

Research Article

Child Labour as Ecological Violence: Figuration and Transfiguration in Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation* and Bole Butake's *Family Saga*

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Abstract

Child labour has received considerable attention as a socio-economic and human-rights problem, but its possible symbolic relationship with ecological violence and spiritual disruption remains underexplored in African literary criticism. This study examines Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation* and Bole Butake's *Family Saga* to explore how the exploitation of vulnerable labouring bodies is represented and transfigured into a broader critique of extractive violence. Drawing on a composite framework that integrates Marxist Literary Criticism with African eco-spiritual thought, the study analyses the relationship between class-based exploitation (child labour), ecological violence, and disrupted continuity. The findings show that the two plays represent child labour through images of degrading work, exhaustion, pollution, appropriation, bodily violation, and unequal power. These textual patterns reveal a shared extractive logic through which vulnerable bodies are consumed for the benefit of dominant structures. Within an African eco-spiritual interpretive framework, this logic enables a transfigurative reading in which the exploitation of the child structurally and metaphorically corresponds to the violence infested on landscapes and the disruption of relationships that sustain communal and spiritual continuity. The study further demonstrates that the two plays offer different dramatic visions: *Beasts of No Nation* exposes the persistence of systemic oppression and the failure of resistance, whereas *Family Saga* moves more visibly toward dialogue, collective memory, and relational restoration. On the basis of this comparative reading, the study proposes an African communalistic ethic of labour as the researcher's normative response rather than as a direct programme jointly prescribed by the two playwrights. The article contributes an African-inflected ecocritical perspective to the study of child labour in African drama by connecting socio-economic exploitation with ecological violence and spiritual discontinuity.

Keywords

Child Labour, Ecological Violence, African Eco-Spirituality, Figuration, Transfiguration

1. Introduction

Child labour remains a persistent global socio-economic challenge. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021,

“Child labour comprises work that children are too young to perform and/or work that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm children's health, safety or morals” [12]. It

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ranges from force labour, dangerous/ nasty industrial work, recruitment into armed conflicts, slavery to drug trafficking. Datzberger, Lottie, Stephen and Jenny posit that, "Child labour is considered to be on a spectrum from 'light' to the 'worst' forms, the latter including trafficking, child prostitution and pornography, and recruitment of children for armed conflict [6]. Scholars from different walks of life have been attracted to child labour discourses. Examples, Metta, Ramadhani, Alison, and Eveline identify household poverty as a major factor driving child labour in Tanzanian mining communities [15], while Eze, Amos, Monday, Ifeanyichukwu, Chukwuma and Sylvanus demonstrate its negative consequences for educational outcomes [9]. Together, these studies establish important material causes and consequences of child labour. However, neither examines how literary representations of child exploitation may function symbolically within an ecological and spiritual framework. The studies are simply some of the studies (principally out of the literary field) that add to other studies done by international organizations like ILO and UNICEF with the goal of combating and eliminating child labour.

In the literary field, critical engagement on child labour does not seem to have received proportional engagement, especially in relation to its symbolic or transfigurative link with ecological and spiritual implications. Here, we must understand that, although a child in the general perspective, and as defined by Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is "anyone below the age of 18", we consider someone a child (within the context of this study) as anyone in the minority group who deserves protection as a minority, but is subjected to hard labour by so-called authorities/systems that should protect them. The reason for this is because literary texts use metaphors and symbolism to represent the concept of child labour.

In African literary traditions, labour (be it child labour or any other form of labour), especially that which involves the vulnerable population goes beyond material conditions to engage with cosmological, ecological and spiritual realms. This is because there is an inextricable and inevitable connection between humans and nature [16]. Consequently, the exploitation of human beings, particularly children, cannot be isolated from the degradation of the environment which also leads to spiritual discontinuity.

Within the context explained above, the works of Bate Besong and Bole Butake become particularly relevant. In *Beasts of No Nation* and *Family Saga*, the playwrights dramatize societies marked by corruption, exploitation, political predation and unequal labour relations, in which vulnerable individuals are subjected to degrading forms of labour. Existing literary criticism has largely approached these plays through political and postcolonial frameworks. Mbonyingingo, Odhiambo and Simatei, for instance, examine the two plays as constructions of the postcolonial Cameroonian nation, foregrounding the socio-political imaginaries, inequalities and tensions that shape the dramatic worlds of Besong and Butake [14]. Similarly,

Teke [22] examines the play through the lens of corporeality and disability, interpreting the bodies of characters such as Blind Man, Cripple and the Night-soil Men as metaphors of state pathology, authoritarian violence and political subjugation. His study demonstrates how Besong transforms bodily deformation, pain and degradation into a representation of the dysfunctional postcolonial state, while also foregrounding the body as a potential site of resistance. In the same line, Yimbu's study of Besong's drama reads *Beasts of No Nation* principally through the interconnected concerns of misrepresentation, marginalisation, exploitation and resistance, arguing that the oppressed masses resist the dehumanising representations and political conditions imposed upon them [24]. These studies are important because they establish the political and ideological significance of the exploitation represented in the plays. However, they do not specifically examine how the labouring and vulnerable bodies represented in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Family Saga* may be read in relation to ecological violence and spiritual discontinuity.

