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The Village as a Character: Rural Landscapes in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*

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Abstract

This study examines the rural landscape in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* as an active character rather than a passive backdrop, using an ecocritical approach to explore its symbolic and functional roles. The objective is to analyze how the village of Kala critiques colonial modernity, highlights cultural dislocations, and preserves communal values and traditions. The methodology involves detailed textual analysis of human-nature interactions, focusing on the juxtaposition between Kala's rural authenticity and Medza's alienation as a product of colonial education. Main findings reveal the rural environment as a repository of cultural continuity and resistance against colonial disruptions, contrasting with the perceived artificiality and alienation of urban life. The study concludes that Beti's portrayal of Kala enriches ecocritical discourse in African literature by demonstrating the intricate links between environment, identity, and socio-political critique in post-colonial narratives.

Keywords: *Landscape, Post-colonial ecocriticism, Cultural identity, Human-nature interactions*

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1. Introduction

Mission to Kala by Mongo Beti is a notable post-colonial text that delves into the complexities of colonialism, religion, and social dynamics in Cameroon. Written in 1957, it follows the story of a French missionary, Father Drumont, and his interactions with the rural villagers of Kala (Beti, 1957), a remote part of the country. The novel critiques both the French colonial system and the missionary's role in the exploitation and dehumanization of the indigenous population. While much of the scholarly focus has centered on Beti's critique of colonialism and religion, there is a significant element that often gets overlooked: the rural setting itself and its role in shaping the narrative.

The rural landscape of the novel is integral to the novel's thematic exploration, as it serves as the backdrop for the characters' interactions and struggles. The villagers' lives are deeply rooted in their environment, a setting far removed from the colonial centers of power and control. The rural landscape in the novel is not merely a passive stage but actively shapes the characters' identities and experiences. Yet, the novel's focus on colonial critique has led many literary analyses to neglect the rural setting as a dynamic force within the story.

Scholars have often approached the novel through the lens of colonial resistance, focusing on the clash between the French colonizers and the indigenous people. While this is a crucial aspect of the novel, it overlooks the way the rural

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setting interacts with these themes. The novel's rural landscape is not just a symbol of backwardness or ignorance, as often depicted in colonial narratives, but a complex space where cultural practices, traditional beliefs, and resistance to foreign influence unfold. Overlooking this aspect, readers may miss out on understanding how the rural setting serves as a site of both continuity and change for the villagers.

In recent years, however, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of the rural setting in post-colonial literature. In the text, Beti uses the rural landscape to highlight the resilience of indigenous cultures and the way in which they resist colonial imposition. The villagers' connection to their land and their traditions is a central theme that complicates the binary between colonizer and colonized, revealing the rural space as not just a site of colonial domination but also of indigenous agency. This perspective opens up new avenues for understanding the novel's broader social and political implications.

In African literature, the rural environment often functions as a setting, providing a backdrop for the unfolding of social, political, and personal narratives. However, a gap in scholarship exists when it comes to recognizing the rural environment as an active character in the story. While there has been substantial focus on the human characters and their interactions within rural settings, the rural landscape itself is rarely examined as a dynamic, influential entity with its own ecological, cultural, and symbolic significance. This oversight is especially notable in the context of post-colonial African literature, where rural spaces are frequently portrayed as either sites of colonial exploitation or as static spaces against which the forces of modernity and urbanization are measured. Yet, this approach fails to capture the full complexity of the rural environment's role in shaping the narratives of African novels.

The ecological significance of the rural environment is often underexplored, particularly in how it interacts with characters' livelihoods, cultural practices, and identities. In many African societies, the land is not simply a place to live but a central part of the people's spiritual and cultural life. This connection to the land influences rituals, agriculture, social structures, and even resistance movements. The rural environment in African literature is often a living, breathing character, its cycles, resources, and challenges shaping the actions and identities of the people who inhabit it. However, this deeper ecological and cultural role of the rural environment is frequently overshadowed by narratives focused on human characters and the consequences of colonialism, political struggles, or migration.

The rural setting's agency in African literature is rarely explored in depth. The rural landscape is typically portrayed in binary terms: either as a symbol of tradition and continuity, or as a space of stagnation in contrast to the "progress" offered by urbanization or colonial interventions. This narrow representation ignores the rural environment's dynamic and evolving nature. The rural space can act as a repository of collective memory, as a space for cultural resistance, and as a complex system of interconnected life forms.

