

# Theorising the environment in fiction: An ecocritical reading of Jairos Kangira's *The bundle of firewood*

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## Abstract

Western perceptions of the African continent as a forest or 'site of death' can be traced to as far back as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of darkness*. Post-colonial readings of this text exude a literary paradigm shift that has seen African writers attempt to valorise the African forest as a possible site of development. This ecological oriented criticism (ecocriticism) has emerged as one of the fresh ways of celebrating the environment as the figurative site upon which human regeneration is likely to occur. The environment becomes a response to the urgent mundane socio-economic issues and provokes readers to interrogate them. In discussing Kangira's *The bundle of firewood*, this paper will analyse how these texts use the environment as a narratology to deconstruct the rigid divisions that typify girlhood stereotypes; seeing these not as monolithic, but as permeable and interchangeable. Thus, celebrating the environment is a way of shifting the centre; of giving agency to silent issues and silenced subjects. It becomes a powerful metaphor in terms of the self's constant quest for definition in a society whose social sexual matrix it (the self) transgresses. The paper reflects on the ramifications of such transgressive politics. It argues that ecocriticism plays a significant role in creating and steering ideologies around a renegotiation of relationships. The paper concludes that the environment is metonymic of so many things; in this context, the politics of exclusivism, and the self's radicalisation and involvement in a limitless re-fashioning.

## Introduction

A simplistic reading of *The bundle of firewood* by Jairos Kangira will reveal that it is a text which speaks against traditional Shona society's prejudice against the girl child. Given so the book's title which is suggestive of one of the core roles that a girl child plays in a traditional home, that is, fetching firewood, can be analysed using a feminist approach. At this level of reading the thesis is that girlhood is only a biological condition which does not make the girl child any worse or any better human being. The book thus advocates for the total acceptance of the girl child into mainstream society.

At a deeper level, however, the text attempts to speak for the silenced voices. It manifests a strong prejudice against children, in particular, the girl child. Tariro's pursuit for justice for the pangolin and her experiences in *The bungle of firewood* become an expose of how the patriarchal traditional Shona society perceived women and girls as inferior and subordinate to men and boys. Again, the assumption is that it can be analysed using a

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feminist lens. However, at this juncture, I would like to recall Hazel Ngoshi's (2011, p.242) argument that "Feminist criticism of Zimbabwean fictional writing has invariably focused on the condition of womanhood; a term feminist scholars have often taken to encompass girlhood." For instance, in the analysis of Dangarembga's *Nervous conditions*, literary critics have always "lumped the adolescent girls Tambu and Nyasha with the women folk ... yet girls as opposed to women always have their own strategic aspirations and interests such as access to education and freedom of movement and association" (Ngoshi, 2011, p.243). In other words, in the Zimbabwean feminist literary criticism and perhaps Africa in general, there is no clear distinction between girlhood and womanhood resulting in the invisibility of girlhood as an independent category. Moletsane et al (2008) as cited in Ngoshi (2011, p.242) argues that there is:

A very thin line [dividing] girlhood and womanhood as the patriarchy often defines these according to cultural exigencies of the time. The boundary between girlhood and womanhood has been discursively erased in past theorisation of female issues.

The above critique of feminist theory is premised in part on the recognition that actual children lead lives and have needs and desires that are different from adults. Hence, this paper argues that because girlhood should be treated distinctly from womanhood, their "subjectivities and agency" (Ngoshi, 2011) can be clearly articulated by adopting a more holistic approach when analysing their unique experiences. I hazard a proposal that unlike the feminist approach, the ecocentric view does not focus on animals and plants in the environment but also holds that human beings should be accorded distinct space in the same environment. As a theoretical perspective, I posit that it can be used to treat and analyse girlhood as a distinct category in Kangira's *The bundle of firewood*. This article argues that in his narrative, Kangira taps into his readers' preconceptions about the girl child and the issues he highlights are consonant with the concerns of girlhood.

