

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Staging Ecological Crisis in East African Drama: Environmental Degradation, Ancestral Land and Environmental Justice in Austin Bukenya's *A Hole in the Sky*

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Abstract

Environmental degradation remains a major global concern, particularly in regions where communities depend directly on natural resources for livelihood, cultural identity and social well-being. In East Africa, environmental destruction is increasingly associated with resource extraction, deforestation, pollution and development practices that privilege commercial interest over ecological sustainability. Literature provides an important platform for interrogating these challenges because it reveals the social relationships and power structures underlying environmental exploitation. This paper examines the representation of environmental degradation in Austin Bukenya's *A Hole in the Sky* (2013), focusing on the relationship between ecological destruction, capitalist development, community displacement and environmental justice. The study is guided by ecocriticism, postcolonial environmental criticism and environmental justice, and adopts a qualitative design based on close textual analysis of the representation of natural resources, characterisation, dramatic conflict and resistance. The discussion demonstrates that Bukenya presents environmental degradation as more than the physical destruction of nature: it is also a social and political problem arising from unequal relationships between commercial interests and local communities. The destruction of Lake Riziki, the clearance of forests, the degradation of streams and the threatened displacement of Kibichi and his family reveal the interconnectedness of ecological sustainability, land rights and community survival. The paper argues that the play challenges narrow understandings of development that privilege financial gain while discounting environmental and social cost, and it contributes to East African literary scholarship by foregrounding the relationship between environmental degradation, ancestral land and environmental justice in the interpretation of the play.

Keywords: ancestral land; East African drama; ecocriticism; environmental degradation; environmental justice; postcolonial ecocriticism

1 Introduction

Environmental degradation has become one of the most pressing concerns of contemporary society. The destruction of forests, the pollution of water bodies, the depletion of natural resources and the deterioration of ecosystems threaten both human welfare and the survival of other forms of life. Although these problems are most often discussed in scientific, political and economic terms, they also raise cultural, ethical and literary questions. Literature provides a valuable space for exploring them because it represents how environmental change affects people, relationships, livelihoods and the values through which societies understand their place in the natural world (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996; Buell, 2005).

In East Africa the relationship between human beings and the environment carries particular weight. Land, water, forests and other natural resources sustain livelihoods and also contribute to cultural identity and community belonging. For many communities land is not merely a commercial commodity; it is bound up with ancestry, collective memory, cultural practice and continuity between generations. Environmental destruction may therefore result in more than the loss of natural resources. It can threaten social relationships, economic security and the cultural foundations of community life (Caminero-Santangelo, 2014).

Environmental degradation must consequently be understood in relation to the economic and political processes that shape access to natural resources. Commercial agriculture, mining, oil exploration, infrastructure development and urban expansion all create economic opportunities. When these activities proceed without adequate environmental safeguards or meaningful participation by affected communities, however, they contribute to pollution, deforestation and displacement. The central question is not whether development is necessary but whether it is pursued responsibly and whether its benefits and costs are fairly distributed (Nixon, 2011).

East African literary scholarship offers useful perspectives on these issues. Edwin, Chetambe and Muhia (2023) investigate capitalist environmental destruction in Austin Bukenya's *A Hole in the Sky* and Okiya Omtatah's *Voice of the People*, demonstrating how playwrights use characterisation to represent environmental exploitation and resistance. Murage and Rutere (2022) examine environmental activism and social cohesion in Ng'ang'a Mbugua's *Different Colours*, showing how literary representation can communicate the importance of collective responsibility for conservation. These studies establish the relevance of environmental criticism to the interpretation of East African literary texts.

The present study focuses on Austin Bukenya's *A Hole in the Sky* (2013), a play that explores the consequences of oil exploration and commercial development for the natural environment and for local communities. The destruction of Lake Riziki, the clearance of forests, the degradation of streams and the threatened displacement of Kibichi and his family establish a direct connection between ecological destruction and the pursuit of economic gain (Bukenya, 2013; Edwin et al., 2023).

The play raises fundamental questions about the meaning of development. When commercial activities destroy essential natural resources and threaten community livelihoods, can they be considered beneficial simply because they promise financial returns? Who holds the authority to determine how land and natural resources are used? What happens when the interests of investors conflict with the environmental and social needs of local communities?

These questions make *A Hole in the Sky* particularly amenable to ecocritical inquiry. The play presents nature not as a passive background to human activity but as an essential part of the social and economic conditions that sustain community life. Its representation of environmental degradation also invites examination of the unequal relationship between those who control economic resources and those who bear the consequences of ecological destruction.