This omission is significant because, in African literary and cultural traditions, the exploitation of vulnerable human beings can be understood in relation to wider cosmological and ecological systems. Human life, nature and spirituality are interconnected, and violence against the vulnerable may therefore carry implications that extend beyond immediate socio-economic injustice. The present study builds on existing postcolonial and political readings of the two plays but departs from them by examining child labour as both a concrete socio-economic reality and an ecospiritual signification. It argues that the exploitation of the child does not merely reflect social and economic injustice; through transfiguration, the violated child also becomes a figure through which the exploitation and depletion of the natural environment and the consequent disruption of spirituality can be interpreted.

2. Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to examine how child labour is figured and transfigured into a form of ecological violence that leads to spiritual discontinuity in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Family Saga*. To achieve this aim, the work focuses on the following objectives:

- 1) To analyze the figuration of child labour as a socio-economic problem in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Family Saga*.
- 2) To show how this child labour is a transfiguration of ecological violence and spiritual discontinuity.
- 3) To propose an African communalistic model as an alternative ethical framework to curb child labour and preserve nature and spirituality.

3. Statement of the Problem

Over the years, scholars have examined child labour as a socio-economic problem, [1, 7, 9] with insufficient attention

to its ecological and spiritual dimensions. This involves questioning the exploitation of the child in terms of labour without looking at the intersection of this exploitation with environmental exploitation which is also linked to spiritual discontinuity. In addition, much of the scholarly works on *Beasts of No Nation* and *Family Saga* have examined the texts as political satires, postcolonial plays on oppression, and/or plays on social (in)justice [14, 22, 24]. However, none of these pays attention to the extent to which the exploitation of the child in terms of labour mirrors the depletion of natural resources/landscapes thereby leading to spiritual discontinuity. This study therefore addresses this critical gap by examining how child labour functions as both socio-economic reality and ecospiritual signification. We can break this problem down into the following research questions.

4. Research Questions

- 1) How is child labour represented in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Family Saga*?
- 2) How does child labour transfigure into ecological violence and spiritual discontinuity?
- 3) What are the dramatic visions of Besong and Butake in relation to the fight against child labour, ecological violence and spiritual discontinuity?

5. Hypothesis

Based on the statement of the problem and research questions posed above, this study relies on the assumption that child labour is not just socio-economic injustice, but also an ecological and spiritual problem which requires an African communalistic model as an alternative model to fight against it. To test this hypothesis, we shall rely on some theories.

6. Theoretical Framework: Marxist Literary Criticism and African Eco-Spiritual Thought

This study adopts a composite theoretical framework that brings Marxist Literary Criticism into dialogue with African eco-spiritual thought. Rather than treating these perspectives as separate theoretical approaches, the study combines their complementary functions in order to interpret child labour as simultaneously a socio-economic, ecological, and spiritual form of violence. Marxist Literary Criticism on the one hand provides the analytical tools for examining relations of class, labour, material production, and systemic oppression, relying on the famous saying of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that the history of every society from antiquity to present is that of class struggle [13]. On the other hand, African eco-spiritual thought explains the interconnected relationship between hu-

man beings, nature, and spirituality. Together, these perspectives make it possible to interpret the exploited child not only as a victim of socio-economic injustice but also as a figure whose exploitation transfigures the degradation of landscapes and the disruption of spiritual continuity.

Marxist Literary Criticism is particularly relevant to the present study because of its concern with the relationship between literature and material conditions. Marxist criticism examines how social and economic structures shape human relations and how class inequalities produce exploitation. As Philip and Patricia argue, Marxist criticism seeks to understand the relationship between the literary text and the social world by recognising the material conditions within which literature is produced and received [18]. Its central concerns include class struggle, ideology, relations of production, capitalism, collectivism, and the unequal distribution of resources. These concerns provide a useful framework for examining the labouring figures in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Family Saga*, where vulnerable subjects perform difficult labour while political and economically powerful structures benefit from their exploitation.

Within this study, therefore, Marxist Literary Criticism is not used simply to identify a rigid opposition between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. It is employed to examine the mechanisms through which exploitation operates. The child, broadly understood within the symbolic context of the two plays as a vulnerable subject deserving protection, is subjected to labour by systems of power that benefit from inequality and material accumulation. Marxist criticism consequently explains the social structure of exploitation: it asks who controls labour, who benefits from it, and how systems of power maintain the silence and vulnerability of the exploited.