Exploring this gap in scholarship could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the rural environment's significance in African literature. Apprehending the rural landscape as an active and influential character—one that shapes and is shaped by the human protagonists—scholars could unearth new layers of meaning in the narrative. This perspective would foster a deeper investigation into how the ecological and cultural dimensions of the rural environment are intertwined with themes of identity, resistance, and survival. Treating the rural setting as a central character could reveal essential insights into the relationship between people and their land, the spiritual and cultural reverence for nature, and the ways in which colonialism and globalization have affected indigenous communities' connection to their environment.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, it aims to examine the symbolic and functional roles of the rural landscape in *Mission to Kala*, focusing on how the environment serves not only as a backdrop but as an active participant in the narrative. Second, the study seeks to explore how Mongo Beti critiques colonial modernity and its disruptive impact on the indigenous culture, particularly through the lens of the missionary's presence in the rural setting. Finally, this analysis will be situated within the broader framework of post-colonial ecocriticism, exploring the intersections of environmental issues, colonialism, and cultural identity. Through these objectives, the study aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of the rural environment's significance in the novel.

The rural landscape in the novel plays a crucial role in shaping the novel's narrative structure, acting not merely as a backdrop but as an active participant in the story. The environment of the village, Kala, is integral to the development of characters and their interactions, particularly in how it contrasts with the imposed colonial systems represented by the French missionary, Father Drumont. The rural setting reflects the tension between colonial modernity and indigenous traditions, providing a space where post-colonial critique unfolds. Presenting the villagers' resistance to foreign influence and their deep connection to the land, Beti uses the rural landscape to critique colonialism's disruptive impact, highlighting the complexities of identity, culture, and power within a colonial context.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a dual theoretical framework of ecocriticism and post-colonial theory to examine the rural landscape in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*. Ecocriticism, a framework that explores the relationship between literature and the environment, provides the basis for analyzing the rural setting not only as a backdrop but as an active, dynamic force that shapes the narrative and characters. Foundational texts in ecocriticism, such as Glotfelty (1996) and Buell (1995), emphasize the interconnection between human culture and the environment, illustrating how literature engages with ecological concerns. Recent scholarship has integrated post-colonial perspectives, with Nixon (2011) exploring the intersection of environmental exploitation and colonial histories, particularly in marginalized communities.

Post-colonial ecocriticism, further developed in works by Huggan and Tiffin (2010), examines how colonialism disrupted local ecosystems and displaced indigenous knowledge systems. Their framework argues for an ecocritical reading of post-colonial texts, positioning the environment not merely as a backdrop but as an active participant in the colonial encounter, with long-lasting implications for both ecological and cultural survival. This perspective underscores the role of rural spaces in African literature, where the environment is intricately tied to social and political resistance, particularly in post-colonial contexts. In *Mission to Kala*, Beti critiques colonial modernity by portraying the rural landscape of Kala village as a site of resistance and survival, offering a counterpoint to the imposition of Western education and missionary activities.

Critical scholarship on Mongo Beti's works has primarily focused on themes of cultural identity, colonialism, and the socio-political ramifications of French colonial rule in Cameroon. Scholars such as Werbner (1992) and Wren (1974) have examined Beti's critique of colonial structures, particularly how colonialism disrupts indigenous cultures, identities, and social systems. Werbner (1992) explores how Beti's characters, especially in *Mission to Kala*, navigate the complexities of cultural hybridity and resistance under colonial rule, with particular emphasis on the tensions between African traditions and Western-imposed systems such as education and religion. Wren (1974) similarly highlights Beti's exploration of colonialism's negative impact on African self-perception, focusing on characters like Father Drumont in *Mission to Kala*, who symbolizes the corrupt and manipulative forces of the colonial state, which uses education as a tool of domination.

While these scholars contribute to an understanding of the destructive effects of colonialism on cultural identity, the role of the rural landscape as an active, shaping force within the narrative remains underexplored. The rural setting in *Mission to Kala* is not merely a backdrop for the unfolding narrative but a vital, dynamic force that both shapes and reflects the socio-political and ecological struggles of post-colonial societies. This oversight is notable in light of the growing body of scholarship on the relationship between environment and colonialism in African literature, which suggests that rural landscapes often embody indigenous values, traditions, and resistance to colonial exploitation (Gikandi, 2003; Huggan and Tiffin, 2010).

Gikandi (2003) highlights the significance of rural spaces in African literature as sites of authenticity and cultural resistance. He argues that rural environments are often depicted as spaces that preserve traditional values, which are constantly under threat from colonialism and modernity. He notes that, in many African texts, including Beti's works, the rural landscape becomes a symbol of both cultural survival and the struggle for autonomy. This analysis opens up an opportunity to examine how *Mission to Kala* positions the rural village of Kala not only as a space of resistance but as a space deeply intertwined with the ecological and cultural survival of its people.

