LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

A postcolonial ecocritical reading of Yaa Gyasi’s Homegoing (2016) and Kwakuvi Azasu’s The Slave Raiders (2004)

Rogers Asempasah1*, Christabel Aba Sam1 and Bertrand Azagsizua Abelumkemah1

Abstract: African literature has suffered a great deal of scathing criticism, especially from western critics and scholars, who believe that Black African writers and critics have repeatedly focused on trite themes and subject matters of colonial/postcolonial nature at the expense of the global environmental crises. This paper then, which is partly a response to this criticism, focuses on two novels, namely, Azasu’s The Slave Raiders (2004) and Gyasi’s Homegoing (2016), texts that yield themselves to postcolonial ecocritical reflections. Situated in the postcolonial ecocritical theory and using content analysis, the paper reveals that colonization and slavery, as the two texts show, have left some incontestable damage to the natural landscape of colonized Gold Coast, now Ghana. The wilderness has disappeared and the specimens of animal species are trafficked leading to some considerable damage to the ecosystems. However, these ecological hazards are subordinated in postcolonial thematic issues such as resistance to slavery, trauma, memory, and healing. The paper contributes to scholarship on the emerging discipline of postcolonial ecocriticism in the African context.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rogers Asempasah (PhD) is a senior Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Cape Coast, Ghana and a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), African Humanities Program (F’20). His research interests focus broadly on postcolonial literature and popular culture in Ghana. He is currently working on a book project tentatively titled Beyond the Tunes: The Animal Gaze, Critique and Pedagogies of the Everyday in Highlife Music in Ghana. Christabel Aba Sam (PhD) is a lecturer in the Department of English, University of Cape Coast, Ghana and a Fellow of the African Multiple Cluster of Excellence, Lagos African Cluster Centre (F’22). Her research interests include Men and Masculinities in Africa and Postcolonial futurity. Bertrand Azagsizua Abelumkemah is a graduate student in the Department of English, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. His area of interests includes oral literature, ecocriticism and creative writing. His latest collection of poems is titled Aguriboma (2022).

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The continuous devaluation of nature and the environment has created problems that threaten and affect the human condition in many societies. Scholars have shown how the mismanagement of the environment has existential consequences. The usefulness of literary works in dealing with the interaction between nature, the environment and postcolonial reality is only now beginning to gain attention. This paper contributes to how neo-slave narratives help us to reconsider approaches to dealing with the ecosystem by examining Azasu’s The Slave Raiders and Gyasi’s Homegoing.

© 2022 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.
1. Introduction
Critical conversations on neo-slave narratives in postcolonial scholarship in African literature have largely been preoccupied with such thematic issues as gender representation, slavery, racism, identity crises, memory, and trauma (de Bruijn & Murphy 2018; Murphy, 2012, 2008). Surprisingly, the ecology or environment has scarcely been central in these discussions. This does not, however, suggest that in African literature, the ecology or natural environment has been left to suffer neglect at the margins of history; or that African writers are insensitive to the plight of the physical environment, as Slaymaker (2001) alleges. For Slaymaker, unlike white-African writers including J. M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer, Black African writers and critics have focused so much on colonial issues to the neglect of the global ecological and environmental crises. However, the argument can also be made that if African literature and literary criticism have largely been anthropocentric, as Slaymaker claims, it is because African writers and critics have focused attention on interrogating postcolonial issues that caused the environmental crises rather than tackling the environmental issues head-on or in isolation. More importantly, recent scholarship on African imagination and the environment has challenged and debunked Slaymaker’s claim (Caminero-Santangelo, 2015; Iheka (2018); Iheka & Newell, 2020; Mthatiwa, 2020). Given this new development and also that the history of slavery is a history of both human and ecological drama (Wardi, 2011), it is surprising that the ecology or environment has yet to receive critical attention in studies on neo-slave narratives. For, the environment that bore witness to the trade in human and other postcolonial crises has suffered greatly from the human drama of wars, capture, slave escape, or flight among others.

The paper attempts a postcolonial ecocritical reading of two historical novels, Kwakuvi Azasu’s The Slave Raiders (2004) and Yaa Gyasi’s Homegoing (Gyasi, 2016). The objectives of the paper are three-fold: first, to explore the writers’ reconstruction of the natural world of slavery and colonization; second, to examine the relationship between nature, memory and trauma, and healing; lastly, to compare the writers’ representation of nature in their respective texts. The choice of the texts was based on two criteria: their treatment of a common subject matter, slavery, in the Ghanaian context and the fact that both texts have not received significant critical attention. This is especially true in the case of Azasu’s The Slave Raiders. To date, there have been only two significant critical readings of The Slave Raiders, namely, Murphy (2012) and Adjei (2014).

Both scholars emphasize Azasu’s epistemological turn to Africa. On Homegoing, scholars have focused on immigration and acculturation (Landry, 2018), memory, identities, and multigenerational struggles (Motahane, Nyambi & Makombe, 202; Sackeyfio, 2021. Surprisingly, none of these studies focuses on the environment. The present study fills in this knowledge gap. The paper adopts the content analysis methodology. The analysis is situated in the postcolonial ecocritical theoretical framework, particularly on aspects of Huggan and Tiffin (2010) and Wardi (2011). The rest of the paper is structured into five parts subtitled: Theoretical framework: Postcolonial ecocriticism; human-nature relations in Azasu’s The Slave Raiders (Azasu, 2004); Human-nature relations in Gyasi’s Homegoing (Gyasi, 2016); Nature, geography, memory, and healing in Homegoing (Haley, 2016); Ecological value in Homegoing (Gyasi, 2016); Convergence and divergence. This outline enables us to provide a detailed examination of the postcolonial ecocritical issues embedded in the two texts under consideration.

