

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Man and Nature in Zake Mda's *The Whale Caller*: An Ecocritical Perspective

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Abstract

*This paper focuses on the binary of man and nature in Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*. Mda is not a deep ecologist, but a novelist who from a typical African perspective, is concerned about human benefits by properly conserving nature. The novel mediates between human and nonhuman elements. Mda significantly contributes to the understanding of the unfolding environmental crisis. *The Whale Caller*, among other themes, aesthetically reflects how tourism economy and poverty among the rural South African population pose a threat to environmental protection and conservation. The discourse adopts a model of African literary environmentalism for the study of ecological concern as raised in the novel. Mda places a renewed pressure on human and animal binaries that form the basis of environmental discourse in contemporary South African fiction. The narrative emphasizes on the neglected non-human elements by drawing attention to how tourism and uneven distribution of resources expose both animals and people to disenfranchisement.*

Keywords: ecocriticism, whales, tourism, poverty, disenfranchisement

Introduction

It was in the 1990s that eco-studies began to gain momentum as significant numbers of literary scholars in different parts of the world began to express concern over what their field has to contribute to the understanding of the emerging environmental crisis. Most ecocritical works share common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems (www.conferenceseries.com/ecocriticism.php, 2019, p.1).

The ecologically focused criticism is fast becoming a worthy commitment because it aesthetically directs our mind and consciousness to the important issues that we need to be thinking about. *The Whale Caller*, for instance, is an ecologically conscious post-Apartheid narrative that aesthetically foregrounds the role of literature in promoting an eco-friendly society. It propounds an ecocritical ethics that establishes a symbiotic relationship between human and non-human elements. The kind of discursive space created by Mda

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enables him to present a protagonist and a whale falling in love with each other in a way that symbolically connects man to the animal. The novel weaves a form of local tale with emerging capitalist South African economy to narrate how specific adventure creates suffering and dispossession in a particular place and how it affects the main character, the whale Caller. Mda, according to Farred (2009), is a writer with a strong affinity for the voiceless and the disempowered. His narrative style, with its unsettling combination of irony and stony-faced realism, offers hope of reparation.

Theoretical Framework

Literary theory in general examines the relations between writers, texts and the world. In most literary criticism, the world is synonymous with society- the social space. The theory adopted for this essay is ecocriticism which is an extrinsically motivated literary perspective that appears as a result of the emerging environmental disasters and the recent global challenges of climate change, agrarian distress and desertification among others. By and large, ecocriticism is the most recent revisionist movement that has greatly impacted humanities over the past few decades. Despite its broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecologically inclined studies share the fundamental premise that human culture is largely connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as the Marxist criticism brings the dynamic modes of production and economic class to its reading of literature and Feminist criticism discusses language and literature from a gender-based perspective, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary criticism. The various models of ecocriticism have sprung up, each promoting the aspect of environmental consciousness it considers significant. These models include bio-centric ecology, deep ecology, ecofeminism, ecoactivism, postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental justice, African literary environmentalism among others.

Ecocriticism assumes various scholarly dimensions as pointed out by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's joint collection: *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1990) as well as Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995). There are various approaches proposed by these scholars. There is 'animal studies' in which animals are studied in a variety of cross-disciplinary ways. There is also the 'critical theory' which is the reflective assessment and critique of society and culture. 'Cultural ecology' focuses on the study of human adaptations to social and physical environment. Human adaptation refers to both biological and cultural processes that enable a population to survive and reproduce with a given or changing environment. According to Sanjo (2017) ecocriticism enables the critics to examine the textualisations of the physical environment in literary discourse and again to develop an earth-centred approach to literary studies. In this way, crossing of the boundaries between the human and nonhuman spheres would enable the ecocritic to analyse the ways in which an ecological vision is addressed or subverted in literary texts.