However, an analysis limited to class and material exploitation cannot fully account for the wider significance of child labour in the African contexts evoked by the two plays. This necessitates an African-inflected ecological perspective. Although Ecocriticism is commonly understood as the most popular term for the study of literature and culture from a perspective informed by environmental politics" [20], or the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment [10], or a literary approach which analyses and promotes oral or written literature which raises moral questions about how humans interact with nature" [21], or the fundamental belief that, all things are inter-related, and that they are actively concerned about the impact of human actions on the environment [8], such definitions require expansion within the African context of this study. African conceptions of nature frequently extend beyond the material environment to include cultural, cosmological, and spiritual relationships [23]. As Achebe observes, Africa is not merely a geographical expression but also "a metaphysical landscape" and a particular perception of the world and the cosmos [2]. Similarly, Ngeh and Mackeus argue that nature holds African spirituality and culture [17]. These perspectives suggest that the degradation of landscapes cannot be understood solely as physical or material

destruction; it may also signify a disturbance of cultural and spiritual relationships.

This African eco-spiritual perspective provides the conceptual basis for the central transfigurative movement of this study. If human beings, landscapes, and spirituality exist in an interconnected relationship, violence against the vulnerable human body can be read in symbolic relation to violence against nature. Likewise, the depletion of the natural environment may imply spiritual discontinuity because the destruction of landscapes disrupts spaces and entities that carry cultural and spiritual significance. In this sense, the child in the two plays is not merely an individual victim of labour. The exploited child becomes a figurative site through which broader forms of ecological and spiritual violence are made visible.

The theoretical framework of this study therefore operates through complementarity rather than juxtaposition. Marxist Literary Criticism explains the material and systemic conditions that produce exploitation, while African eco-spiritual thought explains the ecological and spiritual implications of that exploitation. Marxism addresses the question of how and why the vulnerable body is exploited: through class inequality, material accumulation, and oppressive structures of power. African eco-spiritual thought addresses the question of what that exploitation signifies beyond the human body: the extraction and exhaustion of the child's labour metaphorically correspond to the extraction and depletion of the landscape, while both forms of exploitation threaten the continuity of life and spirituality.

Because the terms "Figuration" and "Transfiguration" are very recurrent in this study, it is important to conceptualise them so as to ensure clarity. To begin with, Erich Auerbach and Paul Ricoeur in their respective works have discussed a lot on the concept of Figuration. According to Auerbach, figuration operates as a representational device where a concrete, historical presence stands as a sign for a broader or deeper historical or physical reality. He argues that a figure does not merely symbolise an abstract concept; rather, it is an embodied phenomenon that points to something deeper (p. 73) [3]. In the texts under study, the child labourer is not presented as an isolated victim, but as a direct figuration of the totality of humans that face oppression from systems and structures that are meant to protect them. Ricoeur aligns his definition with Auerbach's as he stipulates that figuration is that active process of emplotment, wherein a writer extracts discordant real world events and synthesizes them into a meaningful dramatic structure [19]. Within the context of this study, figuration fits squarely with this; it refers to dramatic representation of concrete socio-economic child-labour injustices extracted from the real world. This concrete socio-economic child-labour, however, can mean something deeper. This is where transfiguration sets in. In this study, transfiguration is defined as an aesthetic and conceptual convergence where the socio-economic exploitation of the child labourer is revealed to be a direct reflection of anthropocentric force against the natural

world. This aligns with Cajetan Iheka's framework of co-victimhood which posits that human oppression and environmental degradation are fundamentally inseparable [11]. In short, transfiguration stands for the symbolic metaphor that links exploited child bodies to landscape depletion and spiritual discontinuity.

7. Figuring Child Labour: Exploitation and Silence

Even though a limited body of works of literature are said to have addressed the issue of child labour in contemporary dispensation, Besong and Butake are among the literary creatives who observe child labour as a cause for concern in dramatic works. In *Beasts of No Nation*, Besong mirrors exploitation of the children. The children in the context of the text are the Night-Soil-Men (N. S. M) who work tirelessly in very denigrating conditions. The narrator tells the N. S. M that they are "one of the thousands from the village around Nyos who had carelessly touched the Sephardic ark" (p. 88) [4]. This is indication that many children are going through child labour. The irony is that, at the very beginning of the play, these N. S. M are ignorant of the harsh working conditions that they operate in. They are shit carriers, depicting hazardous work done by children. The following extract from the play demonstrates this.

lights should shift
to lavatory: Brooms, thick with
excrement. Pails of human waste:
brownish, yellowish greyish or
black matter intestinal products
of an inebriated society waiting
to be carted away...
odour of human faeces hangs
thick in the air... (p. 126) [4]

The extract above depicts a terrible working environment in which the children of the nation work. The playwright uses images of faeces to create mental pictures of shits which symbolise denigrating labour. He tells us that odour of human faeces hangs thick in the air" (p. 126) [4] where these children of the nation of Ednuoay work. To make the situation even more critical, these children are the ones carrying the faeces with their hands. It is ironical, nevertheless, because they do not seem to know how dirty that job is. This directly links to children who do not know they are into child labour. Consequently, this prevents them from demanding for their freedom and rights. Even those who know their rights are afraid to voice it because the political atmosphere does not guarantee freedom of speech. The Narrator tells the N. S. M that they are afraid that they "might be silenced by a shot in the back of your head" (p. 96) [4] if they voice their plights. The silence of the child, like the N. S. M, is either precipitated by ignorance or fear of the consequences of speaking out. It is in this line that literature becomes a voice to these voiceless children.

