

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

God, Human and Nonhuman Nature: An Eco-spiritual Imagination in an Ethiopian Novel, *Zigora*

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Abstract

This study aimed at analyzing how Zigora presents the relationship between human and nonhuman nature from ecological and spiritual perspective. Examining how the novel depicted these relationships, the study wishes to highlight environmental issues from religious perspective in Ethiopia context. To this end, the study employs textual analysis method and Lincoln's (2000) principles of eco-spiritual consciousness. The finding revealed that there is a harmonious relationship between human and nonhuman nature in Ethiopian context where the nonhuman nature is considered as a sacred entity and as an abode of spirits. Thus, it should be respected and cared for. The study also showed that a spiritual viewing of the nonhuman nature is an alternative philosophy to the anthropocentrism. In the end, the study concluded that an eco-spiritual imagination of nonhuman nature in literature can be an alternative solution to the present ecological crisis.

Keywords: God, Human, Nonhuman Nature, Eco-spiritual Imagination, *Zigora*

Introduction

our planet groans under the burden of pandemics, a rapidly changing climate, widespread deforestation, and a multitude of environmentally destructive practices demonstrably linked to human activity (Legg, 2021). As the earth manifests ever-more concerning signs of ecological imbalance, a chorus of voices from writers, scholars, and environmentalists is rising in response, offering vital solutions and urging action (Merchant, 2005). Ethiopia is no different when it comes to facing environmental challenges as climate change, land degradation and deforestation. Literary pieces are among the voices that can serve as platforms for comprehending these issues by offering great insights into cultural attitudes towards the environment. Moreover, it would, perhaps, serve as a possible opportunity for creating awareness towards positive relationships between human and nonhuman

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nature.

In literary studies, the concepts of nature, wilderness, environment, ecological wisdom, and physical settings have played an important role in rendering literature. It, also, is a remarkable site for environmental discourse and as an avenue for examining the negotiation between the human and non-human domains. Literature can itself be described as the symbolic medium of a particularly powerful form of cultural ecology (Zapf, 2016:27). Ecocriticism as a literary study represents “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”, which takes “an earth centered approach to literary studies” (Fromm and Glotfelty 1996: xviii). Ecocriticism’s subject is, thus, the interconnection between nature and culture.

Tait (2010) considers ecocriticism as criticism on “casually destructive and disregarding attitude towards the environment” (p.29) that has legitimized humans’ deep-rooted anthropomorphic view of the environment. The experience of modernity encouraged a significant re-evaluation of the meaning of nature in modern society and in literature which an eco-spiritual analysis can explore and examine. Literature is a creative stimulus which generated new modes of artistic expression which are needed to describe modern experience; nevertheless, this need for literary medium to address the contemporary ecological situation is balanced with apprehension about the devaluation of other aspects of human experience such as spirituality, localism and tradition. Spretnak (1997) identifies modernity as the deep structure behind ‘corporate capitalism [...], profit driven technology [...] industrialism, materialism and consumerism’ which separates humans from ‘respect for spiritual concerns’, and this leads to ‘the repression of the real’ and the development of a worldview built on abstract notions of economic progress (p.5). An eco-spiritual imagination emphasizes on ecological values having collective ethical responsibility of mankind to restore them.

Currently, Ethiopians, like the rest of humanity face mounting environmental crisis. The environmental crisis in Ethiopia, and by extension, the world, has urged the need for environmentally based religion and spirituality. Eco-spirituality is necessary in this process as it frees human from consumeristic and materialistic approaches to nature. It also imposes a sense of understanding about the interrelatedness of cosmic realities and sacredness of nature. This ultimately encourages the protection of the environment as it creates an understanding of the earth as a total community of living beings. As such, humans have to immerse themselves in nature, neither dominating nor objectifying it. This immersion leads one to finding one’s connection with nature, towards respecting and loving nature. The current search for eco-spirituality for ecological conservation presents an alternative solution to the present day’s ecological crisis facing Ethiopia that was influenced by western materialistic, consumerist and capitalistic and secularized worldviews.

This attempt to spiritualize ecological concern (eco-spiritual imagination) has its context for the Ethiopian reaction to Western modern and Judeo-Christian tradition. The position this study develops is as an alternative to each of these positions. Eco-spirituality is in the steadfast opposition to the Western anthropocentrism that sees humans as of ultimate significance, and thinks humans have meaning apart from its context as one expression of the earth's nonhuman creations. Eco-spirituality is to be found in an altered understanding of and human's spiritual relationship to the nonhuman. This view, in the sense, accepts that the nonhuman nature is sacred and precious. The procedure critically evaluate Western modernism and traditional Judeo-Christian attitudes towards the nonhuman and human's place on it and then to develop and defend eco-spirituality as a response (Hettinger, 1995, p.84).