Ecocriticism takes the interconnection between nature and culture as its primary focus. Specifically, the need to cultivate environmental-conscious behaviour gave rise to an ecologically induced fiction like Mda's narrative in *The Whale Caller*. The novel has one foot in literature and the other on land. Ecocriticism, according to *A Glossary Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2012, p.96) was a term coined in the late 1970s by combining "criticism" with a shortened form of "ecology"-the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats. "Ecocriticism" (or by alternative names, Environmental Criticism and Green Studies) designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought

on environment by human activities. A glaring trend in ecocriticism is the analysis of the differences in attitudes toward the environment that are peculiar to a writer's race, ethnicity, social class and gender.

According to an American ecocritic, Lopez cited in Aliyu (2015) "the more superficial a society's knowledge of the real dimension of the land it occupies, the more vulnerable the land is to exploitation, to manipulation for short term gain"(p.61). This opinion reflects an acceptance of the differing perspectives of what the environment connotes to different people. Hence, Caminero-Santangelo's *Different Shades of Green: African literature, Environmental Justice, and political Ecology* (2008) is one of the major texts that explore the relationship between African writings, environmentalism, anticolonial struggle and social justice. The text specifically centres on how the nature of Africa necessitated a consideration of why the continent might be thought to be different from other parts of the world. African literary Environmentalism, thus, emerged from an interdisciplinary colloquium on literature and environment in Africa held in the spring of 2008 at the University of Kansas.

Participants explored uses of literature and literary modes of analysis in the study of African environment by geographers, anthropologists, and historians as well as application of theoretical frameworks and forms of knowledge drawn from geography, anthropology, and environmental history in the study of African and colonial literature (p.2)

The primary focus of the colloquium was to develop a model of ecocriticism and modes of analysis centred on how literary studies might contribute productively to the study of African environment. The need for such approach is pressing because more than a century of imperial and neoimperial attitudes and practices has engendered an intractable environmental problems as well as the need for new kinds of environmental discourses. Africa is known for conserving wilderness for religious and spiritual purposes. The conservation of wilderness did not stem from interest in social or economic requirement such as tourism, which appears to be the purpose for western conservationist practices. The preservation of the forest from the traditional point of view of the Africans was to serve as sacred sites for the performances of religious rites and rituals as well as provide sanctuaries for spirit considered evil. The African perception of the environment stems from a cultural or religious consideration which ultimately engenders the qualities of ecolife capable of affecting the state of life of both the individual and that of the community as a whole.

Aliyu (2015, p. 61) posits that colonial intrusion into many African communities had changed this perspective of the environmental preservation. The colonial authority considered many traditional practices as fetish, animist and paganistic. African literary environmentalism is, therefore, a model of eco-analysis which reinforces African's cultural beliefs about the environment as possessing economic, spiritual and mystic elements beneficial to human existence. It is a model that emphasizes an approach to eco-preservation through a more humane and conscious approach to its interference. The approach is adapted from the conservationist eco-criticism which interrogates how literature aids at identifying the manner by which African writers have aesthetically and uniquely established a fundamental connection between wildlife preservation and a radical campaign for socio-economic emancipation of human and non-human elements. This unique dimension was promoted by Caminero- Santangelo (2008, p.701) when he suggests that:

Rather than follow the path of deep ecology, which seeks to minimize The human-effect, African ecocriticism presents the need to think about the anthropocentric politics of both conservation in Africa and of the knowledge on which conservation is based. As a polit-

ically and socially based movement, African environmental studies bring into bold relief the danger of subordinating human concerns to environmental concerns.

There is a growing interest in the animistic religion of the so-called “primitive” cultures and civilization that lack the Western opposition between humanity and nature, and do not assign to human beings dominion over the nonhuman world. Within the crowded sub-field of postcolonial eco-criticism, a model of African literary environmentalism has emerged. Caminero-santangelo has produced extensive scholarship on the intersection of African literary studies and ecocriticism. On this trajectory, he authored *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial intertextuality* and coauthored *Environment at the margin: Literary and Environmental studies in Africa*. From a perspective explored by Caminero-Santangelo, this paper shows the contributions of Mda to the global discourse of ecological literature as well as the contextualization of his work within the peculiar African literary environmentalism.