2. Theoretical framework: Postcolonial ecocriticism
Postcolonial ecocriticism, a marriage of postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism, is an emerging discipline in African literature and criticism. Postcolonial ecocriticism looks at the connection between ecological/environmental crises and colonialism. In other words, as, Huggan and Tiffin (2010), citing
Robert Young, put it, postcolonial ecocriticism, like eco-materialism, “looks at how contemporary postcolonial crises are inextricably connected with ecological crises” (p. 14). That is, whereas ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment generally (Glottfely & Fromm, 1996), postcolonial ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment in the context of colonization. Put differently, postcolonial ecocriticism interrogates ecological/environmental crises resulting from colonial relations. Huggen and Tiffin (2010) emphasize the changing relationship between the constituents of the natural environment and cultural representation when they observe that,

What the postcolonial/ecocritical alliance brings out, above all, is the need for a broad materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals, and the environment—one that requires attention, in turn, to the cultural politics of representation (p. 12).

In other words, postcolonial ecocritical analysis of literary works produced by postcolonial writers has the potential of providing a capacious understanding of postcolonial experiences and conditions of existence. From this perspective, imaginative literature is not just cultural critique, it is also a form of advocacy and therefore a catalyst for social action and change. Like African ecocriticism, postcolonial ecocriticism faces the same issues of interpretation. Because African writers do not tackle environmental or ecological issues in isolation but subordinate them to other postcolonial thematic issues, “The issue for an African ecocriticism, then, is how to grasp the novel’s writing of nature” (Vital, 2008, p. 87). The issue has to do with understanding how the writer engages in a discourse on nature or ecology as s/he tackles postcolonial or social issues. Reconciling postcolonial criticism with ecocriticism has therefore been a source of debate among scholars in these disciplines (Huggen & Tiffin, 2010; Vital, 2008). Vital suggests that a reconciliation of the two modes of criticism calls for a “reading for the complex interplay of social history with the natural world, and how language both shapes and reveals such interactions” (p. 90). Put differently, societal history, precisely, the interactions between different groups, processes, and structures and how these interactions affect the natural environment as literary texts show is crucial in postcolonial ecocritical discourse. For Huggen and Tiffin, postcolonial ecocriticism will then focus on “exploitation and discrimination of all kinds, both human and nonhuman, visible in the world; and, in so doing, to help make them obsolete” (p. 16). Thus, postcolonial ecocriticism address both social and environmental issues and call for a change. Postcolonial ecocriticism, therefore, advocates a healthful human-nature relation and challenges the exploitation of both humans and the natural environment.

3. Human-nature relations in Azasu’s The Slave raiders
Set in the 19th century and alternating between England and Anloland, in the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Azasu’s The Slave Raiders, as the name suggests, recounts a true historical event, the raiding and capturing of the people of Anloland as slaves. The Anlos grant the English, under Captain Sir John Hawkins, an ancestral land for the construction of a fort by the sea. However, the hidden slave raiding and capturing intent of the Pinkman soon becomes apparent to the people. The result is a war between the English captain and the Awomefia of Anlo, Togbe (King) Adeladza.

In most postcolonial literary texts, colonial conflicts often emerge either out of the scramble over native lands or after the lease out of land for colonial settlement. This often is the genesis of ecological and environmental crises of colonized lands. In Azasu’s The Slave Raiders, an ancestral land near the sea is given out to Captain Sir John Hawkins for the building of a fort. This act, seen as a genuinely hospitable gesture on the part of King Adeladza and his subjects, turns out to be a mistake when their well-received guests turn out to be slave raiders. The counter-war of resistance leads not only to the desecration of the ancestral land but the entire coastal landscape. Azasu’s narrative shows that the native people have lived very close to nature and share a symbiotic relationship with it. Some pristine thickets and forests serve as habitats for reptiles and other creatures that are regarded by the people as divine, spirited, and sacred. For instance,
when Aku comes across the big yellowish-green snake across the path near the fontsigba thicket, she does not harm the snake that refuses to be frightened and instead calls old Mana, the oldest woman in the village, to come and see it. The old woman tells her, “itsegle, and owner of the jungle! This is a very bad omen.” Mana then advises her, “If I were you, I would return home. Egle does not crawl on the earth for nothing” (p. 69). Egle is not merely a reptilian snake but one animated with divine spirit and whose sight or presence evokes awe and reverence. This sacred animal also owns the jungle. The defilement of egle suggests that its dwelling place, the “fontsigba thicket” is treated and protected as a shrine or a sacred grove. This implies that an entire ecosystem consisting of animal species, namely, the reptiles and the other animals, and the numerous plant species of this forest are protected. The ecology also serves as a mediating agent between the people and the gods. As the old woman interprets it, the crawling of egle, as the efa priest confirms, is a harbinger of the two grave events to come: the murder of Aku’s husband, Nyaxo, by the ostracized Adzoblasu and his joining the camp of the slave raiders and his subsequent conversion into Christianity.