A novel like *Zigora* (ዝጎራ) emerges to call critics back to an old school way of seeing the world. *Zigora* is an Amharic novel written by a prolific writer Alemayehu Wassie. *Zigora* refers to a mountain in the context of the novel. Alemayehu is a well-established writer with over six works so far; among which four of them are serial novels with the main character navigates through some mystical quest, and their setting greatly involves ecological issues. Alemayehu's novels suggest to pull things back together again is the reclamation of the spiritual imagination of nature. This spirituality implicates that the humans are intimately connected to the nonhuman world in such a way that they reveal one another. The novel is chosen to focus on both ecological and spiritual aspects in order to interwoven the human, nonhuman and spiritual world. Ethiopian monastic community experiences of the surrounding physical world in a particularly "African" stance, filling the space around them with spirits. They relate to the natural world in a holistic manner, favoring respect and veneration of nature. Since *Zigora*'s characters are the reflections of such experience, this study calls for an eco-spiritual imagination. By applying ecocriticism theory, in general, and Eco-spiritual approach, in particular, this study is intended to gain a fuller understanding of how the spiritual imagination of nature can challenge the anthropocentric view of nonhuman nature, and how it can see nonhuman nature as a sacred being and an abode of spirits in *Zigora*.

Review of Related Literature

Few literary researchers have been conducted so far by taking ecocriticism theory as a means of exploring insights of the nonhuman nature in Ethiopian context. The first locally conducted research is Ashenafi Belay's dissertation. Ashenafi (2015) tried to examine the representation of human-nature relationships in selected Anglophone novels set in Africa at various periods of times.

The present study, unlike Ashenafi's, is preoccupied on different thematic issues. It, for instance, tries to examine the representation of not only human and nonhuman nature relationship but also spiritual relationship (an eco-spiritual imagination) on an Ethiopia novel, *Zigora*. The setting of the novel *Zigora* has a different historical legacy in relation to

colonialism from which Ashenafi chose. Ashenafi tries to examine the representation of human and nonhuman relations as reflected in African colonial and post-colonial novels. Ashenafi has studied his research on Anglophone African colonial novels by different authors whereas this study focuses on Amharic novels written by a single author in Ethiopian context.

In addition to Ashenafi, the other researcher who conducted in Addis Ababa University is Dagnachew (2020) is another researcher who conducted a study on ecocritical reading of anglophone African novels. Similarly, Dagnachew (2020) differs from the current study in its approach and setting of the novels. Dagnachew's research revealed post-colonial Anglophone African novels are battlefields of pressing ecological violence and restive resistance against the ecological destructions due to the political intrusions of the colonial manifestations. Dagnachew suggested further study on other genres, regions, and/or authors from different ecological regions of the continent. He even recommended that one can conduct a study on all works of a single author or authoress (2020, p. 161). Similar studies on Ethiopian oral and written texts can be reconsidered even though Ethiopia has no historical connection with colonialism. Investigations and explorations of Ethiopian ecological/environmental concerns and issues as reflected in both literary and nonliterary works can be considered as further area of study employing ecological oriented approaches. Therefore, this study is also conducted to fill the gaps and suggestions that Dagnachew forwarded.

Hailu Abebe (2020) conducted his M.A thesis on Magical Realism in Alemayehu Wassie's Trilogy namely *Emegua*, *Zigora* and *Merbebit*. Hailu conducted literary studies on the three of the selected novels for the present study so far by taking Magical Realism literary theory as a means of exploring insights of the novels. This study is different from him in theoretical framework. This study approaches the novel *Zigora* using ecocriticism while Hailu's is Magical Realism. Hailu also has suggested Alemayehu Wassie's novels should be analyzed in other literary aspects. Acknowledging the aforementioned studies, this study set to fill the gaps that they have not touched so far.

Theoretical Framework

A particularly powerful combination of eco-critical nodes is the intersection of spirituality and nature which this study is calling the eco-spiritual imaginary. Spencer (2022) noted that eco-spiritualism is a subheading of ecocriticism (p.9). Since the eco-spiritual imaginary identifies the nature/culture divide as the driving force behind all ecological devastation, this study seeks for a spiritual understanding of human interconnection with the greater-than human world. This kind of approach is so important because it is critical to analyze texts that connect the nonhuman to the divine, and ultimately to the humans.

Buell's working hypothesis is based on the premise that our modern environmental crisis necessitates more than a simple redefinition of our relation to nature. Buell (1995) noted that the current ecological problems should also make us aware that this "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding

better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it" (p.2). Eco-spirituality is born out of the need to establish a connection between spirituality and ecology. This begins with the growing appreciation of the relationship between spirituality and the environment, and the growing understanding of the universe as the representation of the presence of a great spirit. Historically, eco-spirituality is also a reaction to the Western emphasis on the material, consumerism, technological and economic which lacked the spiritual depth required for a humane approach to the problem of ecological crisis (Delaney, 2009, p.12). It is as well the "mechanistic and capitalistic world view" (Schalkwyk, 2011, p.1). It is believed to be responsible for many intensive forms of environmental exploitation and degradation, leading to the global ecological and environmental crises as we have them today. Thus, Aurelie (2017) defines eco-spirituality as:

A wide range of discourses, whose common interest is in showing that the current ecological crisis is an essentially spiritual crisis of values, so that answers to it should not be merely technological or material but should be sought on a spiritual level, through the foundation of an 'inner ecology' and an enlightened reflection about the meaning of life, the Other, the sacred (p. 7).

Eco-spirituality does not in any way speak of a particular spirituality, but can be developed alongside a particular spirituality, such as the Christian eco-spirituality, Buddhist eco-spirituality, African eco-spirituality, etc., which provides the principles that shape its peculiarity. However, spirituality does not necessarily involve any particular religion. To understand this better there is a need to make a distinction between spirituality and the religious. While the religious has got to do with a particular religion, the spiritual goes beyond the bounds of particular religions, such that one can be spiritual and yet not believe in God. It is in this regard that Aurelie (2017) asserts that:

It is possible to pursue spirituality inside organized religion or out of any religious context, and even without having any faith in God. As it is founded on a personal inner experience, it is difficult to define it univocally, but it is generally associated with a quest for interiority, for self-knowledge, transcendence, wisdom, the sacred (p. 2).