Human and Animal Binary Discourse in *The Whale Caller*

The Whale Caller is the fifth novel of the legendary South African novelist, Zakes Mda. The story opens at the seaside village of Hermanus with the description of whale watchers who are predominantly foreign tourists determined to see the whales in their natural environment. Hermanus lies along the Walker Bay off the South Coast of the Western Cape. The town is an international tourist centre which holds an annual whale-watching festival. The town is also known for having the world’s only whale-crier. According to Broke, S. & Walter, S. (2017) part of what has constituted environmental problem in Hermanus is South African varieties of land use; as sites as diverse as farms, vineyards, cattle ranches, forestry plantation, private and public hunting preserves, national parks, mines, beaches, urban apartment complexes, townships, informal settlements and postindustrial landscapes. All these developments have impact on the environmental exploitation in South Africa’s history.

The setting of the novel in Hermanus serves as a microscopic depiction of South Africa. It represents the intertwined invasions of capitalist globalisation and tourism. Hermanus is represented as a contact zone of various kinds. In contemporary times, it is a place of vibrant mixtures: local township dwellers and villagers, international and national tourists, the poor and the rich, the marginalised misfits and the elite reside together in the locality. Hermanus in the past presents a contact zone between colonial space and the Khoikhoi indigenous inhabitants as well as the Dutch settlers and later also the English colonizers. Although, Mda does not overtly refer to the contact between the Khoikhoi and the early colonialists, the narrator mentions that the land was stolen from the Khoikhoi which lead to a brutal encounter. From the narration, the whales appear to function as transoceanic and transnational links between the local and the global, connecting different continents with each other and reinforcing Hermanus as a contact zone (Woodward, 2009, p. 6). The whales are at home in South African as much as in New Zealand and Australian waters in the present as in the past; they are permanent inhabitants of the waters. Moreover, the narrative connects the different continental cultures in a hybrid mix of the local Kal-fieees, the whale calf festival held annually in Hermanns. So also are the mythical stories of whales and sharks told to the Whale Caller by transoceanic sailors.

As the narrative unfolds, the Whale caller’s ritual of blowing a special kelp horn to attract Sharisha is revealed. The Whale caller’s fascination with kelp horn blowing developed in the church. During the baptism conducted near the ocean, the whale caller perceives that his horn influences the behaviour of the whale. This discovery makes the Whale Caller

believe that he communicates with the whales through his horn. He thus falls in deep love with Sharisha in a way that affects his relationship with even Saluni, his wife. The Whale Caller develops an unexpected relationship with Sharisha. He is able to express his love to the whale by playing his kelp horn, which makes Sharisha swim around the shoreline, making him happy and satisfied. The Whale Caller considers Sharisha an intimate partner because he arouses the whale's reaction to the horn blowing. The Whale Caller first appears to be sexually attracted to whales, especially the one he names Sharisha. This unusual share of affection between human and non-human element makes Salumi, the Whale caller's wife struggle in vain to create intimacy with her man who is emotionally attached to Sharisha.

The whale migrates for over a month and Salumi feels her life is fulfilled as she now has the Whale Caller without her rival. She attempts to initiate sex with him but the Whale Caller's mind is filled with images of Sharisha. When Saluni visits Mr Yodd, she is told that Sharisha would be returning soon. A few days after, Saluni spots the first whale and rushes home only to discover that the Whale Caller already knows the whales are returning. She monitors the Whale Caller for three days to ensure that he does not go to meet Sharisha. Saluni later visits the Twins and when she returns home, she finds the door locked. Saluni rushes to the beach only to find the Whale Caller in his tuxedo with his horn. While watching the whales, the Whale Caller notices that Sharisha has been wounded by a boat. The whale Caller spends his time watching the wounded Sharisha and its calf. When the Whale Caller is playing his horn, he notices that Sharisha has been stranded on the beach. An Emergency team comes and attempts to push Sharisha back into the water as the Whale Caller helplessly watches. The attempt to push back Sharisha into the water ends up in vain. The scientists eventually decide to kill the whale. The injury suffered by Sharisha as a result of the boat attack and its eventual death due to the failure of the scientists to save it show how mass tourism constitutes a serious discomfort to the Whale Caller's desired harmony with nature. The essence of the ecocritical text, such as Mda's *The Whale caller*, is to inspire readers to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implication.