The indigenous people also know about homegrown healthy environmental practices that safeguard and protect the water bodies, rivers, and ponds. When Aku goes to the Anyiehe pond to wash her clothes, the narrator reports that:

She washed her hands and feet clean before pouring the rest of the water into the basin. Soap was taboo to Mama Tanyo, the female divinity, which is believed to be the patroness of the pond. That was why she had to walk up to dry land before throwing out the wash-water so that it might not run back into the pond’ (p. 71)

Like the egle, the Anyiehe pond owned by Mama Tanyo, a goddess or water maiden, popularly known in West Africa as “Mami Wata”, is sacred. As such, the natives ensure that the pond is not desecrated by dirty chemicals such as soapsuds. Clothes are not washed directly in the pond and soap water is thrown away to prevent it from running back to desecrate the pond. However, the slave raiders, angered by the resistance of King Adeladza and his people, who will not give in to capture and shipping to the pinkmanland, decide to punish them to submission by embarking on what could best be termed as environmental genocide (Zimmerer, 2014). The English slave raiders arm up and march through forests and villages, pillaging humans and animals alike and polluting the water bodies. The gory picture of the genocide described in the novel is worth quoting here:

The sky was clouded with vultures, crows, and other carrion birds. The bark of jackals and the happy yelp and howls of hyenas could be heard in the efon thickets all over the isthmus between Anloga and Keta … The decomposing bodies of the slain strewn the length and breadth of the plain. And their stench which filled the air deepened the horror of the living … in those fifteen macabre days. (p. 341)

The narrative shows that the entire ecosystem of the coastal landscape was adversely affected by this historical warfare between the slave raiders and the native Anlo people. The despoliation of the coastal environment, the narrative indicates, cannot be treated in isolation but incorporated into colonization and slave raiding. In other words, as will be seen in the second text, the ensuing drama of slave raiding and resistance result in serious environmental damage. This warfare is not fictitious but a historical event that remains unforgettable in the history of the Anlo people (Adjei, 2014).

4. Human-nature relations in Gyasi’s Homegoing

Gyasi’s Homegoing is set in the Gold Coast/ Ghana, and America, from the 19th to the 21st century. The novel traces the life stories of two sisters, Effia and Esi, daughters of Maame, separated by the slave trade. Esi, captured and sold to the English slave traders, is transported to America where she and her descendants live in slavery. On the other hand, Effia who remains home in Fanteland, Gold Coast, is married to James Collins, a slave trader. Towards the end of the novel, the
descendants of the two sisters, Marjorie and Marcus meet and they finally return home for a reunion and reconciliation (Motahane et al., 2020). This reunion, as will be shown, has little to do with the human characters, Marjorie and Marcus, and more to do with the sea that separated their common ancestry. Nature or the physical environment features prominently in Gyasi’s novel. Unlike *The Slave Raiders*, Gyasi’s *Homegoing* opens at a point when the British have already established colonial settlements and firm roots in the Fanteland, Cape Coast, in the Gold Coast. Governor James Collins, the husband of Effia, lives in the Cape Coast Castle and has been engaged in the lucrative business of slave trade with the Fantes and the Asantes. Chief Abeiku and Fifi are two important Fante figures who act as middlemen between the British and the Fantes, Asantes, and all other people trading in the human commodities. The narrative says that “While Abeiku Badu was the figurehead, the Omanhin who received gifts from the political leaders of London and Holland alike for his role in their trade, Fifi was the authority” (Gyasi, 52). Although writing about the slave trade, Gyasi does not leave the non-human out of the question in her historical novel. The narrative does not only focus on the war of resistance about castles and forts, slave ships and the capture and/or trade of slaves, and the brutality and humiliations the slaves like Esi are subjected to. As the analysis will show, the narrative moves out of the human circles to depict the state of the non-human other, the animal and plant species, and show the kind of relationship that exists between humans and the natural world.

Unlike in *The Slave Raiders*, where human-nature relation is symbiotic and marked by reverence and awe for the sacred, spirited, and divine elements of nature, *Homegoing* shows a rather hostile, exploitative, and unhealthy relationship between humans and nature. In Gyasi’s text, there are no taboos in place for protecting the natural environments, and the plant and animal species. Deemed not sacred and un-divine, the natural environment, precisely rare animal species have become victims of exploitation under colonization. Huggan & Tiffin have made the following observation about the colonial establishment:

> Once invasion and settlement had been accomplished, or at least once administrative structures had been set up, the environmental impacts of western attitudes to human being-in-the-world were facilitated or reinforced by the deliberate (or accidental) transport of animals, plants, and peoples throughout the European empires, instigating widespread ecosystem change under conspicuously unequal power regimes” (2010, p. 6).

The colonizer and slaver, having settled down and established firm roots in the colonized territories, begin to, in addition to capturing slaves, indulge in the buying and trafficking of indigenous plant and animal species.