However, this study views nonhuman nature from the perspective of Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church. Eco-spirituality, somewhat, parallels the concept of 'Deep Ecology' developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1972 (a part of 'Ecocriticism') which considers a "spiritual tendency" in the context of becoming 'bio/eco-centric' rather than 'anthropocentric' and "an emotional relation with and response to nature and not merely a rational-intellectual one" (Nayar, 2010, p. 246). Barnhill and Gottlieb (2001) define deep ecology as "the ethical and religious attitude of valuing nature for its own sake and seeing it as divine or spiritually vital" (p.1). Deep ecology has helped create a shared reverence for the ecological interconnection between all living beings. The deep-ecological drive to hold up the greater-than-human world as an object of reverence and worship risks falling back into that human/nature binary even if it attempts to equalize the two and to show their interdependence.

Ecological literary criticism has the purpose of re-discovering the meaning of nature and re-establishing a close relationship between the human and the nonhuman nature. One of the main concerns is how to overcome anthropocentrism, which sees the world from the perspective of human interests and resources. Deep ecology also questions anthropocentrism (Sitter, 2008, p.32). Ecological literary criticism tries to formulate the meaning of nature by examining the materiality of nature and the interdependence of mankind and nature – either being able to overcome anthropocentrism or within its spiritual context - an eco-spiritual perspective professes the independent and intrinsic value of nature as based in deep ecology.

In the spiritual realization of nonhuman nature, the anthropocentric attitude of domination of human beings as superior force on nature gets gradually diminished, and develops an eco-harmonic aura between man and nature. Ecology and spirituality are fundamentally connected, because deep ecological awareness, ultimately, is spiritual awareness (Capra, 2002). A rising number of ecocritics believe that all creation is interconnected and that humans have a moral obligation to protect the environment. Literary works, according to ecocritics, have tremendously broad intellectual, ethical, political, and even spiritual agendas (Bressler, 2011).

Eco-spirituality emerges from the realization that there is a strong spiritual connection between human beings and the environment, and that the health and wholeness of humanity and of the environment are inextricably intertwined (Lincoln, 2000, pp. 227-244). The contemporary ecological crisis along with the chaos created by the culture of consumerism, materialism and unbridled capitalism is said to be the root cause for the rise of eco-spirituality. While civilizations of the Eastern world and pre-colonial civilizations across the globe have been based on eco-spiritual foundations since times immemorial, the 21st century has witnessed what is called the ‘Great Turning’ – a shift of Europe’s philosophical foundations away from control, dichotomy and oppression towards holism, diversity, harmony and reciprocity (Macy, 1998, pp.4-15).

Cosmological ideas have determined how people relate to and respect the environment. “They have constituted a store of indigenous knowledge including sanctions related to moral and religious codes, producing a frame of reference guiding society and individuals in their relations to each other and the world around them” (Persoon, 2015, p. 132) and “Rapid industrialization, secularization and globalization have undermined and marginalized them”. With the passage of time nature which had been considered sacred and alive in the remote past is no longer viewed as such (ibid.). When environmental considerations are pushed to the background; human beings stop being friendly towards the environment. Socio-cultural processes such as beliefs, values and attitudes are often ignored in the ecological/climate change discourse (ibid.). Researchers note that the positive or negative feedback from the human system directly determines the success or failure of projects: “The ecologist’s worldview, when combined with a profound respect for human society and human institutions, can be used to find ways to achieve harmony between humans and the environment, and provides examples to inspire others” (Zheng

and Wang, 2014, p.35). Cosmological ideas and indigenous philosophies could constitute the most natural way of undergirding an ecological discourse which ordinary Ethiopians could “make their own” and genuinely “own” (Persoon, 2015, p.133).

In his classic “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” White identifies “orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature” as a root cause of environmental problems. He claims that “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” and that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (1967, pp.1205-6). This study argues against that not all Christians-or all interpretations of Christians-accept the arrogant, chauvinistic attitude that gives humans dominion over nature. Traditional religious texts and cultural practices constitute an untapped and disregarded resource for ecological thinking (Persoon, 2015, p.135). This study proposes there is an alternative Christian attitude in Ethiopian context towards nonhuman nature that is properly humble about the human role in the scheme of things.

Ethiopians stretch the tenets of their Christianity to include the experience of the surrounding physical world in a particularly “African” manner, filling the space around them with spirits and relating to the environment and country in terms of their concepts of sin and God’s covenant of mercy. Orthodox Christians relate to the natural world in a holistic manner, favoring respect and veneration of nature. Ethiopia preserved a unique, unadulterated and pure African culture, accepting the *hige libuna* – intuitive law or fear of God in the heart (Acts 28:2b) (Dejaney, 1998, p. 21). Immersion in nature was represented by the strong troglodyte tradition in Ethiopia. The boundaries of Ethiopian monasteries were marked by natural features having ritual significance, such as large rocks, piles of stones or trees. Monastic phenomenology articulates an essential search for unity motivating the religious conscience, reminiscent of the concept of non-duality in Advaita Vedanta (Ganguly, 1995, p. 2). “Euro-linear values seek to predict and control, in contrast; Afro-circular views seek to interpret and understand” (Asante, 1987, p. 18).