The Whale caller despises the mobs of tourists who have no comparable knowledge about whales with that of him. In a satirical tone, he describes how binoculars and cameras weighing down the tourists' necks: sandals flip-flopping like soft coronach, drumbeats as the feet trudge in different directions (pp. 13-14). Tourism, among others economic factors, marks the opening of South Africa's borders to the global market. *The Whale Caller* perceives the new culture of tourism and global capitalism promoted by the post-apartheid government as a threat not only to his much-preferred quiet life but also to the natural surroundings. Mda bolsters argument for reintegrating concerns about animals, land and people in the realm of conservation's link to race, colonialism, apartheid and post apartheid inequalities. The narrators says:

Sharisha embodies issues of border crossing and migration as well, with the dangers that these entail, running the risk of being hunted, or at least being squeezed out of her natural environment by human activity, such as pollution and other abuses of the natural world. She has risked ship's propellers that slice curious whales. She has defied fishing gear entanglement and explosive from oil exploration activity here (p.37).

The novel thus aesthetically reflects how the tourism economy and environmental pollution disenfranchises both animals and people. The tourism industry, as the novel

suggests, abuses the non-human species not only by employing the land as a playing ground, but also through subjugation of animals as objects and toys.

In his didactic tone, the narrator educates the reader about the destructive consequences of mass tourism.

Conversely, Noria's memory of the village is the pale herd boys, with mucus hanging from the nostrils, looking after cattle whose ribs you could count, on barren hills with sparse grass and shrubs. The lean cattle and barren hills are partly result of overgrazing, which is in turn due to shortage of land for black people. (p.23)

The Whale Caller grieves because of the new ways of watching whales. Even though, the town is well suited for watching the whales from its many cliffs, some entrepreneurs have introduced boat-based whale watching.

With relics of the past such as the colourful fishing boats along the cliff that used to belong to fishermen of a century ago. The boats are now restored to their former glory as a reminder of a bygone era and bygone manual practices so that present and future generations can see how fishermen of the old endured the stormy seas in small open boats powered by their own muscles. (p.2)

The Whale Caller sees the tourists getting off the boat and excitedly boasting of how they actually touched a whale. The tourists seem to be excited when they actually touch the whales even though it contravenes the regulation sets out to protect the endangered species. This practice troubles the Whale Caller. He has neither touched a whale nor even Sharisha, except with his spirit - with his horn. He knows absolutely that this boat-based whale watching will be abused (pp. 118-19).

Throughout the novel, the Whale Caller is in love with a Southern right whale that he names Sharisha. This is a strange relationship because when one loves animal, one does not think such affection can be reciprocated. But in this case, Sharisha seems to respond to the Whale Caller's affection. Mda makes it clear for the readers to think about how the relationship with nature and animal can enhance deep affection. This complication affects the Whale Caller's affair with Saluni. For instance, when the Whale Caller wants to consummate relationship with his wife, images of whale interfere at the moment of excitement and he goes limp (p.74). This indicates that the Whale Caller constantly thinks about Sharisha, even during the most intimate moment with his wife. The Whale Caller feels lonely and longs for Sharisha when it is away on migration.

The Whale Caller is angry about the poacher and explains that only four perlemoens a day are allowed for self-consumption. He is enraged about finding a full sack of the protected mussel: "But this is wrong. It is all wrong. Do you know how long it takes for those perlemoens to mature? Eight years. Eight years, I tell you" (p. 174). The poacher explains his motives for poaching. "We have to eat sir. We have got to feed our children. Big companies are making money out of these perlemoens. The government gives them quotas. What about us, sir? Do you think if I apply for quotas I will get them? How are we expected to survive?" (p. 174). Subsequently, the poacher explains the politics of corruption and exploitation to the Whale Caller and by so doing reveals the danger of capitalist economy. There are established racial hierarchies in the illegal abalone trade. Coloured folk sell their harvest to white men who pay around two hundred rands a kilogram. The white men sell to the Chinese men for about a thousand rands a kilogram. The Chinese ship the abalone to the Far East where they get about two thousand five hundred rands a kilogram for it and these are the old prices (p. 175).