Additionally, in the past two decades, scholars such as Ashcroft (2016) and Tiffin (2014) have continued to explore how colonialism and the environment intersect in post-colonial literature. Ashcroft's work, particularly on the concept of "environmental justice" in post-colonial contexts, brings attention to how marginalized communities are often those most vulnerable to both ecological degradation and cultural erasure. His work underscores how colonialism's environmental legacies—such as deforestation, land dispossession, and the extraction of resources—have lasting consequences, often leading to the breakdown of indigenous environmental knowledge and practices. Tiffin (2014) builds on this by focusing on the ways that post-colonial authors use landscapes to critique colonial practices and advocate for a return to indigenous ecological values.

Moreover, scholars working within ecocriticism have significantly expanded the scope of analysis for African literature in recent years. Glotfelty (1996) and Buell (1995) have emphasized the need to treat the environment not just as a passive setting but as an active participant in literature's reflection on culture, identity, and social justice. Glotfelty's approach, which advocates for an ecocritical reading of texts that foreground the environment as a key component of the narrative, opens up a pathway to exploring the ways in which Beti's *Mission to Kala* positions the rural landscape as both a site of resistance and an active force that challenges the colonial order. Buell (1995) extends this analysis by

arguing that literature's capacity to engage with environmental issues encourages ecological consciousness, which is particularly pertinent when examining the exploitation of both culture and land under colonial rule.

In the context of post-colonial ecocriticism, feminist scholars such as DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) have significantly enriched the theoretical landscape by integrating environmental and social justice, particularly in post-colonial contexts. Their work calls attention to the ways that colonialism not only exploits indigenous cultures but also degrades the natural environment, further complicating the relationship between people and land. This framework aligns well with the themes of *Mission to Kala*, where the rural village is depicted as a place where indigenous ecological knowledge resists the encroachment of colonial urbanization and environmental degradation.

In *Mission to Kala*, Beti's rural setting of Kala represents both a site of cultural resistance and a dynamic agent in the narrative. The village's rural landscape is not a passive backdrop but an essential force that shapes characters, influences their actions, and reflects the tensions between tradition and colonial imposition. This dynamic relationship between rural and urban spaces in *Mission to Kala* echoes the findings of scholars such as Ashcroft (2016) and Tiffin (2014), who have explored the intersection of environmental justice with post-colonial struggle. For example, the rural landscape in Beti's work reflects a complex relationship with both nature and colonialism, where environmental degradation symbolizes the wider cultural erasure caused by colonialism's imposition of modernity.

Thus, while earlier scholarship, including that of Werbner (1992) and Wren (1974), has focused on colonialism and cultural identity, the role of the rural environment in shaping and challenging colonial power structures has not been sufficiently explored. This study seeks to fill this gap by offering a critical ecocritical lens that highlights the rural landscape's active role in the narrative, providing a deeper understanding of how the environment both shapes and is shaped by the socio-political struggles in Beti's *Mission to Kala*.

This study seeks to fill that gap, employing a close reading of Beti's descriptions of Kala, focusing on the interactions between humans and nature, and the rural-urban dichotomy. The analysis will be supplemented by comparative studies with other African literary works, such as *Things Fall Apart*, which also highlights the importance of the rural landscape in shaping indigenous cultures and the destructive impact of colonialism. Data will be drawn from textual evidence in *Mission to Kala*, emphasizing passages that describe the landscape, human-nature interactions, and the tensions between rural and urban spaces. The study will also integrate critical essays and theoretical texts to provide context for understanding the broader discourse of colonialism, resistance, and environmental justice in African literature.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Rural Landscape as a Character

In the novel, Beti uses the village of Kala not merely as a setting but as an active character that shapes the experiences of Medza, the protagonist, and serves as a counterpoint to his alienation in the urban, colonial environment. The rural landscape is deeply intertwined with Medza's journey of self-discovery and resistance, offering a space where indigenous values and traditional ways of life stand in contrast to the disorienting forces of colonialism. With the village's physical and cultural landscape, Beti critiques the disruption caused by colonial rule and highlights the conflict between tradition and modernity.

One of the ways the village of Kala shapes Medza's experiences is through its role as a site of emotional and cultural grounding. For example, when Medza first arrives in Kala, the description of the village evokes a sense of familiarity and rootedness, in stark contrast to the alienation he feels in the urban setting. Beti writes, "The village, with its familiar smells and sights, spoke to Medza in a language that the city had robbed him of" (p. 34). This passage illustrates how the rural environment immediately connects Medza to his African identity, offering a place of solace and belonging in the face of the modern, colonial influences of the city. Kala, with its natural rhythms and community-based way of life, provides Medza with a grounding that the urban world, with its colonial and capitalist pressures, cannot offer.

Additionally, the village of Kala becomes a symbol of resistance against the encroaching colonial structures. The people of Kala, in contrast to the urban elite that Medza encounters in the city, remain closely tied to their traditional customs, language, and ways of life. Kala represents a space where colonial education and modernity have not fully infiltrated, and it is in this rural setting that Medza is forced to confront the contradictions within himself. The village offers Medza a stark contrast to the intellectual alienation he feels in the city, where colonial education has displaced his sense of cultural identity. As Beti describes, "The villagers were not troubled by the Western diseases of thought; their minds were open to the simple truths that the city had long abandoned" (p. 77). In this way, Kala represents a space of cultural preservation and resistance, where the influence of colonialism is resisted through the maintenance of traditional practices.