Besong figures this situation in his play.

Besong presents capitalism and failed political systems as the engines of child labour. This is because, as the play shows, characters are in love with material possessions, and they focus on corrupt activities that enrich them. SECOND NIGHT-SOIL-MAN insists that, "Who no like money? I want to be rich" (p. 91) [4]. This simply suggests the desire to enrich ourselves as a motivating factor for child labour. It happens on the part of the child and the authorities subjugating children into child labour. The ultimate problem at this level is that, authorities who are supposed to be fighting against this bad practice instead either stay silent or connive with the oppressors of children. In the text, when the N. S. M demand for freedom from the Narrator, he tells them to demand from Chief Gaston Otshama. Otshama is an ex-soil man who has become an authority and can help fight against the bad practice. The N. S. M instead consider him dead (p. 88) [4], and this is indication of the silence (death) of authorities who are supposed to tackle issues of child labour. In addition, Blindman makes us question the roles of Gendarmes who constitute part of the authorities adorned with the responsibility of protecting the minority (children). He tells us that, "Gendarme be all the same. Taking bribe is all they know" (p. 105) [4]. This is sign of failure of the law to protect children. Hence, Besong depicts failure of the system to protect the rights of the child. It is therefore, not wrong to argue that, child labour is presented as material exploitation and systemic oppression which are fueled by capitalistic tendencies, and sustain on the silence of both the laboured child and the dormant authorities that are supposed to fight against child labour.

Like Besong, Butake presents labouring children in *Family Saga*. The play presents two families; one that labours and one that feeds fat on the sweat of the labourers. Kamala and family represent the proletariat class and they are always working while Kamalo who represents the superstructure are always enjoying. Kamalo constantly tells Kamala that, "I conceive you execute", just like out of the text parents are always conceiving labouring ideas for children. In the play, Sawa (Kamala's daughter) tells Kamalo that her father and Ngong (her brother) are always working. "Daddy does not even drink na? He doesn't smoke na? Only work, work, work without rest na? When I remember what Ngong goes through I can even just be crying na?" (p. 27) [5]. Ngong here goes through harsh working conditions to survive. Just like in *Beasts of No Nation*, child labour in *Family Saga* is driven by lack of knowledge and fear. Labouring characters come to the realisation that they labour too much because they are not informed. NGONG says, Good people, the best inheritance that you can give your children is giving them education, information. A person who is informed, who is aware of his surroundings, who is educated, can never become the slave of another man or woman (pp. 59-60) [5].

Children who are aware of child labour will fight against it. It becomes visible that there is great need to keep sensitising children on the need to be aware of the negative repercussions

of child labour because most children get into it without knowledge. Even children who may have some knowledge of child labour are stripped of their identity as children. They are made to believe that they are big and need to survive. In the play, Butake walks us into characters who realise this after several years of involvement in child labour. Kamala realises himself and makes a public declaration that,

now I know that the easiest way to make someone your slave is to deny that person knowledge. To deny that person an identity. To deny that person the story of his roots, his origins. In short the best way to make someone your slave is to take away that person's identity and give them yours" (p. 60) [5].

When you strip a child of his/her identity as a child, the child lacks a sense of childhood and thus, the future of the child is endangered. Butake is therefore calling on us to effectively recognize the children and shun putting them in severe working conditions. In addition to lack of knowledge, Butake believes that the blame of child labour is a persistent one because we accept it. According to Kamala in the play,

We are our problem because we are doing nothing, absolutely nothing to regain our liberty and dignity that Kamalo and his papa have taken away from us. That is the problem as I see it. I do not know how you see it. But that is the way I see it. Good people, that is our problem. The way I see it. Or am I wrong? Am I wrong, Sawa? Ngong? My children, tell me, tell us, tell all these good people what you think our problem is" (p. 55) [5].

The fundamental question that we need to ask ourselves individually is what we are doing to stop child labour. Failure to ask this question is only making child labour rampant. In the African context, this does not only end at this level given human connection with nature and spirituality. The labouring child transfigures into a deeper ecological and spiritual problem.

8. Transfiguring the Child: From Labouring Body to Ecological Violence and Spiritual Discontinuity

The movement from child labour to ecological violence and spiritual discontinuity in this study requires a distinction between two analytical levels. The first concerns meanings generated within the dramatic texts themselves through images, symbols, character utterances, and dramatic action. The second concerns the African eco-spiritual framework through which these textual patterns are interpreted. This is largely because the two playwrights do not explicitly tailor their plays towards the three interpretive dimensions involved (that is, child labour, ecological violence, and spiritual discontinuity). In this section of the study, we shall start by discussing metaphors generated inside the literary text, and then move to African cultural context used as interpretive background.