The excerpt below exemplifies Huggan and Tiffin’s claim:

> After that first day in the Castle, James never spoke to Effia about the slaves they kept in the dungeon, but he spoke to her often about beasts. That was what the Asantes trafficked most here. Beasts. Monkeys and chimpanzees, even a few leopards. Birds like the king crowns and parrots that she and Fifi used to try to catch when they were children, roaming the forests in search of the one odd bird, the bird that had feathers so beautiful it seemed to be set apart from the rest. They would spend hours on end looking for just one such bird, and most days they would find none. (p. 31)

In this passage, Gyasi does something rare in postcolonial fiction and neo-slave narratives: the narrative draws attention to the trafficking and transportation of indigenous animal species not found in Europe to Europe. Here, the plight of the non-human species, the indigenous animals, is as dire as the human slaves. This further corroborates Huggan and Tiffin (2010), who, citing Plumwood, rightly points out that “European justification for invasion and colonization proceeded from this basis, understanding non-European lands and the people and animals that inhabited them as ‘spaces’, ‘unused, underused or empty’ (p. 5). In this instance, the European slaver and
colonizer makes no distinction between the human and non-human species but lumps them together as property to be properly utilized. Whereas the specimens of plants and animals trafficked to Europe cannot wreak any meaningful havoc in European ecosystems, the ecosystems of the native lands from where these specimens are trafficked greatly suffer a change (Huggan and Tiffin). The transportation of indigenous animal species had the potential of endangering and rendering these species of animals, the birds and primates, climatically native to Africa, extinct in the native lands, thereby damaging and exterminating the native ecosystems. In other words, by taking away bird species, the ecological value of native lands is adversely affected and biological diversity and for that matter, the ecosystem of native land will suffer. The ecological value is further reduced by the depletion of the forest through tribal wars, which means that species” habitats for reptiles and wildlife are endangered too.

Gyasi shows that anthropocentrism and western imperialism both thrive on the exploitation of the natural resources of colonized lands. She pays keen attention to what is going on around the human characters in the natural world, namely, the presence of birds and bird songs, which signifies the importance of the wild. As Fifi and Quey, the Fante slave traders, discuss the state of the slave business, Fifi “looked out into the forest in front of them, and Quey followed his gaze. In the trees, two vibrant birds sang loudly, a discordant song” (p. 52). Why the birds sing a “discordant song", whether it is out of sadness or probably born out of the existential threat to the birds’ natural home, the trees, the face from human wars, means nothing to Fifi whose interest in the birdsong is to use it as an analogy for human trade transactions. Fifi says, “Quey, this village must conduct its business like that female bird. You want to pay more for slaves, pay more, but know that the Dutch will also pay more, and the Portuguese and even the pirates will pay more too" (p. 53). For Gyasi, amid the war of slave raids and resistance, nature continues to announce its presence through, for instance, birdsongs. Gyasi’s narrative also reports disappearing and receding forests resulting from the ongoing warfare characterized by the burning of the forest for human escape and so on.

Gyasi’s narrative also shows that ecological or environmental degradation of colonized lands is embedded in postcolonial issues of dominance and resistance struggles between the colonizer/ slaver and the colonized/enslaved, in the course of which the natural environment suffers some irreversible damage. The battle between the British and the Asantes is one of such human struggles that have implications on the physical environment. The battle principally was fought in the forests and trees and animal species were destroyed. The narrative puts forth the cause of the war. “For years, King Prempeh I had been refusing to allow the British to take over the Kingdom of Asante, insisting that the Asante people would remain sovereign. For this, he was arrested and exiled, and the anger that had been brewing all over the Asante nation grew sharper” (p. 178). The result is the contracted historical war between the Asantes led by Queen Mother of Edweso or Ejisu (exiled to Seychelles) and the British. It is this anger that made the Asantes burn the innocent white man together with the tree. The burned white man, “A nameless man, a wanderer himself, who had found himself in the wrong town at the wrong time” (p. 179) has been scapegoated in atonement for the crimes committed by his white race. The ensuing violence, resulting from human actions, wrecked the natural world, instantiated by the disappearing of forests, Maame’s burning of the wood and cocoa farm to escape slavery, the tying of the white man to a tree, and the burning of both to char, therefore shows that human activity has grave and dire consequences and implications on the natural world.

The vulnerability of nature lies in the fact that it has no verbal codes like humans and hence has to be spoken for by the same humans who exploit and subordinate it (Vital, 2008). As the white man is being burned up together with the tree, he keeps screaming in English, “Please, if anyone here can understand me, let me go! I am only a traveler. I am not from the government! I am not from the government!” (p. 181). As the man dies so does the tree, signaling that humans and nature share a common existential fate. In other words, the narrative suggests that human actions have implications for the natural world. This goes to corroborate the idea that “Crucial to
ecological discourse is the idea of relation: ecology’s scientific work is predicated on the recognition that living beings exist only in relation to other living beings as well as to a complex nonliving material order” (Vital, p. 92). Both the white man, whose verbal code is not understood in this part of the world, or understood but not heeded, and the tree, share a common vulnerability of subalternity; an inability to speak or be heard. For, even if the subaltern speaks, as does the innocent white man, scapegoated and killed for the sins of his race, but is not heard, as Spivak believes, s/he has not spoken. The tree, symbolic of the ecology, is as innocent as the burned white man. The burning of the tree symbolically suggests that ecological tragedy is intricately linked to and coterminous with human tragedy and the reverse holds; that, trees are sentient beings that experience physical pain; finally, that the death of every single tree signals ecological collapse/apocalypse and hence draws the earth an inch further towards the environmental Doomsday. The passage about the children of the crazy woman, Akua, justifies these claims: “The girls had grown too tired to keep walking, and the only tree nearby was the one where the white man had burned. The blackness of the charred bark seemed to crawl up from the roots and toward the lowest branches (Gyasi, 194; emphasis added).