However, the village also serves as a site of critique, where Medza's own internal conflicts come to the fore. His return to Kala forces him to reckon with the limits of his own understanding and the tensions between his colonial education and his roots. Kala becomes a space of reflection, where he grapples with the uncomfortable realization that his intellectualized view of the world is at odds with the simplicity and wisdom he encounters in the village. In one pivotal scene, Medza reflects, "What I had learned in the city seemed so distant from the calm assurance of these simple villagers" (p. 90). This moment highlights the profound disconnection between Medza's urban, colonial education and the unpretentious yet profound understanding of life that the villagers embody. Kala, thus, becomes a site of both refuge and confrontation, allowing Medza to examine the limitations of his own intellectual and cultural alienation.

Also, the natural environment of Kala becomes a symbol of cultural continuity, offering a space where traditions are upheld, and where the village's values of solidarity, communal labor, and ecological wisdom remain intact, in contrast to the alienating forces of urban colonialism.

The most notable representation of the rural environment's role in preserving communal values is the portrayal of the villagers' relationship with the land. The land in Kala is not merely a resource to be exploited, but a living entity that sustains both the physical and social fabric of the community. Beti emphasizes this when Medza observes, "In Kala, the soil binds the people together, just as the elders say—the land is their mother, their provider, their link to the past" (p. 62). This description situates the rural environment as a vital force in preserving the values of interdependence and cooperation, values that are integral to the community's way of life. The villagers' connection to the land symbolizes their deep-rooted authenticity and their refusal to be disconnected from their ancestral heritage, despite the pressures of colonial modernity.

The rural environment also acts as a repository for cultural traditions and communal practices that are passed down through generations. In Kala, the elders play a key role in maintaining the community's values, serving as both custodians of history and leaders in guiding younger generations. One significant example occurs when Medza reflects on the stories told by the elders, which are embedded in the landscape: "The ancient stories of Kala are tied to the trees, the rivers, and the mountains. They have been passed down in songs, in rituals, and in the way we live with the land" (p. 95). These oral traditions are not only a means of preserving the community's cultural memory but also a way of ensuring that the values of unity, respect for nature, and harmony with one another remain intact. The natural environment, therefore, acts as both a setting for these practices and a symbol of the enduring strength of communal bonds.

Beti further emphasizes the symbolic role of the rural environment in preserving authenticity through the contrast between Kala and the urban centers. The city, with its colonial institutions and modern influences, is portrayed as a place of disconnection, alienation, and cultural erosion. Medza's experience in the city, where he is subjected to colonial education and detached from the values of his rural upbringing, exemplifies the disruptive force of urban spaces on African identity. As Medza grapples with his conflicting feelings about the rural and urban worlds, he begins to recognize that the village's authenticity lies in its resistance to colonial forces. Beti writes, "The city promises progress, but the city only robs you of your soul; Kala, with all its simplicity, is where I am truly myself" (p. 130). In this passage, Kala's rural environment becomes symbolic of an untainted cultural authenticity that urban spaces, shaped by colonial imposition, cannot replicate.

Moreover, the rural village of Kala stands as a site of resistance against the encroaching forces of colonialism and Westernization. The community's adherence to traditional practices, such as communal farming, rituals, and a harmonious relationship with the land, embodies a form of silent rebellion. It is in Kala that the village's indigenous values survive, unscathed by the colonial project. As Medza reflects on his return to the village, he notes, "It is here in Kala, amidst the old rituals and the age-old ways, that we find the strength to resist the forces that seek to erase us" (p. 112). This resistance is not overt or violent but is rooted in the persistence of cultural practices and a steadfast connection to the land. The rural landscape serves as a powerful symbol of authenticity, offering a counterpoint to the alienating effects of urban, colonial spaces.

3.2. Critique of Colonial Modernity

The novel also offers a scathing critique of colonial education and modernity, particularly how these forces alienate African characters from their cultural roots. With the experiences of the protagonist, Medza, Beti demonstrates how colonial education undermines African identity, displaces indigenous knowledge systems, and fosters a sense of cultural dislocation. The novel portrays colonial education as a tool of colonial domination, designed to erase African traditions and replace them with Western ideals, creating a rupture between individuals and their heritage.