In the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church matter is not only sanctified, but is used as a means for man’s salvation. The monk’s path of asceticism and repentance helps contemporary man to transfigure the creation within and around him with an understanding of the Eucharistic use of the world, inspired by the Divine Liturgy and the life of the saints and to reconciliation of man with the environment (Theoxeni, 1998, p.71). This is the basis of an ecological way of living. The voluntary poverty of the monks in Mahbere Selassie (Persoon, 1997), and their willingness to practice literally a rule forbidding private property, are a sign of embracing asceticism, and calling the wider population to repentance. This could be described as the need for an eco-asceticism, voluntary self-denial, freeing oneself from the technologies that destroy God’s good earth. In the novel that this study examines, spiritual reverence for the nonhuman derives from indigenous or non-western definitions of the sacred nature. Because of the necessary hybridity of both the spiritual de-colonial of western dualism and the novel as an art form, the novel this study examines seek common ground with Ethiopian religious understandings of shared reverence for the nonhuman world.

Methodology

A descriptive textual analysis has been employed in this study. This method is used as a way to gather evidence from the selected novel. It deals with how characters are portrayed to make sense of the natural world in the narratives. In addition, with their particular observations and experiences by characters and writer's articulations on what is going on the natural ecology has been identified for analysis. In the process, the study focuses on behaviors, interactions, interconnections, feelings of the characters used in the natural ecology to uncover the meanings embedded in the texts selected for this study. Words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs that show nature as sacred being, as abode of spirits and spiritual viewing of nature as a response to anthropocentrism are selected.

Criteria for Text Selection

The main source of the data is Alemayehu Wassie's novel entitled *Zigora*. The novel was written in 2010 Ethiopian Calendar. This novel is selected purposively. *Zigora* is selected for its explicit depiction of the spiritual relationship between human and nonhuman nature detailed in eco-spiritualism. It also follows Lincoln's (2000) five principles of eco-spiritual consciousness: tending, dwelling, reverence, connectedness, and sentience. Therefore, this novel is selected because of its more dominant themes is the reflection of Lincoln's five principles as compared to other novels.

Nature and Type of Data

All the words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs related to God, human and nonhuman nature relationship and the way it is represented in the novels are the research data. For deeper investigation, the major characters and positions accorded to them is taken as significant in extracting data from the novel selected for study. This includes the characters' engagement in depicting nature, how religious positions of the characters/narrators influence the way they define their identity (alterity) from nature and how ideological orientations influence the representations. More specifically, the novel is critically examined from the point of view of the depiction of protagonists' and other characters' interactions with the nonhuman and spiritual world. The words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs related to the God-human-nature relationship in the novel are the data of the study.

Analytical Procedures

The procedure consists of a series step of analysis to be followed. To select appropriate data from the text, first, the novel is read and re-read carefully and thoroughly to get better content understanding. Next, excerpts related to the topic of human-nonhuman nature and spiritual relationships are selected. After that, the selected excerpts are categorized in accordance to the objectives. Then, they are translated into English with communication translation method and reviewed by experts to maintain its original meaning. To this end, a close reading of the chosen novel, *Zigora* is made to identify

excerpts dealing with different forms of ecological themes and the novel's articulations on the depictions of human-nonhuman-spiritual interactions. The themes are identified inductively. Accordingly, three major themes are identified and presented in the finding section below one by one.

Results and Interpretation

Synopsis of *Zigora*

Zigora is a novel about Sisay, an ecologist. He travels extensively to visit and study forests of churches and monasteries of Ethiopian Orthodox with other scholars from different countries. In their quest, they face several challenges of mystic nature while trying to study the jungles. At one instance, they encounter with a moving trees which they suspect caused by presence of uranium or metal pile in the area. Sisay's journey to his home city (Bahair Dar) from one of the monastery is marked by a secret parchment scroll with invisible message. The monks in the monastery instructed him to bring three herbs (whose names written in the parchment) without a delay as the delay would bring him on step closer to his death.

Sisay goes to a business trip to Abu Dhabi's museum, where he discovers that the parchment message can be read with a flashlight or traditional with lemon juice drops. As a result he discovers the names of the three herbs. He searches for the names of the herbs in the internet. After his arduous efforts, he could find the herbs. Sisay returns to the monastery with the herbs and hands the herbs over to the monk as instructed. The next day, he goes to the mysterious place where Melkamu (his research assistant) blacked out, and where Dr. Magdalene (a researcher) saw a moving tree and the instruments failed to operate. Sisay is surprised to see monks gather from different monasteries all dressed in white robes. Dr. Kibre Bael, who was his best friend before he became a hermit, is among them. Sisay asked Dr. Kibre what is going on. The monks blessed Sisay for what he did and touch him with their sticks on the shoulder. He instantly blackout and when regain consciousness sees the tree Dr. Magdelene saw moving. He sees an instruction on the scroll that says "Do not reveal its name, because this mountain is nothing but is a place of prayer and silence."