Thus, this article sets out to explore the problematic of girlhood in a patriarchal society in Zimbabwe using the theoretical perspective of ecocriticism. It posits that Jairo Kangira's aim is to deconstruct the moribund belief that childhood in general is a concept largely defined by adults and that it is an ideologically inflected category. The main thrust of this article is to show that childhood is constructed rather than "natural." From an ecocritical perspective, it is not an accident that the setting is a small rural village, Rufaro, "on the edge of a forest" (Kangira, 2003, p.3). Placing the text into its socio-cultural context, I seek to show that the "the green movements of the 1970s and 1980s are deeply rooted in the text and demonstrate that [Kangira] skilfully links questions of culture, patriarchy and girlhood with environmentalist concerns" (Delveaux, 2001). Through the young girl Tariro, the bundle of firewood, the pangolin and the Impala Game Park, I will show that the environment is closely linked to and is metonymic of the relationships in the human world, thus, clearly taking an ecocritical stance.

This article is thus premised on the notion that Kangira's writing reflects his abiding concern with how, through her love of nature, the girl child constructs her identities vis-à-vis the patriarchal Zimbabwean society that she finds herself in. Using the ecocriticism theoretical perspective as a point of entry, nuanced by the configurations of spatiality which are factored into discourses about childhood and womanhood, this article argues that girlhood is merely an "other" that is created by the patriarchal society. Significantly, Kangira's preoccupation with the question of the girl child identity and otherness, and the natural environment is registered in the very first sentence of the narrative; "Tariro

lived with her grandmother in Rufaro village” (Kangira, 2003, p.3). By celebrating the interconnectedness of the girl child and the environment, Kangira thus questions the ontology of truth and experience in literary expression, thus challenging traditional interpretations of girlhood identity.

This article further argues that “each age and society creates its “others.” Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of “other” is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as context involving individuals and institutions in all societies” (Saidi, 1995, p.332). Indeed the vital question Kangira seems to put across is how the othered subject, a young African girl; innocent and economically underprivileged goes about liberating herself from patriarchal and colonial oppression. It is thus vital that we begin to look at Tariro in her youth, for her growth and journey symbolise her growth spiritually and consciously in the male dominated environment. Although the text’s fundamental premise is that human culture and philosophy of life is connected to the physical environment, the text can also pass for a novel of growth, that is, the bildungsroman novel. To put this argument into proper perspective, it is paramount that one explores briefly the traditional girl child image.

### **The traditional girl child image**

The girl child and women in general have been the objects of scorn and abuse in the African society, since time immemorial. This state of affairs is evidenced by gender imbalances that still exist in many facets of the society today which shows that basic rights like the access to education have been skewed in favour of the boy child. The situation created stereotypes against the girl child which have existed despite consented efforts by the government and non-governmental organisations to provide conducive and enabling environments that promote gender equality.

A number of authors have published interesting and effective materials that address children’s issues. These publications address existential issues that children face; in this article specific reference would be made to the girl-child. The issues addressed include the challenges facing the girl child, such as marginalisation, prejudice, sexual abuse and others. Children’s literature represents an important resource for understanding the needs, wishes and aspirations of young people. In Kangira’s text, Tariro’s wish was to save the pangolin from her grandmother and Liffi. “She did not sleep that night. She thought and thought about how to save the little creature she had grown to like so much. Many plans came into her mind but none of them seemed to work” (Kangira, 2003, p.16). She risks her life travelling alone at night, just to save the pangolin’s life. Hence, this article argues that Zimbabwean children’s literature should be investigated more purposefully in order to address the misconception that the girl child should be treated differently from the boy child.

Notably, the depiction of childhood in African modern fiction has taken varied forms. Starting from birth, through childhood to adulthood, social expectations for the male and female child differ from society to society. Hence, children in most societies learn and embrace the roles expected of them by their own people. The girl child has however been adversely affected since in most African patriarchal societies the females have always been pushed to the periphery. The girl child is disadvantaged by the fact of her gender. Her role has always been confined to domesticity and excluded from more important pursuits like education.