This paper argues that Bukenya uses dramatic conflict in *A Hole in the Sky* to challenge development practices that privilege commercial profit over ecological sustainability and community welfare. It examines the relationship between environmental degradation, capitalist exploitation, ancestral land and environmental justice, building on recent East African literary scholarship while developing a focused interpretation of the connection between ecological destruction and the threatened loss of community security.

The study pursues three objectives:

- to examine how environmental degradation is represented in *A Hole in the Sky*;
- to analyse how the play connects ecological destruction to commercial interests, unequal power relations and community displacement; and
- to explore how characterisation and dramatic conflict communicate the play's environmental concerns and its possibilities for resistance.

2 Literature review

2.1 Ecocriticism and East African literary scholarship

Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). It investigates how literary texts represent nature, construct relationships between human and nonhuman life, and communicate cultural attitudes towards ecological systems. From this perspective the environment is not simply a setting for human activity; it is an active element in the production of literary meaning and in the development of dramatic conflict.

Recent East African scholarship demonstrates the usefulness of this approach. Edwin et al. (2023) analyse capitalist environmental destruction in *A Hole in the Sky* and *Voice of the People*, showing how characterisation distinguishes between figures associated with ecological exploitation and those who resist it, and connecting environmental degradation to capitalist expansion and unequal power relations. Their analysis is directly relevant here because it establishes that environmental destruction in Bukenya's play is bound to economic interest rather than presented as an isolated ecological event. The present paper develops a more focused argument by examining the relationship between environmental damage, ancestral land, community displacement and environmental justice, considering how the destruction of natural resources threatens the social and material conditions on which community life depends.

Murage and Rutere (2022) also demonstrate the relevance of ecocriticism to East African literary analysis. Their study of Ng'ang'a Mbugua's *Different Colours* examines the relationship between environmental activism, patriarchy and social cohesion, showing how literary representation can communicate the importance of collective action. Although their primary text differs, their findings support the argument that environmental concerns are inseparable from social relationships and collective responsibility. In *A Hole in the Sky*, that perspective makes it possible to consider how environmental destruction reshapes the relationship between a community and its land.

Waithiru (2022) examines environmental symbolism in the Kiswahili children's texts *Kijiji Cha Ukame* and *Mazingira Maridadi*, demonstrating how symbolism can communicate conservation, environmental ethics and responsibility to young readers. More recently, Opondo and Odongo (2025) have examined the ecological significance of Okot p'Bitek's "Chameleon and Elephant," an oral narrative collected in *Hare and Hornbill*. Their study emphasises the interdependence of human, animal and plant worlds and argues that conservation requires an understanding of the relationships connecting different forms of life.

Taken together, these studies show that East African literary scholarship approaches environmental representation through several routes: characterisation, symbolism, allegory and oral narrative. The present study draws on this body of work to examine how Bukenya represents environmental de-

gradation through dramatic conflict and through the threatened destruction of a community's natural and social environment.

2.2 Capitalist development and environmental exploitation

A central concern in environmental criticism is the relationship between economic development and the exploitation of natural resources. Environmental destruction occurs when resources are valued primarily according to their capacity to generate commercial profit, with insufficient regard for their ecological functions and social importance. Nixon (2011) describes the resulting harm as a form of slow violence: environmental damage that is dispersed across time and space, that falls disproportionately on the poor, and that is therefore difficult to represent and easy for decision-makers to discount. Literary narrative, on his account, is one of the few forms capable of making such attritional damage visible.

Edwin et al. (2023) identify capitalist environmental destruction as a central concern in *A Hole in the Sky*. Their analysis demonstrates how the play represents commercial exploitation through characterisation and through the conflict between those who damage the environment and those who resist. This provides a foundation for examining how Bukenya challenges development practices that privilege private economic interest over environmental sustainability.

The significance of this perspective lies in its recognition that environmental degradation is bound to unequal relationships. Investors and commercial enterprises possess the financial resources and political influence required to transform landscapes, while local communities often have limited control over decisions affecting their land and livelihoods. Such inequalities complicate the assumption that economic growth benefits everyone. A development project may generate substantial profits while leaving local communities with polluted water, damaged ecosystems and reduced access to natural resources. Environmental criticism therefore requires attention to the distribution of both the benefits and the costs of development (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015).