Spirituality as a Challenge to Anthropocentrism

When Sisay read a book from the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church library, he learnt about the different spiritual developments and ranks of saints. One of the levels is love. As the saints reach this level, they love every creature that God creates equally. According to Abbasi (2015, p.205), "most of the Romantic poets like Wordsworth believed that human strong feelings of love, passion alongside other feelings will be intensified while they experience the solitude of nature." This kind of love is pure and unfathomable. If we take the extract below the protagonist (Sisay) reads what love should look like □ an impartial and genuine according to Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church principle.

**“ፍቅር፡ እግዚአብሔር ከመፍጠር ያልናቀውን ፍጥረት ሁሉንም አስተካክሎ መውደድ ማለት ነው”
(አለማየሁ፣ ገጽ፣ 257)**

“Love means cherishing a similar and an even affection to every creature that God has ever created without being disdainful.” (Alemayehu, 2010 EC., p.57)

The extract discloses that one could reestablish the broken relationship through the power of love. Whereas, the creation is characterized by variety, sometimes, carrying with divisions of superiority and inferiority in the Western tradition. The intrinsic value of each part of creation does not spring from that differentiation, but from the power of love. The novel seems to promote what could arguably be described as eco-spirituality. This is to mean that it concerns itself with the upholding of nature as being more than simply a material resource for humans to exploit, acknowledging a more abstract, even divine essence within the environment.

The extract provides a version where nature/culture boundary is blurred; displaying the traditional romantic sense that civilization is corrupting nature through anthropocentric greed while monastic fathers view nature is inspiring and rejuvenating. *Zigora's* characters distinguish an environmentalism that acknowledges the connection between nature and culture from an environmentalism that privileges both nature and culture indifferently. This kind of love leaves the readers to ponder over its nature. The phrase “loving every creature equally” suggests a deep respect for all forms of life, regardless of their utility to humans. This aligns with eco-spiritual principles that advocate for the intrinsic value of all species, not just those deemed useful or significant to human society. The idea that “creatures that God have created without being disdainful” implies that the divine presence is immanent and inclusive, rather than being distant or judgmental. This notion resonates with ecological spirituality, which often sees the divine as present in all aspects of nature. It encourages a sense of humility and reverence for the natural world, recognizing that humanity is but one thread in the tapestry of life.

Moreover, traditional anthropocentric worldviews often position humans as masters over nature, justifying exploitation and domination. The extract directly counters this by promoting an ethic of love and care for all creatures. From an ecocritical standpoint, in general, and eco-spirituality, in particular, such a shift away from anthropocentrism is crucial for addressing environmental crises. By valuing all creatures equally, we can foster sustainable practices that respect the rights and needs of non-human entities.

When Sisay visited Mahbere Selassie Monastery in West Gondar zone, he was astonished by the forest surrounding the monastery, and how the monastic fathers managed to take care of it so far. He, then, asked one of the monastic fathers, *Aba Kidane Mariam* “Do you get any benefits from this forest?” He replied:

“ደኑን የምንጠብቀው የሀገር ሀብት፣ የአባቶቻችን ቅርስ ስለሆነ ነው እንጂ እስከ ዛሬ ድረስ በገቢ.

ምንጭነት አስበነው አናውቅም” አሉ አባ። (አለማየሁ፡ ፲፰፤ 94)

“We protect the forest because it is our national treasure and our ancestral heritage; we have never thought of it as a source of income until today” said the monastic father. (Alemayehu, 2010 EC., p.94)

The monk’s response phrase accentuates a deep cultural connection to the forest than valuing it as a resource that serve their immediate material need. This suggests that the community views the forest not merely as a resource but as a sacred entity passed down through generations. From an eco-spiritual standpoint, this goes with the idea of valuing nature intrinsically—recognizing its worth beyond utility or economic gain. It emphasizes the importance of preserving ecosystems for their historical, spiritual, and ecological significance. The monastic fathers do not consider nature for economic value as presented in the novel; they conserve nature (the forest) because it is their nation’s wealth and their forefathers’ inheritance. The attributions of the forest as a “national resource and ancestral heritage’ in the quotation give weight to the way nature is perceived. The responsibility of guarding it is motivated by an act that is larger than them □ something supernatural. This shows the selfless act of the ascetic fathers for tradition they inherited from others who came before them. Those who travel into the forest frequently find themselves in an area entirely separate from civilization. The extract highlights the connection between the hermits in the forest and the natural world; they combine nature and culture flawlessly, carving an existence that has no impact on the natural world. They are careful with natural resources, putting them in sharp contrast to anthropocentric tradition and their life stands as a monument to their ability to blend in seamlessly.

The environmental crisis will not be solved simply by romantic expressions of regret or aesthetic formulations of a creative imagination. The extract below reveals to us the way out of ecological impasse by proposing the solution of self-denial, the denial of selfishness or self-centeredness. It is, therefore, the spirit of asceticism that in this analysis leads to the spirit of gratitude and love, to a rediscovery of the sense of wonder and beauty. In this context, the voluntary poverty of the monks in Mahbere Selassie (Persoon, 1997), and their willingness to practice literally a rule forbidding private property, are a sign of embracing asceticism. Humans are to learn to relinquish their desire to possess and control. They must stop wounding the natural resources of this earth and learn to live simply, no longer competing against one another and against nature for their survival. What is called for is a softening up in their relations toward each other and toward nature. They must learn to make their communities more sensitive and to render their behavior toward nature more respectful; this means acquiring a merciful attitude, and a compassionate heart. Such a heart cannot bear to deplete – still less to destroy – the earth that they inhabit and share.