In fact, as far as tradition is concerned, there are chores that the girl child is expected to do as she grows up. She is taught to perform certain duties viewed as feminine; for example preparing food, washing (dishes and clothes) cleaning the house, looking after or taking care of young siblings in the parents' presence or absence to mention but a few. The girl child is taught to be silent and not to air her views or speak out. Tradition promotes male dominance and females are expected to be tender, soft hearted and sensitive. A girl child is not expected to be assertive; she should be submissive; is expected to be irrational and cry on occasion (Sadker and Sadker, 1999).

Degenove and Rice (2005, p.143) further point out that, "most children accepted cognitively their assigned sex as boy or girl and then strive to act according to the expectations of the society and the group of which they are a part." The emphasis here is that children are expected to behave or act according to what the society views as "normal;" they are not expected to behave or act according to what the society views as "abnormal." In short, they would adhere to and not question society's expectations. If childhood is a concept that is largely defined by the society, this article argues that it is high time that the issues undermining the girl child are changed to allow children (especially girls) to have a voice, to speak out and face this world in a confident manner. The fact that being feminine means being weak and dependent is a view or idea which I believe needs to be interrogated and amended. What the society needs to consider is that "femaleness" does not necessarily mean weakness. Hence, in *The bundle of firewood*, Kangira demonstrates that mainstream society is hooked on conventions and failure to collapse its thoughts, practices, knowledge and actions, results in imprisoning women and children in the name of culture. Using ecocriticism as a point of reference, this article will argue that children have dreams, aspirations, and visions; they are knowledgeable and need to be heard. Like any other human being, children have an identity that is not homogeneous but heterogeneous. Hence, before illustrating how Kangira celebrates nature and girlhood in his narrative, there is need to define and explain the ecocritical theoretical perspective which informs this paper.

### **Defining ecocriticism**

Ecocriticism is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment (Glotfelty, 1996). Also called the "green theory," ecocriticism, as an academic discipline, is a relatively fresh way of explaining the relationship and the function of nature and indigenous knowledge systems. Even so, Mwangi, (2004) notes that African critics have over the years examined the relationship between literature and other forms of social consciousness such as morality, politics, psychology, pedagogy and philosophy. Hence, I believe that an analysis of *The bundle of firewood* can give "a more conscious insertion of the study of the environment" (Mwangi, 2004) and also help us understand the text better and appreciate the art's interaction with other forms of human practice. This article posits that through Kangira's narrative we witness the interconnectedness between nature and the people's philosophy of life, culture and morality. Hence, as mentioned earlier, it is no accident that Tariro's journey to self-actualisation and growth begins in a forest close to Rufaro village.

In addition to Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," Buell (1995, p.40) says that this study must be "conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" and also sees it as "the study of the inter-relationship between art and the natural world." In other words, there exists a symbiotic relationship between literature and the natural world. Buell's

definition clearly distinguishes ecocriticism from other literary critical approaches. The latter tends to focus on the writer, the text and society; and yet ecocriticism transcends the social sphere to include the entire ecosphere. One might argue at this juncture that the inherent climate change discourses and climate variability is “wrecking havoc and inflicting untold suffering to humanity around the world” (Makwanya, 2010, p.130). This is evidenced by the occurrence of floods, heat waves, drought etc., and their damaging effects on both the environment and human species in different countries in the world. One is thus justified to argue that the new millenium talks on global-warming and climate change the world over are closely related to the crises that most African and non-African countries are currently experiencing. Hence, in his “Ecocriticism and Shakespearean studies,” Estok argues that ecocriticism is more than

simply the study of nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analysing the function – thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise–of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds (Estok, 2001, p.216-17).