The narrative decenters man from the focal point of the tragedy; it shifts our gaze from the burned human to the tree responding to stimuli, experiencing expiration, its dying moment. This visual imagery foregrounds the place of the tree in human life. The “only tree” re-echoes Traore’s 2019 notion of the community tree in traditional African societies. According to Traore, trees serve as points of social/community gathering. This burnt tree in Gyasi’s text is given the status of the community tree as it is the only one in sight.

5. Nature, geography, memory, and healing in Gyasi’s Homegoing
The physical geography, even to some extent the landscape, in slave narratives is implanted with memory (Wardi, 2011). The American South, home of cotton plantations and factories, is a geography of bondage whereas the American North represents freedom. Going back to Kentucky,

Marcus and Marjorie discover that the underground mines and even the unmarked graves of ex-convicts, the miners, lie in ruins. Marcus’s Ph.D. research seeks in vain to uncover, among other things, the material memory, the grave sites, of his ancestors who lived in Pratt City, Birmingham, and worked in the coal mines. To his utter disappointment, there are no traces of their existence, not even ruinous remains to contend with. Therefore, the built environment of man, the graves, the text suggests, can hardly keep and preserve memory. On the other hand, the sea, which has perfect memory as Morrison puts it, keeps the memory alive. Like Kunta Kinte in Alex Haley’s Roots: The saga of an American family (Haley, 2016), Ma Aku, who came directly from Africa, still dreams of the Gold Coast, her homeland, and is determined never to leave Baltimore. As the narrator stresses; “As for Ma Aku, Jo knew she would never leave Baltimore. Unless she could go back to the Gold Coast, there would be no new countries for her—not Canada, not even Paradise if it existed on Earth” (Gyasi, 124).

For her, Baltimore has become her surrogate or substitute home in exile; in Baltimore, she has access to the sea and the sea reminds her of Africa, her real home and this feeling gives her a sense of homeliness. Water, more than any natural element, with its historical role in the slave trade, has, thus, become a defining trope of slave narratives. Wardi (2011) emphasizes the centrality of water in the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade by noting that “Not only did the waters of the Atlantic Ocean bring captives to the shores of America … crossing the Ohio River signaled a deliverance from slavery” (p. 3). In Morrison’s Beloved, crossing the Ohio River to Ohio, Cincinnati, signifies liberation as seen in the flight of Sethe; in Asasu’s The Slave Raiders, the besieged Anlo people escape Sir Governor John Hawkins and his slave raiders by crossing the Keta Lagoon via boats and canoes to the island of Fiaxo, Adzato, and Akplofudzi. As Wardi (2011) points out, “In African American literature, recovery of the past is frequently coterminous with a literal or symbolic return to the original waters of the Atlantic Ocean”. In Gyasi’s Homegoing, for Marjorie and Marcus, coming home means coming home to the sea of Gold Coast, now, Ghana,
which marks the point of departure. Marcus's trauma, his phobic dread of water, like Marjorie's trauma, which is a fear of fire (a generational trauma/ or curse on her ancestors for their role in the slave trade), is on account of the memory of the Middle Passage which the sight of the sea waves evokes in him. As Marcus encounters the water, “his illusion of his mental connection with his ancestors make them become them, sharing their fears, particularly the fear of water associated with the original ancestor, Esi, and her experiences of the Middle Passage” (Motahane et al., 2020, p. 23). The sight of the current not only evokes the memory of the Middle Passage; as well, it reminds him of what the water is made of: the bones and dead bodies of his ancestors—’ the five percent of the human cargo who died in crossing that took three weeks, the quarter who died in crossing that took three months’ (Wardi, 2011). Gyasi’s narrative describes the scene of Marcus’ confrontation as follows:

He closed his eyes and walked in until the water met his calves, and then he held his breath and started to run. Run underwater. Soon, waves crashed over his head and all around him. Water moved into his nose and stung his eyes. When he finally lifted his head from the sea to cough, then breathe, he looked out at all the water before him, at the vast expanse of time and space (p. 300).

