, urging further integration of recent theory for decolonized ecologies.

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