Thus, in this article, ecocriticism is viewed as the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. I strongly contend that the crisis in the natural elements is symbolic of the crisis in the human world, for example, in some Shona folktales, the drought in the forest and lack of food, were symbolic of a leadership crisis in the animal world. In fact, folktales and proverbs are derived from the natural environment and acquaint people with their socio-cultural and natural environments. They are a constant reminder that people of ages gone by were aware of how to survive in their environment.

Thus, for the purposes of this discussion, as my working definition, I will adopt Glotfelty’s definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, that is, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, p.xviii). This relationship will be demonstrated by analysing aspects of the natural environment in *The bundle of firewood*. These include the forest, the bundle of firewood, the pangolin and the Impala Game Park.

### **The forest and the bundle of firewood**

An assessment of Kangira’s *The bundle of firewood* shows that the forest and the firewood serve as a motif of articulation for self-definition introduced through Tariro’s story. Hence, Kangira’s writing affords crucial insights into his preoccupation with both the problematic of the girl child identity and the Shona people’s traditional knowledge or belief systems. Kangira presents Tariro interacting with women (grandmother and Sergeant Musara) and men (the bus conductor, the park officers, Mr Dube) of different ages, backgrounds, race and profession and performing different roles while, “being informed by a variety of ideas and life styles they have picked up in their lives” (Zhuwarara, 2001, p.236). By making Tariro go to the bush alone without telling her grandmother and also making the decision to take the strange animal home, Kangira has succeeded in laying the foundation for the child voice and agency. He clearly shows that children’s literature studies have long been aware of the necessity to interrogate the essentialised and decontextualised conceptions of the innocent child (Flynn, 2000). In addition, Flynn argues that:

The idea that childhood is a concept largely defined by adults, that it is not universal trans-historically, and that it is an ideo-logically and politically inflected category is old news. Granted it is news we find it necessary to

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repeat to our students who resist the suggestions that childhood is constructed rather than “natural” (Flynn, 1995, p.15).

Hence, Kangira successfully demonstrates that adults should grant space to children for them to develop the potential to express themselves. Chitando (2008, p.16) cements this notion when she notes that although in children’s literature:

it is largely adults who try to capture the world as seen by children, it is necessary to promote children’s creativity...They have clear ideas regarding their aspirations and the kind of society they would want to live in. Children’s literature worldwide needs to democratise and grant space to children’s voices.

Kangira’s text not only captures the child’s world from an adult’s perspective, but also engages in the reclamation of both the child space and the environment space as a place of growth, regeneration and self-actualisation. Through Tariro and the way she relates to ecocritical symbols, this article shows how Kangira grants the girl child space and thus links his narrative with emblems of nature and also ascribes certain powers to these phenomena to restore community cohesion. For instance, Tariro “tied the wood in a bundle, using three long pieces of creeper. She made a circle of soft grass to put on her head, and then placed the bundle of firewood on it” (Kangira, 2003, p.4). I have underlined the ‘emblems of nature’ in Tariro’s simple action to show not only her creativity in the whole process, but also illustrate how Kangira interweaves the environment with human survival skills.

Similarly, Rusinga and Maposa (2010), in their study of the Ndaou people in Zimbabwe, have argued that natural resources have both tangible and intangible utilities that range from serving the physical needs to their significance in the religious lives of the people. Citing Nhira et al. (1998), Rusinga and Maposa, in their study concerning the link between traditional religion and natural resources amongst the Ndaou people in Zimbabwe, have observed that trees and forests play key roles in household production in the rural communities of Zimbabwe. When Tariro discovers the pangolin in the forest close to her village and carries it inside the bundle of firewood, Kangira iterates the symbiotic idea that people and the environment are never separate. Significantly, it is this sacred creature that later accords Tariro a meaningful and purpose driven existence.