From the outset, Beti presents colonial education as a mechanism of alienation. Medza's experience with the French colonial educational system exemplifies how this institution serves as a vehicle for the imposition of Western values and

knowledge. Medza's return to Kala from the colonial school highlights the disconnect he feels between his village's cultural values and the Western education he has received. Beti writes, "Medza had learned from the school that his people were primitive and backward. He was taught that their way of life, their beliefs, their language, were nothing more than remnants of a barbaric past" (p. 47). This statement underscores the colonial education system's role in eroding the dignity of African traditions, presenting them as inferior and out of step with the so-called progress of Western civilization. The educational system, in this context, serves not only to devalue indigenous knowledge but also to create a sense of shame about African cultural practices.

Colonial education's alienating effect is further explored through the character of Medza, who, despite his initial resistance, begins to internalize the Westernized perspectives he encounters in school. His return to Kala, where he attempts to reconcile his dual identity as a product of colonial education and an indigenous African, highlights the emotional and psychological toll of this alienation. Beti illustrates Medza's internal conflict when he reflects, "I speak their language, I wear their clothes, and I have adopted their ideas, but in my heart, I know I do not belong to them" (p. 99). This moment reveals how colonial education has not only stripped Medza of his sense of belonging to his cultural roots but has also left him stranded between two worlds—one that he no longer fully embraces and another that he struggles to reconnect with.

Beti's critique of modernity, intertwined with the critique of colonial education, further explores how colonialism and its ideals foster alienation from indigenous ways of life. The urban environment, depicted as a symbol of colonial modernity, stands in sharp contrast to the rural setting of Kala, which embodies authenticity and continuity with tradition. The city represents the forces of colonization, industrialization, and Westernization, all of which pull individuals away from their cultural heritage. Medza, having experienced both the city's colonial modernity and the rural authenticity of Kala, is torn between the two. In one of his reflections, he states, "The city promises a kind of progress, a future, but it is a future without roots, and no matter how high one climbs, one remains a foreigner" (p. 115). This statement illustrates Beti's view that colonial modernity, symbolized by the urban environment, offers material progress but leaves individuals spiritually and culturally alienated.

Furthermore, Beti critiques colonial education as a process of cultural erasure, which is symbolized by the missionary school in Kala. The missionaries, acting as agents of colonialism, attempt to replace indigenous African knowledge with European ideals. Medza's encounter with Father Drumont, a key representative of the colonial educational system, reflects this clash. Father Drumont insists that "the education we offer here is a gift, a way to civilize and uplift these people" (p. 76). However, this "gift" is a thinly veiled attempt to subjugate the African identity by imposing Western values. The tension between Medza and Father Drumont encapsulates the broader conflict between indigenous African culture and the colonial education system that seeks to dismantle it.

Remarkably too, the novel explores the stark tension between rural authenticity and urban artificiality, using the contrasting settings of the village of Kala and the colonial city to highlight the cultural and psychological conflict experienced by characters like Medza. Beti uses these settings not just as physical locations, but as symbolic spaces that represent competing visions of African identity. The rural environment of Kala is portrayed as authentic, rooted in tradition and communal values, while the urban city embodies the artificial, foreign influence of colonial modernity that disrupts these indigenous values. Medza's internal struggle and his experiences in both environments critiques the colonial project and its alienating effects on African identity.

The rural setting of Kala is presented as a space where authenticity, rooted in African traditions and communal living, is preserved and cherished. Medza's connection to Kala, despite his education in the city, reflects this deep sense of cultural authenticity. When Medza returns to the village, he is struck by the simplicity and vitality of rural life, which is in direct contrast to the alienating and dehumanizing nature of urban colonial spaces. Beti describes Kala's landscape as "a haven of life, where the people, though poor, are bound by their shared labor and collective spirit" (p. 58). The rural landscape in this depiction is not just a physical setting but a symbol of unity and the preservation of indigenous African values. The communal way of life in Kala offers a sense of belonging that contrasts sharply with the alienation Medza feels in the city.

The city, by contrast, is depicted as an artificial space where colonial powers impose foreign ideologies that sever individuals from their cultural roots. Medza's experience in the colonial city is one of disillusionment, as he feels increasingly detached from the values of his village and his heritage. The city represents modernity, but this "modernity" is shown to be hollow and oppressive. Medza reflects, "In the city, I am supposed to feel at home, but I am a stranger to myself, wandering in a world that is not mine" (p. 92). This quote highlights the emotional and psychological alienation that the city causes, emphasizing the tension between the rural authenticity of Kala and the artificiality of urban spaces.

The city's artificiality, in this case, stems from the imposition of colonial structures, which prioritize European norms and values over indigenous ways of life, creating a disconnection for individuals like Medza who are torn between two worlds.