2.3 Research gap

Recent East African scholarship has examined environmental degradation through capitalist exploitation, characterisation, symbolism, gender and collective responsibility (Edwin et al., 2023; Murage & Rutere, 2022; Opondo & Odongo, 2025; Waithiru, 2022). These studies demonstrate the value of environmental criticism for interpreting literary representations of ecological change.

Edwin et al. (2023) have already examined *A Hole in the Sky* in relation to capitalist environmental destruction, and the present study does not claim that the play has escaped ecocritical attention. It seeks instead to develop a distinct interpretive emphasis by foregrounding the connection between ecological destruction, ancestral land, community displacement and environmental justice. That emphasis makes it possible to trace the consequences of environmental exploitation beyond the physical destruction of nature, drawing attention to the relationship between natural resources, community identity and the unequal distribution of development costs. The contribution of the study lies in bringing these concerns together in a sustained reading of how the threatened loss of land and community security deepens the play's environmental argument.

3 Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in ecocriticism and informed by postcolonial environmental criticism and environmental justice. The three approaches are complementary: they address, respectively, the

representation of nature, the power relations surrounding resource exploitation, and the unequal distribution of ecological harm.

3.1 Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism provides the principal framework for analysing the representation of the environment in *A Hole in the Sky*. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) define it as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, and Buell (2005) extends the field towards the social and institutional dimensions of environmental crisis. Applied here, it enables examination of the significance of Lake Riziki, the forests, the streams and the ancestral land within the dramatic conflict, considering how these resources sustain the lives of the characters and how their destruction alters the conditions under which the community exists. The environment is thus treated as integral to the play's meaning rather than as a backdrop to human action. Opondo and Odongo (2025) demonstrate the importance of recognising the interdependence of human, animal and plant worlds in literary analysis, supporting an understanding of environmental degradation as a disruption of relationships rather than merely a change in the physical landscape.

3.2 Postcolonial environmental criticism

Postcolonial environmental criticism examines the relationship between ecological exploitation, historical inequality and continuing structures of economic and political power (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015; Nixon, 2011). It asks who controls natural resources, whose interests determine their use, and which communities bear the consequences of environmental damage. Caminero-Santangelo (2014) argues that African environmental writing is particularly concerned with the entanglement of conservation, land dispossession and economic power, and cautions against readings that separate ecological concern from the politics of land. Edwin et al. (2023) provide a regional application of this approach, linking ecological damage in Bukenya's play to commercial interests and to the unequal power relations of capitalist expansion. This perspective is useful for examining the conflict between the commercial ambitions represented by Tajeer and the interests of the local community, and for questioning the assumption that economic investment is automatically beneficial when it threatens environmental sustainability and community security. The analysis does not assume that all investment is destructive; it examines the particular development practices the play represents and the consequences that follow from them.

3.3 Environmental justice

Environmental justice provides a further lens for investigating the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Bullard (2000) established the principle that environmental harm is distributed along existing lines of economic and political disadvantage, so that the communities least responsible for ecological damage frequently absorb the greatest share of its costs. In *A Hole in the Sky*, the threatened displacement of Kibichi and his family raises questions of land right and of the unequal consequences of commercial development. Their struggle is connected to the wider ecological crisis because the transformation of the landscape threatens both the natural resources and the community's established relationship with the land. The combined framework therefore treats environmental degradation as an ecological, economic and social problem, enabling the study to examine not only what is destroyed in the play but also who benefits, who suffers, and how the affected community responds.

4 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative interpretive design based on close textual analysis. The approach is appropriate because the research examines the meanings, conflicts and dramatic techniques through which environmental degradation is represented in a literary text. The primary text is Austin Bukenya's *A Hole in the Sky* (2013). Secondary materials comprise foundational work in ecocriticism, postcolonial environmental criticism and environmental justice, together with recent East African scholarship on the representation of ecological destruction.

Data were obtained through close reading of the primary text and examination of relevant scholarly publications. The analysis addressed three interconnected areas: the representation of environmental destruction; the relationship between commercial development and community vulnerability; and the role of characterisation and dramatic conflict in communicating environmental concern.

The first stage identified the environmental issues represented in the play, particularly the destruction of Lake Riziki, the clearance of forests, the degradation of streams and the threatened displacement of Kibichi and his family. The second stage examined the relationship between these environmental problems and the commercial interests driving the dramatic conflict, with attention to the positions occupied by Tajeer, Kibichi and Kijani. The third stage interpreted these findings through ecocriticism and environmental justice with reference to the scholarship reviewed above, enabling the study to examine how environmental degradation is connected to power, community right and the meaning of development.