The poaching industry seems to represent the South African's dilemma. The irony of the post-apartheid South Africa is that the elites who have struggled for freedom and equality are the characters involved in the international collaborative exploitation against the ordinary people at the bottom of the food chain. Although promoting his stance for environmentalism, Mda does not turn a blind eye to the conditions of the people whose daily survival is threatened in his campaign for the reservation of nature and animals. (p.42). The narrator says, "They do not like to be called squatters. How can we be squatters on our land, in our own country? Squatters are those who came from across the sea to steal our land (p.42). With this narrative, Mda reveals how environmental sustainability seems to be a largely neglected issue in South Africa as many Blacks are concerned with their daily survival.

Poverty constitutes a major worry than the protection of nature and animals. The narrator experiences a first-hand encounter with the characters who believe that environmental protection and conservation is a luxury. Mda is being accused of writing White things in *The Whale Caller*. He is accused of neglecting the poor and the marginalized that he usually focused and wrote for in his earlier literary texts (2009, p.12). In an address, Mda points out that "The journalist told me that there was consternation among my black readers. 'Now Zakes is writing white things', was the refrain. However, caring about animals and telling stories about them cannot be a folly because these are the very animals that featured as characters in the stories that my grandmother told me when I was a little boy; stories that had been passed to her by previous generations of grandmothers long before white people came to South Africa" (2009, p. 12). Mda appears to canvass that non-human nature must be treated as having an existence and value beyond the benefit of tourism economy. Just like the South African poet, Mongane Wally Serote, Mda continues to worry about wildlife issues and land use such as mining abuse and environmental destruction propelled by colonialist and apartheid policies of land use. His argument seems to flow along the tide that the lack of freedom and the development among non whites in South Africa have created a hostile natural environment as well as a hostile political one. The land is becoming inhabitable, and natural resources are no longer available to the majority of the people who live on the land. The argument carries further that the idea of post-apartheid liberation should translate into a mass democracy where people could determine what should become of elephants, whales and trees among other non-human elements. Instrumentalising the other, the non-human sentient and non-sentient being, is the humanistic survival philosophy that South African writers express when they write about humanity in nature. (Slaymaker, 2007, p.691).

The colonial and apartheid alienation of many urban Black South Africans from the natural landscape along racial lines established a pattern of settlement in a way that rural landscapes are seen as backward and the non-human world primarily as a space without spiritual value to urban, modern lives. This perspective becomes explicit when two human protagonists encounter a aperlmoen poacher. The encounter highlights the vicious circle of poverty and abuse of the natural environment held so sacred by the forefathers of the land. Mda imaginatively criticises the post-apartheid black elites for their indifference towards ecological crises. Instead of inspiring the people on re-valuing landscape and respectful treatment of nature, they ignore both the urban and rural poor people.

Mda points to the ecological significance of environment as the rural areas are being directly affected by the rising wave of poverty. The problem, as it appears in the plot, is not that black South Africans do not really care about the environment, but in a way, the discourse on environmental justice is not framed in a manner that relates directly to their

lives (Mda, 2009, p. 12). According to Stanley and Philip (2017, p.5) “The fact is that questions about animals and questions about ownership of land, and hence about people are thoroughly intertwined in South Africa as throughout the continent-something belies by the split between landscape-focused versus animal-focused criticism.” The government takeover of land, and the resulting displacement of local people in order to create national parks to boost revenue through tourist economy constitutes a strong factor that makes poaching difficult to control and thereby protect the wildlife. *The Whale Caller* narrates the exploitation of land, animals and disenfranchised people as configured across the colonial, apartheid and post apartheid eras as a basis for continuing social inequalities that complicate ecocriticism and animal protection in South Africa. The narrator says “it is not only black people’s livestock that is running out of space, the people are also victims of this malice. As a result many black people live in squatter camps”(p.42). Postcolonial thinkers argue that social issues are so grave for human beings that that they need to be addressed first, before putting energy toward nonhuman beings. However, such postulations have been challenged. Graham Huggard and Hellen Tiffen’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animal, and Environment* (2010) primarily emphasizes the animal rights and environmental conservation, promoting natural purity and belonging. Likewise, the first issues of the *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* carefully positions key issues in the field.