In *Beasts of No Nation* we come across working environments that are horrible for the Night-Soil-Men (N. S. M.). We are told that: “the lavatory is smelling” (p. 102) [4]. This is said by a N. S. M to arouse a sense of pollution, and to invoke images of terrible working environment. Similar to this, “the night-soil-men carry their buckets containing human faeces” (p. 113) [4]. The playwright uses a stage direction to present this nasty activity that the children of the nation/ state (in the text referred to as, Ednuoay, which is “Yaounde” written in the reverse form/ backwardly) go through. We can say that the most immediate dramatic images associated with the N. S. M. are those of bodily waste, pollution, and degrading labour. The stage directions in the play draw attention to “Brooms, thick with / excrement” and “Pails of human waste,” while odour of human faeces hangs / thick in the air [4]. These images establish a dramatic environment characterised by filth and contamination. The N. S. M. are not merely described as workers; they are made to carry the physical waste of an “inebriated society” [4]. Their bodies therefore become the means through which the consequences of collective corruption are physically managed.

This dramatic arrangement is significant because the play places waste at the centre of the social order. The filth produced by society is transferred downward to those with the least power (the proletarian class), while the structures responsible for the corruption remain protected. The N. S. M. carry away the waste, but they do not control the system that produces it. The same logic of unequal extraction appears in the political and economic structures of the play. Those in positions of authority like Aadingingin benefit from the existing order, whereas the vulnerable bodies of the N. S. M absorb its most degrading consequences. Thus, the textual pattern established in the play is one of production, extraction, accumulation, and disposal: society produces corruption, the powerful remain insulated from it, and the vulnerable are required to bear and remove its waste.

The imagery of waste is accompanied by the suppression of speech. The N. S. M. remain silent partly because of ignorance and partly because they fear that they might be “silenced by a shot in the back of [their] head” [4]. The violence of the dramatic world is therefore directed not only against the body but also against the voice. The exploited subject is expected to work and remain silent. The play consequently constructs a relationship between bodily exploitation and political muting. The child or vulnerable labourer is consumed by labour while being denied the power to challenge the system that consumes him.

In *Family Saga*, exploitation is similarly organised around unequal relations of labour and consumption. The proletariat class led by Kamala constantly suffers from the pressures of the ruling class headed by Kamalo. In fact, the child is constantly being exploited by structures that ought to protect. In the play, Kamalo rapes Sawa, the daughter of Kamala.

NGONG:

What did he do to you Sawa? Don't tell me that

the brute...

SAWA:

(In frenzy of agony from remembering the fact of having been raped by Kamalo.)

That man is Satan na? With that his giant size na? And the power of a horse na? He just carried me to his bed na. Pulled off my wrapper na and... and... and... (She breaks down completely). (p. 37) [5].

This rape designates a deeper system of extraction that the ruling class practices on the proletarian class. This violation of Sawa introduces another important image of domination into the dramatic world. Her account of being physically overpowered and violated by Kamalo represents an extreme form of unequal power. The scene must first be recognised for what it explicitly presents: sexual violence, patriarchal domination, and the violation of a vulnerable body. The play does not explicitly state that Sawa is nature or that Kamalo is humanity. Nevertheless, the rape scene extends the play's broader pattern in which the powerful assume the right to take from bodies over which they exercise dominance. The two voices that accompany the condition of oppression make this pattern explicit when they sing:

We rape your daughter

We seize your goods

We turn you into slaves

To toil for the pleasure of Kamalo

To sweat for the amusement of his papa (p. 42) [5].

Rape, seizure, and enslavement are therefore linked within the dramatic structure as related expressions of domination and appropriation. These are all indicators of how the child suffers in the community where child labour has no punishments. It makes the perpetrators dominant and overtly powerful over the oppressed. Talking to Kamalo, Kamala says “Do you ever look into the mirror? Do you ever notice how fat you have grown in the few years we have lived together, Kamalo?” (p. 12) [5]. Also, Kamala complains to Baakingoom (his supposed father) that he works extremely hard and Kamalo (his supposed brother) takes everything and all credits. Kamala says, “Look at me, father. When I left this place, I had more than half-a-dozen suitcases full of clothes. This is all I have today. I toil in the fields all day long with my offspring; and when I go to get provisions from the bar, there is nothing left because, Kamalo tells me, My papa was here. He took the provisions” (p. 22) [5]. This repeated exploitation connects with a disruption of continuity. This explains why in the play *Family Saga*, knowledge of history and origins becomes essential to liberation. Kamala argues that slavery is maintained by denying people knowledge, identity, and “the story of [their] roots” [5]. The play therefore presents identity as inseparable from continuity: to take away the knowledge of one's roots is to weaken one's ability to understand one's place and resist domination. Similarly, Kamala sends his children into the community to recover the “family story” and “history” [5]. The return to history, memory, and community becomes part of the movement away from exploitation.