5 Environmental degradation in *A Hole in the Sky*

5.1 The destruction of Lake Riziki

The most significant representation of environmental degradation in *A Hole in the Sky* is the destruction of Lake Riziki. The lake is damaged by oil exploration, which pollutes its waters and destroys its capacity to support the community's established activities (Bukenya, 2013; Edwin et al., 2023).

The destruction of the lake illustrates the consequences of treating natural resources primarily as opportunities for commercial gain. Oil exploration promises financial return, but the environmental consequences become severe when extraction damages the ecological systems on which local communities depend. A lake is more than a physical feature of the landscape: it supports fishing, provides water, sustains other forms of life and contributes to the economic stability of surrounding communities. When it is polluted the effects extend well beyond the water itself, undermining livelihoods and disrupting the relationship between people and their environment.

Edwin et al. (2023) identify the pollution of Lake Riziki as an important instance of capitalist environmental destruction. Building on that observation, the present study argues that the lake also figures the unequal distribution of environmental costs. The commercial interests associated with oil exploration pursue economic benefit, while the local community absorbs the loss of a resource essential to its way of life. The imbalance bears directly on the meaning of development: if the pursuit of profit destroys the resources that sustain local livelihoods, the resulting economic gains cannot be assessed independently of the social and ecological losses. The destruction of Lake Riziki is consequently not merely a physical problem but a question of priorities, accountability and the values by which an economic activity is judged beneficial.

5.2 Deforestation and the degradation of streams

The clearance of forests and the degradation of streams extend the play's account of commercial development, reinforcing the principle that ecological systems are interconnected and that damage to one part of an environment affects the wider landscape.

Forests provide habitats and contribute to ecological stability; their destruction disrupts the relationships between plants, animals, water and human communities. Streams likewise form part of the natural systems that sustain communities and other living organisms, and their degradation affects water quality and reduces access to resources necessary for daily life. When forests are cleared primarily to facilitate commercial activity, the immediate economic benefit can obscure the longer-term ecological cost.

Opondo and Odongo (2025) emphasise the interconnectedness of human, animal and plant worlds in their reading of East African oral literature, and their argument clarifies the significance of environmental damage in Bukenya's play. The destruction of forests, streams and the lake should not be read as a series of unrelated events; together they constitute a wider disruption of an environment. The play's ecological concern therefore extends beyond any single resource, revealing the consequences of development practices that fail to recognise the relationships connecting ecological systems to human livelihoods. This is also an argument for environmental accountability: development projects must be evaluated against their cumulative effects on natural resources rather than against immediate financial return alone.

5.3 Nature as more than an economic resource

The environmental conflict in *A Hole in the Sky* raises a fundamental question about how nature is valued. Commercial development treats the environment as a collection of resources to be extracted, transformed and converted into financial gain. An ecocritical perspective challenges that narrow understanding by recognising the ecological and social significance of natural resources. In the play, the destruction of Lake Riziki, the forests and the streams reveals the consequences of prioritising commercial interest: the natural world becomes vulnerable when its value is determined primarily by its usefulness to investors.

This representation need not be read as a claim that economic development and environmental protection are necessarily opposed. It suggests rather that economic activity becomes destructive when it consumes the natural systems that sustain human life. Waithiru (2022) demonstrates how literary symbolism can communicate environmental ethics and conservation; although his study concerns children's literature, its emphasis on the communicative work of environmental representation is pertinent here. In Bukenya's play the damaged landscape itself becomes the means of communicating the consequences of irresponsible development, and the natural environment acquires a significance well beyond its commercial value. Its destruction represents the loss of ecological stability and the weakening of the conditions necessary for community survival.

6 Capitalist development and environmental injustice

6.1 Commercial interests and ecological exploitation

The relationship between commercial development and environmental destruction is central to the conflict in *A Hole in the Sky*. Tajeer and his overseas investor associates represent the interests driving the commercial transformation of the landscape, and their activities are the source of the

environmental damage that threatens the community's well-being (Bukenya, 2013; Edwin et al., 2023).

The conflict reflects a wider concern in environmental criticism: economic activity becomes destructive when natural resources are treated primarily as sources of profit without sufficient regard for their ecological function or social importance. Edwin et al. (2023) examine this through eco-Marxism and ecofeminism, connecting capitalist environmental destruction with unequal relations of power and the exploitation of nature. The present analysis extends that discussion by concentrating on the consequences of commercial exploitation for community security and land right, asking how the pursuit of economic gain affects those whose livelihoods depend on the natural environment.