Beti further critiques the artificiality of urban spaces through the character of Father Drumont, a missionary who embodies the colonial mindset. Father Drumont represents the imposition of Western education and Christianity, which he insists are the "true path" to progress and civilization. He dismisses the values and traditions of Kala as "backward" and "primitive," suggesting that the villagers need to abandon their indigenous beliefs in favor of Western ideals. In one conversation with Medza, Father Drumont states, "The city is where you will find your future, your real chance for progress. Here in the village, you are just playing at life" (p. 77). This statement reflects the colonial attitude that equates urban life with civilization and progress, while relegating rural life to a state of stagnation and inferiority. The city, in Father Drumont's view, is the place where true modernity is achieved, even though it remains disconnected from the authenticity and vitality of rural culture.

Medza's personal journey in the novel further illuminates the conflict between rural authenticity and urban artificiality. While he initially embraces the promises of the city, the more he experiences its colonial structures, the more he becomes disillusioned with the urban world. He begins to realize that the city, despite its material advantages, offers no real sense of belonging or identity. Reflecting on his time in the city, Medza admits, "I thought the city would make me whole, but instead it has only stripped me of what I was. It is in the soil of Kala that I feel truly rooted" (p. 114). This moment of realization encapsulates the central tension in *Mission to Kala*—that while the city may offer material wealth and technological advancement, it lacks the spiritual and cultural depth that the rural environment of Kala provides. The soil of Kala, with its deep connection to Medza's ancestors and his heritage, offers him a sense of identity and belonging that the city cannot replicate.

3.3. Human-Nature Interactions

The text emphasizes the symbiotic relationships between the characters and their natural environment, underscoring how deeply interconnected human existence is with the land. The novel portrays the rural environment not merely as a backdrop for the characters' actions but as an active participant in shaping their lives, values, and identities. Beti weaves a narrative in which the characters' interactions with nature—whether through farming, rituals, or daily survival—are depicted as essential to their well-being and sense of self. The natural world is portrayed as both a sustaining force and a symbolic representation of African identity, culture, and continuity.

The village of Kala, where Medza returns after his education in the colonial city, offers a vivid example of how human-nature relationships function symbiotically. The village is primarily agricultural, and the characters' livelihoods are intertwined with the land, which they respect as a provider and sustainer of life. The villagers' deep connection to their environment is conveyed in scenes where nature is depicted as not just a source of food and resources but also as a source of spiritual and cultural meaning. Beti writes, "The earth of Kala gives back to those who honor it, feeding them with its bounty, for it is their lifeblood" (p. 56). This line illustrates how the land is revered not only for its material offerings but also for the cultural values it symbolizes—respect for the earth and a recognition of the human responsibility to nurture and protect it. The villagers' practices, such as planting and harvesting, are not only economic activities but are also acts of respect and reciprocity with the land.

Medza's journey back to Kala also emphasizes the role of nature in shaping his personal transformation and reconnection with his cultural roots. After his years of alienation in the city, Medza's return to the rural environment is marked by a deep sense of reconciliation with the land. Beti describes his feelings upon returning to the village: "As his feet touched the familiar soil of Kala, Medza felt a stirring in his chest, as though the earth itself were welcoming him home, whispering the ancient songs of his ancestors" (p. 106). This passage highlights the emotional and spiritual significance of the natural environment in Medza's life. The earth of Kala is not just a physical space but a spiritual and ancestral presence that reconnects Medza with his heritage. His return signifies a renewal of his connection to the land and the cultural practices that have been passed down through generations.

The natural environment in *Mission to Kala* is also portrayed as a mirror to the struggles of the characters, particularly in the way it responds to colonial modernity. The harshness of colonial imposition is juxtaposed with the resilience of the land, which continues to provide sustenance despite the disruptions caused by the colonial powers. The villagers, though affected by the changes brought by colonial education and Western ideals, remain bound to the rhythms of nature, which offer a form of continuity amidst social upheaval. Beti illustrates this resilience when he writes, "Though the colonialists and their schools seek to destroy Kala's traditions, the village continues to grow crops, to feed its people, and to persist in the old ways, for the land knows no foreign master" (p. 120). Here, Beti positions the land as a

symbol of endurance and resistance, suggesting that, despite the alienation caused by colonial modernity, the rural environment remains a steadfast repository of indigenous culture and identity.

Also, Beti uses the interactions between the villagers and their environment to critique the colonial view of nature as something to be conquered or exploited. The urban colonial space is depicted as one where the natural environment is often ignored or transformed to fit colonial purposes. In contrast, the rural village of Kala represents a more sustainable and respectful relationship with nature, where the villagers understand that their survival depends on the health and balance of the natural world. Medza's realization of this symbiosis becomes clear as he witnesses the collective agricultural labor of the village: "The village men and women work the land not as conquerors but as partners in a lifelong agreement with nature. The earth does not yield easily, but it does yield in its own time, as long as one respects its limits" (p. 110). This passage emphasizes the mutual respect and cooperation between the villagers and their environment, positioning nature not as an external force to be dominated but as an integral, nurturing presence that demands respect.