Textual patterns do not, however, end the issues mirrored in the plays. This explains why in this second analytical level of the texts we look at eco-spiritual interpretation. The immediate argument here is not that the plays explicitly declare the child to be nature or that every exploited body literally represents a landscape. Rather, the texts repeatedly dramatise an extractive logic in which powerful individuals or systems take from vulnerable bodies, consume the results of their labour, and leave them exhausted or deprived. Within the theoretical framework of this study, this logic provides the basis for reading child exploitation in relation to ecological violence which leads to spiritual discontinuity. This process starts in *Beasts of No Nation* with the polluted lavatory and human waste because they bring exploitation and environmental contamination into the same dramatic space. The N. S. M. are compelled to handle the physical consequences of a polluted social order. Their labour is connected to waste, while their social position prevents them from controlling the structures that produce that waste. The play therefore presents a vulnerable body working within an environment of contamination. The immediate textual meaning concerns degrading labour and political corruption, but the recurrence of pollution, disposal, and bodily degradation makes an ecological extension of the analysis possible.

Within an African eco-spiritual perspective, the significance of this extension lies in the interconnectedness of human life and the environment. As argued in the theoretical framework, African ecological thought can extend beyond the physical environment to include cultural and spiritual relationships. This cultural perspective does not replace the meanings of the play; it provides the interpretive context through which the dramatic patterns of exploitation can be understood in a broader framework. Thus, when the vulnerable body is repeatedly subjected to extraction and degradation, this may be read as transfiguring the same extractive logic through which landscapes are depleted and environments are polluted. In fact, Besong and Butake use a plethora of literary devices such as symbolism, metaphors and allusion to depict the exploitation of the child. This exploitation of the child functions as a metaphor for the violence nature which carries spiritual essences. The child symbolises landscapes/nature. These landscapes are generally supposed to be protected, not exploited. When we exploit them, they deplete. It is supposed to be in case of extreme necessity that man may use nature. Contrary, the texts under study depict the struggling children at all time. These children workers constantly work in horrible working conditions, and not even in cases of extreme necessity. This exploitation of the child is a metaphoric representation of the depletion of nature through human or anthropocentric violence. Labouring the body of the child indicates extraction of natural resources of the earth without remorse. In Africa, this goes beyond simply extracting the resources in landscapes because these landscapes hold spiritual essences. Tata Andrew Ngeh & Mackeus Nguni argue that nature “holds African spirituality and culture” (p. 63) [17]. The central argument here is that

child exploitation or child labour leads to ecological destruction which leads to spiritual discontinuity.

The relationship between the child and the landscape is therefore not one of direct identity but of structural correspondence. The child is exploited through a system that extracts labour without adequate concern for the body's well-being or future. Similarly, ecological violence involves extracting from landscapes without adequate concern for environmental sustainability or the future. Both processes operate through the consumption of what is necessary for continuity. Child labour consumes childhood and can compromise the future of the younger generation; ecological exploitation consumes resources and can compromise the future sustainability of human and nonhuman life. It is this shared logic of extraction and depletion that allows the exploited child to function as an ecologically meaningful figure. The child here, like nature, is inherently neutral until it encounters human tendencies that seek personal gains. In the course of seeking these gains, there is no remorse. This explains why in *Family Saga*, despite how Kamala labours, he still goes back home to meet nothing in the store. The emptiness of the store is a metaphoric symbol of nature in future. Butake seems to be foreseeing a future where humans will no longer have the nature which they are destroying today. The argument is that, when we labour the child, we are consuming the future. This is because child labour is an ecospiritual crisis. According to ILO and UNICEF 2021, child labour is both as a result of poverty and the cause of future poverty [12]. As a result of poverty, most children who embark on child labour do so because their parents lack survival means. As the cause of future poverty, children who suffer from child labour sacrifice their education and end up as street children. As such, the future becomes bleak. Thus, exploiting children through child labour means destroying the future. This phenomenon is equivalent to the fact that exploiting the land is destroying sustainability. So, just like destroying the future of the child through child labour, nature sustainability is tampered with when we exploit the land without replenishing the resources. In fact, the child's body thus becomes an ecospiritual site upon which the violence of extraction is inscribed. This fundamental problem requires a different approach in resolving it since strategies implemented by authorities and individual have not proven to be successful.

9. Dramatic Visions and Proposal for an African Communalistic Ethics

Although Bate Besong and Bole Butake tackle child labour that has gained attention in other walks of life, they suggest novel solutions which if properly implemented can help reduce child labour and its attending consequences. They do this by first demonstrating that, the child alone cannot embark on the fight against child labour and win. In *Beasts of No Nation* we see this when the N. S. M embark on the fight on their own and it is a failed revolution. In the text, “N. S. M storm in with

buckets full of excrement. Comrade Mayor Aadingingin... swallows the incriminating evidence" (p. 142) [4]. At the end, nothing happens to Aadingingin. He shoots Otshama and the N. S. M run away and he says "My Word is Double Law./ I AM THE LAW!" (p. 143) [4]. This illustrates the failure of individual resistance in the fight against child labour. Thus, the child alone cannot fight against child labour. This shows the continued domination of authority over vulnerable subjects.