The play suggests that commercial development cannot be judged successful merely because it generates wealth; its consequences must also be weighed against environmental sustainability and the welfare of affected communities. The point matters because environmental destruction produces unequal outcomes. Those who control investment decisions stand to benefit financially, while the communities whose resources are damaged experience declining livelihoods and reduced access to essentials. The conflict in the play therefore exposes the limitations of development models that privilege commercial return over ecological and social responsibility.

6.2 The unequal distribution of environmental costs

Environmental degradation affects communities unevenly. People who depend directly on land, forests and water suffer disproportionately when those resources are destroyed, and they frequently have the least influence over the decisions that determine how the environment is used. This asymmetry is the central concern of environmental justice (Bullard, 2000), and Nixon (2011) notes that it is compounded by the slowness with which ecological harm becomes visible: by the time damage is undeniable, the commercial activity that caused it has often concluded and its beneficiaries have departed.

The destruction of Lake Riziki illustrates the inequality precisely. The commercial activities associated with oil exploration generate the environmental damage, while the community sustains the loss of a resource on which its way of life depends. Murage and Rutere (2022) demonstrate the importance of examining environmental concerns alongside social relationships and collective responsibility, and their study of *Different Colours* provides a regional context for considering how ecological harm reverberates through community life. In *A Hole in the Sky* the environmental crisis is inseparable from a conflict between commercial interest and community need, and those who depend on the affected resources plainly do not exercise the same control over the development process as those pursuing the commercial opportunity.

The resulting imbalance raises questions of accountability. Who should bear the consequences when development damages the environment? What obligations do investors owe to the communities affected by their activities? How should the rights of local residents weigh when commercial projects threaten their livelihoods? These questions are central to the play's environmental significance. By connecting ecological destruction to unequal power relations, Bukenya presses his readers to consider the social responsibilities that accompany economic development, and he challenges the habit of equating development with the mere expansion of commercial activity. A project that generates financial return while destroying water resources, clearing forests and threatening livelihoods raises serious questions about its long-term value, and sustainable development requires

recognising that natural resources hold ecological and social value beyond their immediate commercial usefulness.

7 Ancestral land, displacement and belonging

7.1 Land as a foundation of community life

Land occupies a central position in the conflict of *A Hole in the Sky*. The threatened eviction of Kibichi and his family from their ancestral land demonstrates that environmental degradation is bound to questions of belonging, security and community continuity.

For many communities land represents more than a physical space or an economic asset: it is associated with ancestry, collective memory, livelihood and cultural identity, so that losing access to ancestral land threatens both material security and a community's sense of belonging. In Bukenya's play the threatened displacement of Kibichi and his family occurs within the wider context of commercial development and environmental destruction, suggesting that the conversion of land into a commercial resource undermines the interests of those whose lives are bound to it.

The conflict raises the question of who holds the authority to determine how land is used. When commercial interests seek to transform a landscape, the historical and social connections between local communities and their land come under pressure. An environmental justice perspective recognises that such conflicts cannot be reduced to disputes over property; they concern the distribution of power and the right of communities to participate in decisions affecting their environment. The threatened eviction therefore deepens the play's environmental argument, showing that ecological destruction proceeds alongside the disruption of community relationships and the loss of security.

7.2 Environmental degradation and displacement

Environmental degradation and displacement are closely connected in the play. The destruction of natural resources undermines the conditions that sustain community life, while the threatened eviction of Kibichi and his family raises the prospect of losing access to ancestral land altogether. The two processes reinforce one another, because the commercial transformation of a landscape simultaneously damages its ecological functions and threatens the people who inhabit it.

The play consequently challenges the assumption that land can be treated exclusively as a commercial commodity, an understanding that overlooks the social relationships and ecological functions giving land its broader significance. This interpretation extends the concerns identified by [Edwin et al. \(2023\)](#) by foregrounding the relationship between capitalist environmental destruction and community displacement. The question is not only whether commercial activity damages nature, but how that activity affects the people whose lives are bound to the environment. The threatened loss of ancestral land thus becomes a question of environmental justice, directing attention to the need for development practices that respect community rights and recognise the long-term value of ecological resources.

7.3 Environmental justice and community rights

Environmental justice involves more than protecting the natural environment from physical destruction. It requires consideration of the people who depend on that environment and of the extent to which they can participate in decisions affecting their lives. In *A Hole in the Sky* the threatened dis-

placement of Kibichi and his family demonstrates the place of community security within environmental debate, and suggests that the consequences of commercial development cannot be assessed in terms of financial return alone.