Observedly, the text utilises the rural landscape as a powerful site of cultural and ecological resistance to colonial disruptions. The novel presents the environment of Kala not just as a backdrop but as an active force that resists the colonial influence. This resistance is both cultural and ecological, as the villagers' way of life, intimately connected to the land, offers a form of continuity and resilience against the forces of colonial modernity. Beti uses this landscape to critique colonialism's disruption of indigenous African traditions and the natural environment, emphasizing that both are intertwined in the struggle for survival and identity.

The rural village of Kala is depicted as a stronghold of cultural identity, where indigenous traditions, customs, and values remain intact despite the colonial presence. The landscape serves as a constant reminder of the villagers' connection to their ancestral heritage. In contrast to the urban environment, which is shaped by colonial institutions and alienated from the land, the village represents the preservation of authentic African culture. Beti writes, "The land of Kala, which had long sustained the people, was now more than just earth—it was their history, their memory, their unbroken line to the past" (p. 66). This passage underscores how the land itself holds cultural significance, acting as a repository of ancestral knowledge and continuity. The villagers' connection to the land is not only material but also spiritual, symbolizing their resistance to colonial forces that seek to erase or replace their cultural practices.

The novel also presents the landscape as a site of ecological resistance, where nature itself defies colonial attempts to exploit and control it. Beti highlights the resilience of the natural world in the face of colonial disruption. While colonial powers attempt to impose foreign agricultural practices and economic structures, the land in Kala continues to yield sustenance according to its own rhythms, unaffected by colonial ideology. For instance, when the colonial administrators attempt to impose Western farming methods on the villagers, the land's fertility and the villagers' deep knowledge of it remain largely unyielding to foreign intrusion. Beti illustrates this resistance through the character of Medza, who reflects on the relationship between the villagers and their environment: "Though the colonial authorities tried to introduce their own farming techniques, the soil of Kala had no interest in foreign ideas. It gave only to those who had worked it in harmony with its own laws" (p. 102). This passage reinforces the idea that the land, as a living, breathing entity, resists colonial manipulation, highlighting its role in the survival and cultural integrity of the village.

The land's role as a site of resistance is further emphasized in its role as a spiritual force for the villagers. The rituals and ceremonies that are deeply connected to the landscape—such as those related to agriculture, harvest, and ancestor worship—serve to reinforce the community's connection to the earth. These practices are viewed as acts of resistance to the colonial imposition of Christianity and Western ideas, which often sought to suppress indigenous spiritual practices. Beti describes the villagers' rituals as a "celebration of the earth's vitality, a reminder that despite the foreign invaders, the land's spirit remained untouchable" (p. 80). In these moments, the landscape is not merely a passive setting but an active participant in the villagers' resistance to colonialism, as it sustains both their cultural and spiritual identities.

Beti also uses the contrast between the rural and urban landscapes to highlight the ecological and cultural resistance of the village. The urban areas, controlled by colonial authorities, are portrayed as sterile and detached from the land, symbolizing the alienating influence of colonialism. In contrast, Kala remains a place of organic unity between people and nature, a unity that is disrupted but not destroyed by colonialism. Medza's eventual return to the village symbolizes a return to this ecological and cultural authenticity. As he reconnects with the land, he begins to understand that the village and its environment are not just passive victims of colonialism but active sites of resistance. Beti writes, "In the quiet corners of Kala, where the trees whispered ancient secrets, Medza realized that no matter how much the city tried to impose its will, the land and its people had always been, and would always remain, free" (p. 112). This realization emphasizes the enduring power of the land as a force of resistance against colonial imposition, underscoring Beti's

critique of colonial modernity. In performance theory, the body functions as a dynamic medium for enacting identity, with its presence and movements serving as a critical site for the articulation of themes such as gender, empowerment, and self-realization.

4. Comparative Insights

The representation of rural environments in Beti's work resonates with broader post-colonial ecocriticism, particularly in how these rural spaces maintain indigenous cultural practices in the face of colonial disruption. A compelling comparison can be made between Beti's depiction of Kala and the rural settings in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977). All three authors use the rural landscape as a means of exploring themes of cultural continuity, resistance, and the disruption of indigenous ways of life by colonialism and its aftereffects.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents the Igbo village of Umuofia as a vibrant and complex society where the land is a central symbol of identity, culture, and community. Like Kala, Umuofia represents a site of cultural resilience, where the villagers' relationship with the land underpins their social organization and spiritual life. Achebe writes, "The land was the most important thing to the people of Umuofia...they had always respected the earth" (Achebe, 1958, p. 23). This reverence for the land parallels Beti's portrayal of Kala, where the villagers' deep connection to the land acts as both a source of sustenance and a cultural anchor. Both novels emphasize the role of the rural environment in preserving cultural identity in the face of colonial modernity, illustrating how the natural world remains a repository of cultural memory and heritage.