The failed resistance is however significant because it dramatizes the limits of isolated or inadequately organised resistance in the face of systemic oppression. The failure of the N. S. M does not automatically prescribe a particular solution. What it demonstrates is the magnitude and resilience of the structures that sustain exploitation. The dramatic vision of *Beasts of No Nation* is consequently more diagnostic than programmatic: Besong exposes corruption, political violence, silence, and the failure of existing institutions to protect vulnerable subjects, but the play ends without a complete resolution.

Family Saga, by contrast, moves more visibly toward dialogue, collective memory, reconciliation, and the restoration of relationships. Kamala's instruction that his children should "go out into the community and find out our family story. / Our history" [5] situates liberation within a process of recovering memory and collective identity. Song and dance also become occasions for dialogue between the oppressed and their oppressors. As Kamala explains, performance can be "an occasion for us to dialogue with Kamalo through song and dance" (p. 58) [5]. The dramatic movement toward reconciliation is therefore more explicit in *Family Saga* than in *Beasts of No Nation*.

Secondly, Besong and Butake demonstrate that the government alone cannot fight against child labour. This is evident in *Beasts of No Nation* when Besong depicts collapse of moral order and authority. To begin with, the authority is silent. Lazare Otshama speaks with the N. S. M and we get to understand that, before becoming an authority, he has been a N. S. M too. This depicts adults who face child labour, outlive it; but, instead of fighting against it, they either stay silent or promote it themselves. Otshama supports Dealsham Aadingingin and even tells N. S. M that "he can order your execution, today, now, this week as a subversive element" (p. 136) [4]. To further illustrate the inability of authorities alone to fight against child labour, we observe roles of hero-worship and law failure. In the text, citizens begin by worshiping authority instead of fighting for liberation. The system uses the following instruments to implement child labour: "tear gas, water hoses, equipment for constant beatings, water immersions, Russian roulette" (p. 120) [4]. These cause fear and instead make children in terrible working situations to worship authority. The Blindman tells us that, "Hero-worship is strongest where there is least regard for freedom" (p. 136) [4]. He says this in connection to the inability of the N. S. M to take hold of their freedom. In *Family Saga*, the people do not leave everything to the government to handle. Kamala tells his two children that

dialogue between the oppressor and the oppressed will help resolve the problem. He says,

We will dance for them. As slaves, that is our duty. To entertain our masters and owners. But it is also an occasion for us to dialogue with Kamalo through song and dance. Both of you shall now go out into the community and find out our family story. Our history" (p. 58) [5].

This does not only emphasize on the importance of dialogue and communal spirit, but it also shows the importance of African folklore in the fight against child labour. Song and dance are elements of African culture that can help in educating and sensitising people on the ills of child labour.

As shown above, the two plays demonstrate that the child alone or authority alone cannot liberate the child from child labour. Despite this, the two plays do not articulate a single approach to the fight against child labour. This means that their dramatic visions are different. Besong's play foregrounds the catastrophic consequences of systemic exploitation and the limitations of resistance within an authoritarian structure, whereas Butake's play provides a more constructive, though limited, movement toward dialogue and reconciliation. The comparative analysis nevertheless reveals a common concern with the inadequacy of individual vulnerability in confronting systems of exploitation. In both plays, the exploited subject exists within larger networks of power, family, community, and political authority. This shared concern provides the textual basis for the broader recommendation.

This recommendation in question is the researcher's perspective and we call it the African communalistic ethics. This perspective originates from the failure of the resistance of the N. S. M in *Beasts of No Nation* which demonstrates that vulnerable subjects cannot easily overcome entrenched structures of exploitation without broader transformation and the fact that, the reconciliation in *Family Saga* is not transformed into an unqualified social policy simply because the play concludes with a movement toward peace. Instead, its dramatic emphasis on memory, dialogue, collective participation, and the restoration of relationships offers interpretive resources from which a researcher may develop a broader ethical proposal which, in this case is the African communalistic ethics. The recommendation of an African communalistic ethics of labour emerges from this comparative interpretation. Such an ethic would emphasise collective responsibility for the protection of vulnerable children, equitable relations of labour, respect for human dignity, and concern for the ecological conditions that sustain communal life. Within the framework of this study, its relevance lies in its resistance to the extractive logic identified in the two plays. Child labour, ecological exploitation, and social domination all involve relationships in which power is exercised without adequate responsibility toward vulnerable bodies or future continuity. A communalistic ethic, as proposed by the researcher here, would challenge this logic by shifting emphasis from individual accumulation toward shared responsibility.