The Whale Caller addresses important issues that are largely neglected in the post-apartheid era -or rejected as elitist or White. Through his characters, he provides a different view on landscape and recuperates its often neglected or forgotten cultural mystical stories. While the narrative does not offer any ready-made solutions, it does raise awareness on the link between poverty and the difficulty to lead an ecological friendly life. Hence he criticises the political arrangements for neglecting the needs of rural and poor people in their efforts to survive. In order to explicate the importance of the ecology, Mda’s literature establishes environmental activism as a prominent thematic focus.

From the point of view of African conservation imperative, *The Whale Caller* not only recalls local age-old practises but also incorporates the ancient myths of transoceanic indigenous cultures in his narrative about the precolonial pasts. The narrator reveals a spiritual vacuum in the relationship with the non-human world in people’s heritage. The contact between cultures and myths provides a way to attain inspiration from traditions and stories. Through the whales, the narrative weaves a fabric of transcultural myths connecting not only oceans and coastlines but also local cultures, feeding on stories about the whale. Thus, just as the southern right whales share various oceanic homes, regardless of national allocation of the waters, so do the inhabitants along those adjacent coastlines share a relationship with the whales. Due to a lack of an indigenous interaction with whales apart from an ecological one long ago, the Whale Caller feeds on myths and oral traditions from across the ocean such as those belonging to the Australian Aborigines and the indigenous people of Papua New Guinea. The narrative connects indigenous cultures which welcome the same whales at different times of the year and interweaves oral traditions and mythologies. According to Mda, the Whale Caller is aware of those cultures and he learns from them as well. In order to deal with issues concerning whales in his own environment, he also draws from those indigenous cultures (2009, p. 364). The narrator contrasts an emphatic, balanced past with a destructive, even sadistic present. He also ironically raises the failure of modern science and technology and its failure to protect ecolife. While the story of the past animal protection enriches the Whale Caller’s own connection to the animal, he also knows of indigenous stories which he cannot identify with, such as the practices of the shark callers of New Ireland. Although this story does not focus on whales but on sharks, it also tells of a form of communication between the human

and the non-human. The shark callers' gruesome way of entrapping sharks in order to kill them counters the Whale Caller's ideal of a harmonious human-nature relationship. He rejects a comparison between him and the shark Callers because he does not see whales, or in fact any animals, as objects, but as his equals. Rather, the Whale Caller suggests a parallel between shark callers and the official Whale Crier of Hermanns. Thus, the recollection of local stories serves to inspire critical thinking about contemporary treatment of the non-human world. The narrative reveals the present ecological dangers if disrespect for the natural environment continues. The Whale Caller exemplifies Mda's environmental concerns and his progressive, hopeful approaches to land and ecological issues.

In conclusion, the essay explores an ecostudy of Mda's *The Whale Caller*. It shows how tourism in South Africa opens a perspective to view and analyse the novelist's handling of a variety of ecologically significant ideas about human and animal relationship. It also exposes the multiple ways in which poverty and official land acquisition constitute a threat to environmental protection that Mda canvasses. African Literary Environmentalism offers a new way to read contemporary African novels as manuals for environmental conscious behaviour. *The Whale Caller* points out how the invasion of global capitalism and technology unsettle the rural areas. In the face of modern technologically driven tourist economy, the Whale Caller derogatorily refers to the present as these days of engine-powered trawlers (p.3) which is responsible for the destruction of Sharisha and by extension, the natural habitat of the animals.

The Whale Caller recounts how his village has been transformed into a modern holiday resort (p.10) and a haven with double and triple storey buildings for national and international affluent tourists temporarily escaping the hustling and bustling of the city life by spending part of the year enjoying the spoils of their wealth in the laid-back ambience of the village, hence, the place is filled with the tourists who contribute to unsettle the countryside. By presenting the Khoikhoi's past ecological ways of life, the Whale Caller re-enacts the practice of the ancient as a better alternative to the present.

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