The bundle of firewood and the pangolin represent freedom and change in Tariro’s life and a redefinition of her identity within the traditional setup. Kangira thus, interrogates the child identity, debunking the belief that it has set boundaries that are total and permanent. Despite societal pressure, Tariro challenges cultural practices and traditional knowledge systems that threaten both the child and non-human animals. By using the bundle of firewood, Tariro discovers her identity, her ability to speak for herself, and realises both personal growth and fulfilment. I believe, this is a book about growth through trials in general. Tariro runs away from her grandmother and Liffi so as to save the pangolin; she is thrown off the bus at dawn, in the forest because she does not have enough money. However, Kangira argues that her problems are approachable and not insurmountable. He thus decentralises patriarchal discourses that accord children the silent identity, so that they are unheard and invisible. I believe *The bundle of firewood* is thematically endearing and thought-provoking, giving quite old issues a fresh outlook.

### **The “sacred” pangolin**

An analysis of Kangira’s narrative honours the connectedness and spiritual integrity of the environment consistent with African traditional belief structures. However, there

are also conflicting views concerning the pangolin. Kangira shows a paradox that clearly illustrates both the connectedness and disconnectedness of the environment with African belief systems. This paradox is illustrated through the grandmother, Liffi and Tariro's views concerning the pangolin. On seeing the young pangolin, Grandmother says, "In our culture, anyone who comes across this animal is lucky... They are a delicacy. Our chiefs love to eat them. No one has the right to eat a pangolin except the chiefs. We should give it to the chief as a special present" (Kangira, 2003, p.10). To Tariro's question why chiefs are the only people with a right to this animal, Grandmother simply responds, "it's our culture." Thus, because of its sacred status, it was taboo for an ordinary person to kill a pangolin. What must be emphasised is that "most of the taboos were designed in a way that people fear even to make negative comments or ridicule anything they see in the forests or mountains; such a view symbolically means that the [Shona people] possess a critical concern for conservation of natural resources" (Rusinga and Maposa, 2010, p.205).

Contrary, the grandmother believes the pangolin can be killed by anyone. According to her traditional knowledge, the pangolin's skin can make medicine that can boost Liffi's business. She says, "it will work. The skin of the pangolin is going to be the strongest ingredient in this medicine, Liffi, son of Songo. I'll burn it and mix it with herbs..." (Kangira, 2003, p.13 ). Significantly, grandmother's plan is discussed at night in the bush with the feared and cruel businessman. Working in tandem, their conjoined presence indicates that there is a conflict between New World beliefs and Old World practices when it comes to insuring wealth by members of the community. For instance, for Tariro, the strange creature is a "special creature" (Kangira, 2003, p.8) that had to be preserved and protected, but for grandmother and the businessman, Liffi, the skin of the pangolin was to be turned into "the strongest ingredient in [the] medicine" (Kangira, 2003, p.13). To both adults the pangolin is only significant as a means of boosting Liffi's business. The value of the precious pangolin is mislaid. By revealing these contrasting ideas, Kangira debunks both childhood innocence and insubordination. Tariro clearly shows that "People have a selfless conviction to conserve and safeguard the environment because they acknowledge that the community is the custodian of natural resources while the individual belongs to the community" (Rusinga and Maposa, 2010, p 205).

Thus, Tariro's love for the pangolin and her care for the animals at the game park skilfully expose the interconnection between the environment and the human world. The threatened pangolin species is symbolic of the threatened traditional religious and knowledge systems. Thus, Kangira qualifies as an ecocritical writer, subscribing to the notion that the human world is at peace if the natural world is also at peace. When the pangolin is saved and safely kept at the game park, Tariro forgives her grandmother and they live in harmony. This symbiotic relationship between the natural and the human worlds is a clear indicator that ecocriticism takes as its subject, the interconnections between nature and the human world.

From the above discussion, it does appear that grandmother is aware of the taboos designed to enforce positive societal attitudes towards the environment. Hence, I would argue that her plan to sell the pangolin must be understood in a wider context; it is for purely economic reasons. She has neither education nor viable means of livelihood. The basic blame lies squarely on the oppressive economic conditions and socio-political environments that they live under and which must be destroyed. Tariro's "parents had died of AIDS when she was in grade three and there was no one to pay her fees, so she dropped out of school" (Kangira, 2003, p.26). Her grandmother was very poor and her plan, though wrong, is seen in this light, that she needed money to look after herself and her grandchild.