“በገዳሙ ህግ በቀን አንድ ጊዜ የሚበላው ሰውነትን ከጥጋብ ተከላክሎ ለፈጣሪ ለማስገዛት እንጅ ሰውን ለማስራብ ተብሎ አልተደረገም” ይላሉ የገዳሙ አባቶች፡፡ (አለማየሁ፤ ፲፰፤ 113)

“The reason, according to the rule of the monastery, why only one meal is

allowed a day is to restrain the body from being over satiated, and make oneself an obedient to the Creator, not to get fellow human starve” say the fathers in the monastroy. (Alemayehu, 2010 EC., p.113)

As the extract above, it is mentioned that as a rule in the monastery, a person is allowed to have only one meal in 24 hours. This is a typical example of asceticism. The spiritual dimension of the world is so intimately and so profoundly linked with the ascetic dimension. Asceticism is the conscious awareness and deeper recognition that humanity is dependent not only on God, but also on the world, and indeed on the food chain, just like every other creature. Asceticism requires from humans a voluntary restraint, in order for them to live in harmony with their environment. Asceticism offers practical examples of conservation. By reducing consumption or self-control – there come to ensure that sufficient resources are also left for others in the world to share and enjoy.

The statement emphasizes being “obedient to the Creator” rather than succumbing to individual desires or greed. This reflects an understanding of humans as stewards of creation, entrusted with caring for the Earth rather than exploiting it. An eco-spiritual interpretation sees this as a call to recognize the sacredness of all life forms and ecosystems. It, further, promotes respect and reciprocity in human interactions with nature. Such reverence challenges anthropocentrism—the belief that humans are superior to other species—and instead advocates valuing all living beings equally.

Nature as an Abode of Spirits

In this context, when we say spirits, we mean holy spirits like Angels, saints, hermits, and monastic communities in general. The novel emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans and nature rather than their dualistic relation. This novel emphasizes immanence and unity which leads to monism and the harmony between human and nonhuman nature in a spiritual way. In addition to showing the relationships among these beings, the extract below also reveals nature as an abode of spirits. When *Aba* Kidane Mariam blessed Dawit, forestry by profession, for the demarcating of the monastery forest, he said the following statement.

“ሰማ የኔ ልጅ፤ ደኑን እየዞራችሁ በምትከልሉበት ወቅት ሁለት መላእክት ከፊትና ከኋላ ሁነው ይጠብቁችሁ ነበር” አሉት አባ ኪዳነማርያም፡፡ (አለማየሁ፣ ገጽ፣ 104)

“Listen, my son, when you were demarcating the boundary of the forest, two Angels were guarding you from the front and from the behind,” said *Aba* (Father) Kidane Mariam. (Alemayehu, 2010 EC.,p.104)

The forest in this context is more than just a physical space; it represents a sacred entity that is protected by divine forces (the Angels). This reflects an understanding of nature as something holy and worthy of reverence, a common theme in many ecological and spiritual discourses. The presence of Angels guarding the forest indicates a belief in supernatural protection of natural spaces. This idea reinforces the notion that nature

should be respected and preserved not only for practical reasons but also due to its intrinsic value and spiritual significance.

According to the extract, when a human being respects nature in this context (the forest), Angels protect him in response. This shows the strong bond among the divine beings, nature and human. The forest is an abode of Angels where humans with good intent are protected so closely. The narrator in this extract brings spiritual beings into the forest and the reciprocal relationship between nature and human is important for both of them. Bringing spiritual elements into reading (eco-spiritual imagination) of novels can create a harmonious and sustainable future of the world. It also foregrounds the significance of nature.

The hermits in the monasteries of north Ethiopia, in the novel *Zigora*, view the forest with great spiritual reverence; there are sites within the forest ecosystem that are venerated as special abode of ancestral spirits. Most of these sites are normally found on mountains, hills, and around remote places. The author emphasizes this by giving the title of the novel the name of a sacred mountain called *Zigora*. Human beings are strictly prohibited from entering or cutting down trees in such sacred sites embodied in the novel by the forest around the monasteries. Though the communities around the monasteries are all agrarians, and look for a grazing land for their cattle, they would not dare to trespass the land in the monastery keeping. They, rather, have a deep respect and reverence to it as can be inferred from the conversation between the protagonist and the local cowherd below:

“እዚህ ቤተ ክርስቲያን ደን ውስጥ ከብት ታስገባላችሁ እንዴ? አልኳቸው። “አገ! ከብት አይገባም” አሉ። “አጋም፣ ቀጋ ለመልቀምም አትገቡም? አልኳቸው። “ኧረ አይገባም” አለ አንደኛው ልጅ። ለምን? “ደጎች ስላሉብት ነው” አለ። (አለግየሁ፣ ገጽ፣ 232-33)

“Are you grazing cattle in the forest of the church?” inquired I. “No! Cattle are not allowed” they said. “Don’t you go into it to pick some ‘agam, k’ega’ (type of small wild fruits)?” I asked them. “Oh no,” said one of the cowherd. ‘Why?’ “It’s because the holy ones are abiding in it,” he said. (Alemayehu, 2010 EC., pp.232-33)

As can be learnt from the extract, the cowherds do not take their herds into the forest of the church for grazing tempting as it might be for its abundant grass. Even they themselves do not enter into the forest to pick some fruits as they truly believe that the forest is a place where holy ones live in it. It is believed there are hermits in the woods are not visible to most people unless they wish to reveal themselves. The humble and revered statements that the boys utter show a respectful coexistence. Their admittance of the monastery as the abode of the holy ones ensures protection of the place. It, also, tells how much this belief rooted deeply in the societal lives. According to the tradition expressed in the novel, such beliefs anthropomorphized the physical environment as a conscious living entity and a shelter for hermits. More importantly, they helped to deter human encroachments on forests, thus, making sacred groves important sanctuaries for plants, animals, birds, and insects. This deep ecological concept of the interconnectedness of all life forms on

earth is presented in the text as a prerequisite for the restoration of a harmonious co-existence among all ecological citizens of mother earth.