The proposed model should therefore not be understood as

a simple return to an idealised African past or as a claim that African communities have historically been free from exploitation. It is a normative framework that draws selectively on communal principles of interdependence, collective responsibility, and relational accountability. Its purpose is to propose an ethical orientation capable of addressing the interconnected concerns identified in the analysis. Applied to child labour, such an orientation would require responsibility beyond the child, government and the family. The state, employers, communities, educational institutions, and other social actors would share responsibility for protecting vulnerable children. Applied to ecological concerns, the same orientation would challenge forms of extraction that consume landscapes and resources without regard for future generations. The connection between these two concerns lies in the study's central argument: both child exploitation and ecological exploitation can operate through an extractive logic that privileges immediate benefit over vulnerable life and future continuity. So, on the basis of the different dramatic visions demonstrated in the plays under study, this study proposes a communalistic ethical framework as one possible contemporary response to the interrelated problems of child exploitation, ecological violence, and spiritual disruption.

10. Conclusion

This study examined child labour in Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation* and Bole Butake's *Family Saga* through a composite framework that brings Marxist criticism into dialogue with African eco-spiritual thought. The study began with three questions concerning the representation of child labour, its transfiguration into ecological and spiritual concern, and the dramatic visions of the two playwrights. The findings can therefore be summarised in direct relation to these questions.

First, the analysis demonstrates that child labour is represented in the two plays through the exploitation of vulnerable bodies within unequal systems of power. In *Beasts of No Nation*, the Night-Soil-Men perform degrading labour within a corrupt political environment in which fear and silence protect oppressive structures. In *Family Saga*, labour is organised through unequal relations of production and consumption: Kamala and his family work while Kamalo benefits from their labour. The two plays therefore figure child labour as more than an individual problem. It emerges as a consequence of systemic inequality, material exploitation, and the failure of social and political structures to protect vulnerable subjects. In this respect, Marxist criticism helps explain the class-based and structural mechanisms through which exploitation operates.

Second, the study demonstrates that the transfiguration of child labour into ecological and spiritual concern is an interpretive movement grounded in textual patterns rather than a literal equation imposed upon the plays. The dramatic texts repeatedly represent pollution, bodily degradation, appropri-

tion, rape, exhaustion, dispossession, loss of identity, and disrupted continuity. These patterns establish a shared logic of extraction in which powerful individuals and systems consume vulnerable bodies while disregarding their well-being and future. The African eco-spiritual framework then enables this extractive logic to be interpreted in relation to ecological violence. The exploited child and the exploited landscape are not identical, but they are connected through a structural and metaphorical correspondence based on extraction, depletion, and the consumption of future possibilities. The spiritual dimension remains an interpretive extension grounded in African conceptions of interconnected relationships among human beings, landscapes, culture, and spirituality. The study therefore does not claim that every act of child exploitation in the plays explicitly produces spiritual collapse. Rather, it argues that the texts' representations of disrupted relationships can acquire eco-spiritual significance when interpreted within an African ecological and metaphysical framework.

Third, the comparative analysis reveals that Besong and Butake offer different dramatic visions in relation to exploitation and its possible resolution. *Beasts of No Nation* ends without a successful communal reconciliation. Its dramatic vision is primarily diagnostic: it exposes the resilience of oppressive systems, the failure of political authority, and the difficulty of resisting entrenched power. *Family Saga*, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on dialogue, collective memory, community, reconciliation, and the restoration of relationships. The plays therefore do not provide a single, explicit remedial programme.

The African communalistic ethics of labour advanced by this study must consequently be understood as a normative recommendation proposed by the researcher rather than as a direct prescription jointly articulated by Besong and Butake. This recommendation emerges from the comparative interpretation of the two plays, particularly their shared concern with vulnerability, unequal power, relational breakdown, and the inadequacy of isolated resistance. It proposes an ethical orientation based on collective responsibility, equitable labour relations, protection of vulnerable children, concern for future continuity, and responsibility toward the natural environment.

The central contribution of the study, therefore, is to show that child labour can be read beyond its immediate socio-economic consequences. Through the composite framework adopted here, the exploitation of the child is understood as part of a wider extractive logic that also provides a basis for interpreting ecological violence and, within an African eco-spiritual context, the disruption of relationships that sustain cultural and spiritual continuity. The study does not collapse these forms of violence into one another. Instead, it traces the metaphorical and structural correspondences through which human exploitation, ecological depletion, and spiritual disruption may be brought into conversation.

Ultimately, the two plays reveal different dimensions of the problem: Besong exposes the destructive persistence of oppressive systems, while Butake provides a more constructive,

though limited, movement toward relational restoration. The African communalistic ethics proposed by this study is the researcher's response to these dramatic insights. It represents not a textual claim about what the playwrights explicitly prescribe, but a normative attempt to extend their concerns into a broader contemporary framework for thinking about child protection, ecological responsibility, and the future of communal life.

Abbreviations

ILO	International Labour Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
N. S. M	Night-Soil-Men

Author Contributions

Mackeus Nguni: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study can be found in the two plays under study. The plays are *Beasts of No Nation* by Bate Besong and *Family Saga* by Bole Butake.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



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Research Field

Mackeus Nguni: Ecospirituality, Eco-culture, Spirituality, Afrocentricity, Cultural Studies, Ethno-ethics and Bioethics