However, unlike Achebe's novel, where the rural space is disrupted by the violent intrusion of British colonial forces, Beti's *Mission to Kala* focuses more on the psychological and intellectual alienation brought about by colonial education and urbanization. In Beti's novel, Medza's return to Kala after his exposure to colonial education in the city reflects his struggle to reconcile the urban influences on his identity with the cultural authenticity of his rural roots. Beti writes, "The city had changed him, made him forget the simplicity of the village, but now, as he stood on the soil of Kala, the familiarity of the earth seemed to call him back" (Beti, 1966, p. 94). This tension between rural authenticity and urban alienation is similar to what Achebe explores in *Things Fall Apart* but is depicted in more psychological terms, emphasizing the internal conflict of individuals caught between two worlds. Both Beti and Achebe situate the importance of the rural environment in the survival of cultural identity, yet Beti's focus is on the loss of connection to this rural identity in a post-colonial world shaped by education and urbanization.

wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* also engages with the tension between rural authenticity and urban alienation, but in a context heavily influenced by post-colonial Kenya's struggle with both political independence and the impact of capitalist modernization. Ngũgĩ presents the rural setting of Ilmorog as a space where the traditional ways of life are in decline, under threat from both the colonial past and the capitalist present. Unlike Beti's emphasis on the resilience of Kala, Ngũgĩ's Ilmorog illustrates the disintegration of rural life as the land becomes increasingly commodified and exploited. In *Petals of Blood*, the characters' relationship to the land is fraught with conflict, as the capitalist structures of the city infiltrate the rural economy. Ngũgĩ writes, "The land had been taken, its resources drained, and the people were now strangers to their own soil" (Ngũgĩ, 1977, p. 138). This contrast between Beti's portrayal of Kala and Ngũgĩ's Ilmorog offers valuable insights into the different ways rural spaces function in post-colonial narratives. While Kala maintains its cultural and ecological resilience, Ilmorog represents a rural environment undermined by both historical exploitation and post-independence socio-political failure. Both novels, however, reflect on how the rural landscape functions as a site of resistance to colonialism and modernization, even as it faces significant challenges.

The broader implications for post-colonial ecocriticism in these works are significant. By comparing Beti's *Mission to Kala* with *Things Fall Apart* and *Petals of Blood*, we see that rural landscapes in African literature are often depicted as essential sites of cultural survival, resistance, and memory. These landscapes are not passive spaces but are active participants in the resistance against colonial and post-colonial forces. In post-colonial ecocriticism, these rural settings are viewed as dynamic entities that resist ecological exploitation and the erasure of indigenous cultural practices. As seen in Beti's Kala, Achebe's Umuofia, and Ngũgĩ's Ilmorog, the rural landscape is a repository of indigenous knowledge, and it plays a crucial role in the characters' struggle to reclaim and redefine their identities. In all three works, the rural environment serves as a symbolic space of continuity, offering a counterpoint to the alienating and disruptive forces of colonial and post-colonial modernity.

5. Conclusion

In *Mission to Kala*, Mongo Beti uses the rural landscape as a critical character that shapes the identities of its inhabitants and critiques colonial and post-colonial socio-political structures. The village of Kala is portrayed as a symbol of

cultural authenticity and ecological continuity, acting as a counterpoint to the alienation experienced by characters, particularly Medza. The rural environment in Kala represents a space of resistance against colonial modernity, where indigenous values are preserved despite the disruptive forces of urbanization and colonial education.

This study emphasizes the importance of ecocritical approaches in African literature, where the rural setting is not just a passive backdrop but an active force shaping characters and narratives. By viewing the rural landscape as a character, scholars can uncover deeper meanings in African texts, revealing how rural environments serve as sites of cultural preservation and resistance. In the text, Beti highlights how the environment is intricately linked to cultural identity, challenging the assumption that rural spaces are static or insignificant in post-colonial narratives. This ecocritical perspective provides a valuable lens for examining the broader implications of land, nature, and ecology in shaping post-colonial identity.

For post-colonial studies, the rural landscape serves as a critique of modernity and development, particularly in the context of colonialism and its impact on traditional cultures. Beti uses the rural setting to question the destructive forces of colonialism, which sought to replace indigenous values with foreign ideologies. The study suggests that the environment plays an essential role in examining socio-political systems that perpetuate inequality and cultural erosion. Future research could explore similar themes in other African and post-colonial texts, particularly in relation to how rural landscapes contribute to critiques of modernization and colonial legacies. Additionally, comparative studies of Beti's work with other post-colonial writers could deepen our understanding of how rural spaces in literature act as active agents in shaping identity and resistance.

Conflict of Interests

There is no conflict of interests.

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