The forest is described as belonging to “the church,” implying that it holds spiritual significance. In many cultures, sacred spaces are protected areas where human interference is restricted due to their association with divine or supernatural entities. The cowherds explicitly state that “cattle are not allowed” and that they do not enter the forest to gather fruits (of “agam, ke’ga”). This suggests that the forest’s sanctity imposes rules that limit human exploitation of its resources. From an ecocritical standpoint, such practices can be seen as early forms of conservation, where religious taboos serve to preserve biodiversity by restricting access to certain areas.

Therefore, the presence of “the holy ones” within the forest indicates a belief system that attributes agency or personhood to non-human elements (e.g., spirits, deities). This animistic worldview fosters a sense of respect and reverence for nature, treating it as something more than just a resource for human use. By acknowledging the forest as a domain inhabited by sacred beings, the community establishes a boundary between what is permissible and what is forbidden. Such boundaries can help maintain ecological balance by preventing overuse of nonhuman nature.

The protagonist has explored the different monasteries and its forests, too. These places also rejuvenate him with its beauty. While watching the forest in the monasteries, he visualizes the grace. This sight is very relaxing as well as inspiring to him. The writer has elaborated several faces of the beauty of the environment through various examples. These facets have given distinct moods to the protagonist. Sometimes he is amused, sometimes surprised, sometimes astonished. While Sisay was searching for soil sample in the forest for his study, he saw something strange. When he wore a special glass for his study and look around, the forest is filled with thick white cloud. In doubt, when he looked around with naked eyes, nothing new is there. Again, when he wore the glass, the cloud disappeared. Surprisingly, Sisay asked *Aba Mezgebe Selassie*:

“አባ ታዲያ የዚህ ደን ምሥጢር ምንድን ነው?” አልኳቸው። “ቦታው የተቀደሰ፣ የእግዚአብሔር ክብር መገለጫ የሆነ የአምልኮ ስፍራ መሆኑን ካመንክ ሌላው ነገር ቢቀርብህ ምን አለ?” አሉ አባ። (አለማየሁ፣ ገጽ.282)

“Father, what is the secret behind this forest?” I asked him. “If you believe that the place is holy, a place of worship where God’s glory is manifested, why don’t you simply ignore the rest?” responded *Aba*. (Alemayehu, 2010 EC., p.282)

The protagonist, Sisay, who initially entered in the church forest, was ignorant about the grandeur of the nature. After spending time with nature, having several mystical encounters with nature, along with monks in the monastery, the protagonist still confused, and also realized something about the mystic truth of forest. All the moods lead him to the conclusion that nature in its distinctive forms express only one idea to be affectionate, humble and noble towards other beings on the earth. The intermeshing

of spiritual elements with human beings and nature may create a difference in viewing nature among readers. Thus, this leads humans to be humble in nonhuman nature and not intervene in an exploitable manner.

Nature as Sacred Being

Sacred means something which cannot be profaned or violated i.e. designed by a divine sanction possessing the highest title to honor, reverence. Nonhuman nature in *Zigora* possesses such qualities. Nonhuman nature in *Zigora* is represented of as amiable and sacred entity. The novel emphasizes on the depiction of harmonious relationship between monastic life and nature. There is a great deal of description showing tuneful relation between people and nature. The narrative presents that social life in the sacred places is deeply intertwined with nature. Nature discourses shape the worldview of the people. The monastic community used to teach the people the values through telling stories which dominantly embeds the image of nature. As a result, stories appear as the site where the conceptualization of nature in the culture is communicated to the society. In *Zigora*, trees are represented as personalities endowed with the capacity to listen and communicate with the humans. Sisay personifies the trees and the two seem to intimately coexist. He shows that trees and humans are related, as members of a single community that the absence of the one lessened the other. He begins his acquaintance with the forest by sheltering under a tree. The connection to a tree cements his relationship to the monastery, helping him maintain his relationship to the forests and certainly enabling him to, in essence, speak for the trees.