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However, through Tariro's intelligence and love for the environment, the text demonstrates that Kangira places human beings and nature on the same plain and his story clearly shows interrelatedness between traditional religious beliefs and the natural environment. Underlining this interconnection, is Kangira's conclusion of the story:

One afternoon, a few years later, Tariro was in her laboratory at Impala Game Park with her assistant. A park officer came in. He was carrying a small sack. 'I've got a very special creature here,... I think it's been injured by a poacher's trap.' He opened the sack, and took out a small, curled-up creature, a little bit bigger than a tennis ball. Tariro laughed. In her mind, she remembered the afternoon when she went into the bush to find firewood, and first saw a pangolin (Kangira, 2003, pp. 35-36).

The ending clearly illustrates a cyclic co-existence between human beings and the environment. It also cements the notion that human beings have the duty to ensure that the environment remains hospitable for supporting future human and animal life and guaranteeing the survival for both (Delveaux, 2001). Hence, Kangira adopts an ecocentric stance which emphasises that "the environment deserves direct moral consideration, has an intrinsic value, and qualifies for moral selfhood" (Delveaux, 2001, p.9).

#### **The Impala Game Park: a web of human relationships**

The Impala Game Park serves as an extension of Kangira's ecocentric world view; a view that holds that the animal world and the human world are interconnected. I would argue that the Game Park is symbolic of an all encompassing world that accommodates children, women, men, animals and plants. For instance:

Tariro helped the officers with their work. Sometimes, they had to look after sick and injured animals. Tariro... found a lot about the animals (Kangira, 2003, p.31).

Clearly, Kangira's conception of the environment is rooted in a type of love that transcends the inter-human level to include the physical environment as well. Hence, it extends to the whole web of human relationships (Delveaux, 2001).

In addition, the Impala Game Park is symbolic of the journey motif introduced through Tariro's story. Umeh (1987), citing Deborah E. McDowell, notes that the journey motif is prevalent in feministic novels. Chukwuma (2003) further argues that the journey motif, "on the physical side, involves a distancing, a far removed to a new place which makes its own demands and sets its own standards." In *The bundle of firewood*, Tariro is physically moved from Rufaro village to the Impala Game Park. However, "the journey is also appreciated on the symbolic level where it involves a metamorphosis in orientation and goals on the part of the traveler. In moving from the interior to the exterior or the limelight, the heroine sheds her personality. [Tariro] moves from Idealism to Realism (from [child] innocence to experience)" (Chukwuma, 2003, p.84). By moving Tariro from one form of physical environment (the forest) to another (the game park), Kangira demonstrates the inextricability of the human world and nature. Worried about ecological damages and the deterioration of the environment, he examines through the symbolic pangolin and the game park, the moral basis of environmental responsibility (Delveaux, 2001).

Significantly, through her love for the animals Tariro demonstrates that our responsibility toward the environment also hinges on the interests of these animals and hence, the



concern for the environment solely derives from human interests (Delveaux, 2001). We are told that she liked to visit the game park headquarters to see the pangolin and help the officers to look after sick and injured animals (Kangira, 2003). It is during one of these visits that she has an encounter with Mr Dube, the National Director of the Wildlife Society who offers her an opportunity to go back to school. She studies Veterinary Science and becomes a successful veterinary surgeon. Her success is a result of her moral consideration of the pangolin and other animals in the game park. She realises the “intrinsic value” (Delveaux, 2001) of not only the pangolin, but also of the natural environment as a whole. One sees a close similarity in the ecocritical analysis of *The bundle of firewood* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. In his analysis, Delveaux concludes that Walker’s “understanding of environment is not limited to nature, but extends to the whole web of human relationships. For Walker, ecosystems do not just refer to the relationship of plants and animals in their habitat, but include human beings together with their environment” (Delveaux, 2001, p.6). This whole web of human relationships is symbolised by the Impala Game Park in Kangira’s *The bundle of firewood*, an environment that allows human beings - men, women and children - to communicate with the different animal species. I argue that it is to a certain extent, symbolic of an “all-embracing concept of love” that is crowned by Tariro’s forgiveness of grandmother.