Thus, the antidote to Marcus’ trauma is the sea of Gold Coast; his encounter with the sea marks an important moment in his life. Ho (2018) describes this scene as a “moment of change and ‘rebirth’” (p. 14). For descendants of slaves like Marcus and other characters in Homegoing, water, which is perfect memory, is a permanent witness of all that has happened, the memory of which points beyond temporality, to the “vast expanse of time and space”. The encounter is traumatic in the sense that it enables Marcus and Marjorie “to experience the moment of the original loss of full humanity in Esi’s lineage”, while at the same time, a moment of healing as it enables them ‘recover full humanity’ (Motahane et al., 2020, pp. 21–22). As the narrator observes, though born free, Marcus is further haunted by the memory of the mental struggle of his ancestress, Esi, as well as the struggle of his great grandfather, H, in the coal mines under the convict system. Water then becomes a medium of reconciliation, reunion as well as recovery of humanity. Marjorie’s fear of fire, the narrator points out, has a connection with Marjorie’s ancestor, Effia, with whom she shares the common phobia, and at whose birth a ferocious fire ‘raging through the wood’ (Gyasi, p. 3). The same fire haunted Marjorie’s grandmother, the crazy woman, Akua. The memory of the fire as something that will haunt the lineage of Effia has been foretold by Cobbe, Effia’s father, who says that the memory of the fire ‘would haunt him, his children, and his children’s children for as long as the line continued’ (Gyasi, p.3, emphasis added). The sea, the sight of which evokes memory and history, has become a symbol of memory and history of slavery, and so on. Thus, the ambivalent character of water, ‘fluid, shifting, and indeterminate’ (Wardi, 2011) echoes its ambivalent role in slavery, of healing, and trauma. Marcus’ and Marjorie’s confrontation of their respective traumas is first traumatic and second liberating and healing. The sea and the castle, the place that marks the place of separation of the sisters into two continents leading to the formation of two identities, is the same place that marks a reunion, a homecoming. Marcus’s reunion with his home is a regaining of his African identity symbolically lost through Esi’s loss of her stone given to her by her mother. Her emersion in the sea is also symbolic of reclaiming her identity. Her umbilical cord is buried in the sea by her grandmother, Akua, who believes her granddaughter is “in this water” (Gyasi, p. 267).

In regard to the role of water, Ho (2018) observes that “Instead of using water and the ocean solely as a metaphorical site of trauma and erasure, Gyasi puts much emphasis on healing.” Also, the character of water as “geographically bounded and boundless” which is ‘an evocation of memory and history’ (Wardi, 2011, p. 6) symbolizes bondage and freedom respectively, life and death. In the seawater are the dead bodies as well as the living dead who inhabit the water and continually communicate with Crazy women. In the cultural and literary expression of African Americans, as is also the case in the Christian Bible, water crossing has become a metaphor for both bondage and freedom, life and death. In the Old Testament, river crossing marks a point of
departure from slavery to freedom as seen in Joshua leading the Israelites across the Jordan River.

6. Ecological value in Gyasi’s Homegoing
In Gyasi’s text, Akua, the crazy woman, is one character most invested with true ecological value. She is haunted by a firewoman, the great-great-grandmother she does not know, and the matriarch, Maame, who once set the great fire in the wood and ran through it to escape slavery. Akua has a series of horrible nightmares involving fire “where fire consumed everything, where it ran from the coast of Fanteland all the way into Asante. In her dreams, the fire was shaped like a woman holding two babies to her heart” (p. 177). As a result of these nightmares, she develops a schizophrenic condition that made her set her room on fire one night, killing two of her children and leaving a scar on one, Yaw, the teacher. Therefore, the villagers regarded Akua as insane and called her Crazy Woman. As a descendant of slave traders, Akua bears the brunt of the guilt of slavery and suffers the sins of her ancestors, James Collins and Quey, whose complicit role in slavery is known both in the Fante and Asante lands. Like her father, James, nicknamed Unlucky, because the sins of slavery of his line deprive him of any luck, Akua is socially and communally ostracized by society. Having been shunned by the human community and abandoned by her only surviving son, Yaw, Crazy Woman seeks refuge in nature. The character of Akua sharply contrasts with that of her great-great-grandmother. Whereas her ancestor sets the ecology on fire, Akua has found nature to be a companion and therefore makes a garden of assorted flowers. When Yaw and his future wife, Esther, visit her in Edweso, Kofi Poku tells them:

She lives with only a house girl in that place your father built for her on the edge of town. She rarely goes out anymore, though sometimes you can see her outside, tending to her garden. She has a lovely garden. My wife often goes there to admire the flowers that grow there … she has always been kind to me. She even gives me some flowers to take home. (p. 236)

Crazy Woman’s Garden means more to her than the human community that has exiled her. She “rarely” comes out as she devotes her full time to doing what she loves doing best, tending to her garden of flowers. The narrator goes further to say, “Yaw knew it immediately from the lush things that grew in her garden. Colors that Yaw had never seen before bloomed off of long green stalks that rustled from the wind or the small creatures that moved breath them”(p. 238). Ma Akua may have grown the garden for aesthetics, but the garden has a greater ecological value as it provides habitat for “small creatures”, creating a viable ecosystem and biodiversity in Crazy Woman’s backyard garden.

Crazy Woman is imbued with symbolic importance as she represents the end of an old era and the beginning of a new one. The transatlantic slave trade started with her forefathers as well as her foremother’s burning of the forest; the attendant aftermaths including the guilt and trauma of the sins of slavery have lived on to haunt one generation after the other. This generational curse reaches its climax with Akua, her exile, and her garden project which sprung out of the exile. Symbolically, therefore, Akua’s flower garden marks a rebirth and/ or replenishing of the burnt ecology/forest; the garden symbolizes healing, new hope, and the birth of a new era. Akua’s relations with the garden foreshadow the re-emergence of human and non-human relatedness that colonialism and the slave trade had destroyed. The exiled are thus reintegrated into the human community by means of the garden. The sins of slavery, symbolized by the recurring trope of fire, are purged by the symbolic blossoming garden of flowers. The symbolic value of Crazy Woman is therefore tied to her flower garden.