“ . . . የሎላ ዛፍ ሥር ነኝ፤ የጸሎት መቁጠሪያ ተንጠልጥሎበታል፡፡ የቅዱሳኑን ምሥጢር የምትከድን፤ ዐፈርና ውኃውን የምትጠብቅ፤ የእንስሳት የእዕዋፋቱ መጠለያ፤ የገዳማት የአድባራቱ ሞገስ፤ ቅዱስ ፍጥረት ሆይ! አንተን ሊቆርጥ ምሳር የሚስል እንዴት የተረገመ ነው? አልኩና ተነሥኜ እንደ ሰው እቅፍ አደረኩት” አለ ሲሳይ (አለማየሁ፣ ገጽ፣ 319-20)

“ . . . I am under a ‘ሎላ’ (lol) tree; a prayer rosary was hanged on it. The one that keeps the secret of the saints, the one protects the earth and the water, the one that shelters the animals and birds; one that is the grace of the monasteries and the churches. Oh holy creature! How accursed is he who sharpens an axe to cut you? Said I, and rose up to my feet and hugged it as I would to another human” said Sisay. (Alemayehu, 2010 EC.; p.319-20)

As the extract shows, beyond the conceptualization as a peaceful being close to human, it is portrayed as sacred being in *Zigora*. It has a valuable place in the religious worldview of the society in Ethiopia as depicted in the novel. The religion of the people does not distance nature, and does not give it a lesser position in the chain of hierarchy upon which the Lynn White man’s religion was founded. Rather, through the ethics of monasticism, nature plays a determined role in tying the people to their God. People respect the creations of God and believe that God could curse them for their evil actions. The protagonist wishes a curse upon whomever tend to cut trees. The dialogue between Sisay and the

tree reveals the people's belief in the power of nature, and the punishment it could inflict on man when moral laws are broken. The violence done here is against human, and the belief system has the philosophy that nature is immune against any forms of violence. Any damage on nature is considered as breaching against the sacred nature. Rosemary hanged on the tree symbolizes devotion, purification and protection believed to ward off evil spirits and negative energy. As a result, observing the sacrament of nature is seen in the culture as giving honor to nature. Sisay views the tree as a holy creature. He feels it as his close personal friend when he embraces it. He feels inexplicable at peace with nature.

In the Bible, the tree of life appears in Genesis. It's a part of the Garden of Eden, along with the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The tree is an integral part of the well-known story in the Christian version of the history of mankind. Adam and Eve are told not to partake in the fruit from this tree, but Eve eats it, and as a result, they are exiled from the Garden of Eden. Beginning from this time, there has been a strong relationship not only man and nature but also nature and religion. The respect the people pay nature is extended to the human through the connection established between them mediated by God. As a result, in addition to respecting nature, people are obliged to respect each other because they are considered as the children of nature. Consequently, the peaceful coexistence with nature through the sacred ways brings success in life and its breaching is followed by some sort of punishment. The natural world, contemplated by the power of the imagination of the author, is not just a physical reality, but also of the moral and religious life of human beings. The power of spiritual imagination of nature enables the human to represent the idea of communion within the sense of the divinity.

In the following extract, when Sisay gives to Aba Tekele Tsion incense wrapped with plastic, He closes it to his nose and smells and said:

“ከማሳበረ ሥላሴ ገዳም የበረሓ ዱር የተለቀመ ዕጣን መዐዛው ግሩም ነው። በእግዚአብሔር ፊትም የተወደደ የጸሎት መሥዋዕት ነው። አሉና አባ ተክለ ጽዮን ወደ ደረታቸው ጠጋ አደረጉት” አለ ሲሳይ። (አለማየሁ፣ ገጽ፣ 138)

“The fragrance of the incense picked from the desert forest from Mahabere Selassie Monastery is wonderful. It is a prayer sacrifice that is beloved in the sight of God” said Aba Tekele Tsion and held it close to his chest” said Sisay. (Alemayehu, 2010 EC., p.138)

In the novel the narrator has portrayed the life of monastic people and their relationship in the nonhuman nature. Those people, who live in that jungle trust the nature, respect it and view the divinity of it. The character talks about incense from the monastery which makes man happy and in return man needs to respect the incense by giving gratitude. He says “The fragrance of the incense picked from the desert forest from Mahebere Selassie Monastery is wonderful”. The incense, harvested from the desert forest, symbolizes a deep connection between humans and the natural environment. The act of picking incense from the forest suggests a respectful and sustainable interaction with nature, where resources are used for spiritual purposes rather than exploitation. This reflects an eco-spiritual ideal of harmony between humans and their environment.

The incense is described as a “prayer sacrifice” that is “beloved in the sight of God,” indicating that nature is not merely a resource but a sacred entity. This aligns with eco-spiritual themes that emphasize the intrinsic value of nature and its role in spiritual and cultural practices. The passage suggests that nature is integral to religious rituals by emphasizing its importance beyond material utility. The act of holding the incense close to the chest signifies reverence and gratitude for the natural world. This gesture can be interpreted as an ethical stance toward nature, where humans acknowledge their dependence on the environment and treat it with care and respect. Ecocriticism often critiques exploitative attitudes toward nature, and this passage presents an alternative model of ethical engagement.

Conclusion

Zigora continuously calls for the theme of a close, spiritual connection between the human characters and the nonhuman nature. The characters’ relationship with nonhuman nature becomes largely spiritual, and their practices within nature uncover the novel’s imagination of eco-spirituality. Eco-spirituality is seen in the context of Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewehedo* Church. It maintains the spiritual views of nature and involves a communion with nature itself. Eco-spirituality embodies an acknowledgement of the nonhuman nature as more than a physical entity but a sacred being and an abode of spirits and as a challenge to anthropocentric views. Eco-spirituality recognizes a spiritual and fundamental value and a presence that is often otherwise denied by anthropocentric worldviews. Practically, this study builds awareness that by viewing spiritually in the interaction between human and nonhuman nature can create a harmonious relationship or a symbiotic relationship of mutualism between humans and nonhuman nature.

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Declaration of Conflict

There is no conflict of interest among the authors of this research paper.

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