In addition, it is at the game park that Tariro’s future is completely transformed through education, “after High School, Tariro studied Veterinary Science, and became a successful veterinary surgeon” (Kangira, 2003, p. 34). Armed with this educational tool, she becomes self-sufficient, independent and financially stable. Chukwuma, (2006, p. 10) notes that “education is a mighty step forward for women in the various nations of Africa today and the reality on the ground is that girls are encouraged to read by their parents and have various governments’ and agency’s sponsorship.” The Impala Game Park accords Tariro an opportunity to see another side to life and to question the percepts of her upbringing. She is allowed a first taste of freedom as the game park is symbolic of the child’s spiritual growth in a male dominated environment. Thus, Kangira demystifies traditional perceptions of children as submissive and silenced. His narrative decentres culture and identity; it collapses the centre in a bid to redefine girlhood in the African cosmology. The whole objective is to give children a voice and locus in their own affairs and matters concerning society in general. This shows that African cultures and child identities are not homogenous, static or finished products, but rather are varied, hybrids, flexible and always in the making (Hall in duGay 2000). *The bundle of firewood* calls for the transformation of culture and traditions so that they coagulate well with contemporary realities. The text detotalises and removes closures that are put on culture and childhood identity.

Finally, in his pairing of Tariro, Sergeant Winfreda Musara and Mr Dube, Kangira suggests that an alternate way of constructing power and authority in women’s and children’s space is through maintaining harmonious relationships between men, women and children and creating new avenues for understanding the special needs and concerns of children. Reconnections with nature allow the silenced subjects to shift identity through space and time in the physical world to the mental world or ideational space and ultimately to the pneumatic or spiritual world. Discussing these “mutually permeable” and interpenetrable ontological spaces, Nzegwu(1972) asserts that these spheres constantly shift and change and permit a person to access these spirit spaces in the same way as one does objects in the physical world (Nzegwu 1972). In this article, I have presented the ways in which men, women and children have interacted spiritually as healers, guides, and nature workers through the maintenance of ecological ethics, intrinsic to African spiritual traditions.

Within the broader framework of African worldviews embedded within the physical landscapes they have reclaimed identity through their fundamental relationship to nature. Thus, understanding that the forest and animals are not hostile, rather they symbolise the sacred cosmos of beliefs and their ritual participation serve to consolidate identity and preserve established traditions.

### Conclusion

Predicated on Kangira's *The bundle of firewood*, this article set out to interrogate the problematic of culture and girl hood identity, using the theoretical perspective of ecocriticism as a point of entry. The article argued that Kangira introduces nature as a trope against which children such as Tariro are destined to grow and celebrate self-realisation. The text uses the environment as a narratology to deconstruct the rigid cultural divisions that typify girlhood stereotypes; seeing these not as monolithic, but as permeable and interchangeable. Thus, celebrating the environment is a way of shifting the centre; of giving agency to silent issues and silenced subjects. For Tariro, it becomes a powerful metaphor in terms of the self's constant quest for definition in a society whose social sexual matrix it (the self) transgresses. The article thus argues that ecocriticism plays a significant role in creating and steering ideologies around a renegotiation of the girlhood identity and relationships. It is not surprising that Estok argues that "African texts, ranging from Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart* to Zakes Mda's *Heart of redness*, have attempted to valorise the "forest" as a possible site of development which didn't hear of civilisation for the first time from the urbanised West" (Estok, 2005, p.230). I conclude that Kangira's *The bundle of firewood* falls in this category.

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