Crazy Woman finally leaves Edweso, in the Asanteland, for “Cape Coast to be near the water”, for “In Edweso, where she had lived before, everyone called her Crazy Woman, but in Cape Coast, they knew her only as Old Lady” (pp. 264–65). It is significant to note that Crazy Woman’s obsession with the sea is not entirely ecological but spiritual; she comes to have communion
with the spirits of her ancestors. She tells Marjorie, “In my dreams, I kept seeing this castle, but I did not know why. One day I came to these waters and I could feel the spirits of our ancestors calling to me” (p. 268). Beyond this spiritual communion, however, one can still catch a glimpse of her desire for nature. At Crazy Woman's death, “She wanted to be buried on a mountain overlooking the sea” (p. 283). The old woman’s wish to be buried in nature and by nature shows the extent of her love for nature. In her life, she has “lived in a big open bungalow on the beach” (p. 265) and wishes to have her eternal rest in nature’s bosom, on a ‘mountain overlooking the sea’. The sea in this regard symbolizes a point of reunion. This is a reunion of all the generations: the spirits of the ancestors represent the forefathers and mothers and those who died in the course of the Middle Passage as well as those shipped across the Atlantic to the New World; Akua represents her generation whilst Marjorie represents the last generation. There is more to this reunion, especially for Akua and Marjorie. The narrator reports that:

… they waited for the water to come up and lick the spaces between their toes, clean the sand that was hidden there. Marjorie watched as her grandmother closed her eyes, and she waited patiently for the old woman to speak. It was what they had come for, what they always came for. (p. 268)

Both Akua and Marjorie appear before the sea in the manner of worshippers or devotees approaching a sea deity, barefoot, for cleansing. The water coming up and licking “the spaces between their toes, clean the sand that was hidden there” suggests a symbolic cleansing of guilt or sins (the sand), the sins of slavery. It is the sin that, like a generational curse, has followed one generation after another, both at home and across the sea. Having received this baptism, the old era and its sins are washed away and a new era of freedom from the guilt and sins of slavery has begun. The two are now like Christians who have been washed off of the original sins and become clean.

7. Points of convergence and divergence

In the two texts set in the historical context of the 19th century Gold Coast, now Ghana, nature is represented in similar and different ways in the midst of slavery and colonization. In a war situation involving humans and non-humans, shared suffering and agency are usually produced. The two texts portray nature as vulnerable and a victim of the human actions of slave raiding and capture. There is the disappearance and pollution of the wild forests, the desecration of the Coastal lands, orchestrated by human beings and their actions—wars and looting. At the same time, in the two texts, ecology serves as an agent of resistance. The wood is a conduit to freedom in both texts. The matriarch, Maame, once escaped slavery through the woods in the Gold Coast, and in America, Ma Aku, who takes Ness’s son, Jo (Koj), to freedom in Baltimore, spends “days in the wood, running from catchers, from town to town, until they’d hit the safe house in Maryland” (p. 111). The signal Ma Aku gives to indicate to Ness and Sam that it is time to take flight into freedom, “an old Twi Song, sung softly in the wood as though carried by windswept leaves” comes in spring and in the wood, “When the sun came up, they climbed the trees” (pp. 85–6). In Azasu’s text, nature takes on the status of divinity. The natives fight and defeat Captain Sir John Hawkins’ invading army with the help of mosquitoes and the houseflies. As the narrator puts it;

Togbe Avego was the divinity of poisonous insects. His favourite insect, however, was the mosquito; just as the housefly was the favourite of Togbe Sakpana, the divinity of smallpox. . Mama Blewa and Togbe Adzemu told them they would partake in the war’ (p. 290).

The mosquitoes and houseflies, poisonous species of nature, known for destruction, are not perceived in this context as ordinary but as divine and spirited creatures. Non-human animals and humans are represented as working together to save their environment.

In Gyasi’s text, however, the world of slavery does not see nature as something sacred or divine. In Gyasi’s narrative, nature’s prime essence lies in its material value to man, which is the demand
of modernity. Thus, Gyasi identifies in the slave trade an emphasis on extractivism, the carrying away of human and nonhuman for profit. As Vital observes;

Ecological understanding, in the spread of modern thinking, has displaced (at least among those so educated) other, older ways of articulating human relation with the natural world, which tend to be spiritual, religious in character, and which persist as influential in all regions of the world (though everywhere modernity has reached it is the discourse of “natural resources” that bears the force of normality’ (Vital, 2008, p. 90).

The slave traders in Gyasi’s text, including Chief Abeiku, Cobbe, and the rest, have lost their spiritual connection with the natural world. For them, it is all about exploiting its resources for personal material gain (the instrumental function of nature). In contrast, in Azasu’s text, the characters are still in tune with nature which plays an important role in their spiritual and religious life. The egle, the green mambo, who is the owner of the jungle, doubles as a mediating agent between the divinities and men. The old woman, Mana, who understands the ways of the divinities immediately discerns that “Egle does not crawl on the earth for nothing” (p. 69) and advises Aku to return home. For Abeiku and Cobbe, they are ‘out of tune’ with nature, for in ‘Getting and spending ‘ what they can from nature, they “lay waste” their “powers” (to loan the words of Wordsworth in his ‘The world is too much with us ’). It appears safe to suggest that the current ecological crises in Ghana, precisely, the pollution of water bodies, once deemed sacred and worshipped with awe, through “galamsey” (illegal mining) emerged from colonial and capitalist extractivism that disregards the environment.

8. Conclusion
The analysis of the two texts challenges Slaymaker’s (2001)) assertion that Black African writers are insensitive to the natural environment and the global environmental crises. The analysis reveals that the treatment of nature in the literary works of Black African writers is subordinated to the thematic issues of slavery and colonization including but not limited to identity, history, memory, trauma, and healing as Vital (2008) asserts. The subordination of nature to human activities is a reflection of the postcolonial state’s preoccupation with the materiality of nature at the expense of its ecological value to the ecosystem. This study shows that there is a relationship between slavery, memory, postcolonial trauma, and ecology. In Gyasi’s text, there is a complicated relationship between slavery and nature. Nature in Gyasi’s novel is cast in a tripartite posture: It is at one point complicit in, another point victim of slavery and yet at certain moments a conduit to or agent of freedom. The agentic role of nature nearly equals its complicity role. The findings confirm Huggan and Tiffin’s assertion that postcolonial ecocriticism “has in large part emerged out of genuine alarm at the future of the planetary environment and its inhabitants. Such concerns come in the wake of taken-for-granted human domination where anthropocentrism and western imperialism are intrinsically interwoven” (2010, p. 11). The study will help widen the scope of postcolonial ecocriticism as a burgeoning field of literary and cultural critique.

Funding
The authors received no direct funding for this research.

Author details
Rogers Asemphasah¹
E-mail: rosemphasah@ucc.edu.gh
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1272-1211
Christabel Aba Sam²
Bertrand Azaguzua Abelumkemah¹
¹ Department of English, Faculty of Arts, C.H.L.S. University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Citation information
Cite this article as: A postcolonial ecocritical reading of Yaa Gyasi’s Homegoing (2016) and Kwakuvi Azasu’s The Slave Raiders (2004), Rogers Asemphasah, Christabel Aba Sam & Bertrand Azaguzua Abelumkemah, Cogent Arts & Humanities (2022), 9: 2145669.

References
Adjei, M. (2014). Beyond fiction: Historical, sociological, and ideological perspectives on Kwakuvi Azasu’s The Slave Raiders. International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science, 2(6), 55–66.
Azasu, K. (2004). The slave raiders. Yamens Books.
Caminero-Santangelo, B. (2015). Witnessing the nature of violence: Resource extraction and political ecologies.
in the contemporary African novel. In DeLoughrey, J. Didur, and A Carrigan E. (Eds.) Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities (pp. 226–242). Routledge.

de Bruijn E and Murphy L. T. (2018). Trading in innocence: slave-shaming in Ghanaian children’s market fiction. Journal of African Cultural Studies, 30(3), 243–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2017.1321982

Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology. University of Georgia Press.

Gyasi, Y. (2016). Homegoing. Penguin UK.

Haley, A. (2016). Roots: The saga of an American family. Hachette UK.

Ho, T. (2018). Too much future? Time’s only now: Temporality, haunting, and resurrection in Yaa Gyasi’s Homegoing (Vol. 2016). John F. Kennedy Institute.

Huggan, G., & Tiffin, H. (2010). Postcolonial ecocriticism: Literature, animals, environment. Routledge.

Iheka, C. (2018). Naturalizing Africa: Ecological violence, agency, and postcolonial resistance in African literature. Cambridge University Press.

Iheka, C., & Newell, S. (2020). Introduction: Itineraries of African ecocriticism and environmental transformations in Africa literature. ALT 38: Environmental Transformations in Africa Literature Today, 2020, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv105bzb.4

Landry, A. (2018). Black is black is black? African immigrant acculturation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah and Yaa Gyasi’s Homegoing. MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, 43(4), 127–147. https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mly044

Motahane, N., Nyambi, O., & Makombe, R. (2020). Rooting routes to trans-Atlantic African identities: The metaphor of female descendancy in Yaa Gyasi’s Homegoing. African Identities, 19(1), 17–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2020.1788505

Mthathi, S. (2020). Poetic and anthropogenic ecological adversity in Steve Chimombo’s poems “in ALT 38. Environmental Transformations in Africa Literature Today, 2020, 50–64. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv105bzb.8

Murphy, I. (2018). The curse of constant remembrance: The belated trauma of the slave trade in Ayi Kwei Armah’s Fragments Studies in the Novel 40(4), 52–71.

Murphy, L. T. (2012). Metaphor and the slave trade in West African literature. Ohio University Press.

Sackeyfio, R. A. (2021). Memory, identity, and return in Yaa Gyasi’s Homegoing. In Sokfyio, R. A. (Ed.) African Women Writing Diaspora: Transnational Perspectives in the Twenty-first Century (pp. 15). Lexington Books.

Slaymaker, W. (2001). Echoing the other(s): The call of global green and black African responses. PMLA, 116 (1), 129–144. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2001.116.1.129.

Traore, M. (2019). An ecocritical reading of selected African poems. Kente: Cape Coast Journal of Literature and the Arts 1(1), 74–89.

Vital, A. (2008). Toward an African ecocrimticism: Postcolonialism, ecology and life & times of Michael K. Research in African Literature, 39(1), 87–106. https://doi.org/10.2979/RAL.2008.39.1.87

Ward, A. J. (2011). Water and African American Memory: An ecocritical perspective. University Press of Florida.

Zimmerer, J. (2014). Climate change, environmental violence, and genocide. The International Journal of Human Rights, 18(3), 265–280. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2014.914701