A just approach to development would require meaningful consultation with affected communities, adequate environmental safeguards and accountability for ecological damage, and it would recognise that local residents hold legitimate interests in the land and resources on which their livelihoods depend. Murage and Rutere (2022) emphasise the relationship between environmental conservation and social cohesion in their study of *Different Colours*, supporting the broader argument that environmental responsibility cannot be separated from the social relationships through which communities organise their lives. Applied to Bukenya's play, this highlights the importance of protecting ecological resources and community relationships together. The play invites its readers to consider whether development can be considered legitimate when it threatens both the environment and the security of local communities, and its environmental message is inseparable from questions of accountability, participation and the fair distribution of resources.

8 Characterisation, dramatic conflict and resistance

8.1 Tajeer and the representation of commercial power

Characterisation carries much of the environmental argument in *A Hole in the Sky*. Tajeer represents the commercial interests driving the transformation of the landscape for economic gain, a position that brings him into direct conflict with the environmental and social interests of the local community. Edwin et al. (2023) have demonstrated the importance of characterisation in representing capitalist environmental destruction in the play, and their analysis provides a foundation for considering how characters embody competing attitudes towards nature and development.

The present study examines Tajeer in relation to the consequences of the development model he represents. What is critical is not his function as an antagonist but the wider set of priorities associated with commercial exploitation. Through this conflict the play asks who holds the authority to determine how natural resources are used and whose interests take precedence when commercial development threatens community welfare. The character therefore contributes to the play's critique of development practices that disregard ecological sustainability, bringing the relationship between commercial power and environmental destruction into dramatic focus.

8.2 Kijani and environmental resistance

Kijani provides the counterpoint to the commercial interests Tajeer represents. Her opposition to the threatened eviction of Kibichi and his family establishes her as a figure of resistance to the forces threatening the community's relationship with its land.

Her role is significant because it refuses the representation of affected communities as powerless victims. Resistance demonstrates that people whose livelihoods and security are threatened can question development decisions and defend their interests, and Kijani's actions can therefore be read as an expression of environmental agency that connects the defence of ancestral land to the wider question of environmental responsibility. This complements the emphasis on environmental activism in Murage and Rutere (2022): their study illustrates the importance of collective responsibility in addressing environmental challenges, while Kijani's role draws attention to the defence of community rights under commercial pressure.

Kijani's resistance also marks the relationship between environmental protection and social justice. Defending the land is not merely an attempt to preserve a physical location; it is a means of protecting the conditions that sustain community life. The significance of her character lies in the possibility of challenging harmful development practice, and through her the play opens a space for questioning the assumption that commercial interests should automatically take precedence over ecological and community concerns.

8.3 Dramatic form as a means of environmental criticism

Drama is particularly suited to environmental conflict because it brings competing values and interests into direct confrontation. In *A Hole in the Sky* the tension between commercial development and community protection gives ecological destruction a recognisable social and human dimension. The damaged lake, the cleared forests, the degraded streams and the threatened eviction combine into a conflict in which the consequences of development become visible, and these environmental concerns are attached to characters whose actions and interests embody distinct approaches to land and natural resources.

The dramatic form enables an audience to weigh these competing positions and to question the assumptions informing them. Commercial development may be justified in the language of investment and profit, but the consequences for local communities raise questions about the meaning of progress. [Edwin et al. \(2023\)](#) demonstrate that the representation of environmental destruction through characterisation is central to the play's critical concerns; building on that observation, the present study argues that the interaction between characterisation and environmental conflict also exposes the unequal distribution of development costs. The play's dramatic structure thus provides a means of examining environmental degradation as a question of power, responsibility and justice.

The scope of the present reading should be stated plainly. The analysis treats *A Hole in the Sky* as a dramatic text and interprets the meanings communicated through dialogue, characterisation, stage direction and conflict. Claims about lighting, sound, design or audience response would require the analysis of a particular production and lie outside the present study; the staging examined here is therefore the staging of conflict within the dramatic text rather than its realisation in performance.

9 Implications and conclusion

Literature contributes to environmental awareness by giving narrative and emotional form to problems that otherwise remain abstract. Scientific studies establish the extent of environmental damage and policy documents set out regulatory responsibility; literary texts complement both by exploring how ecological destruction enters people's lives, relationships and values. This is the capacity [Nixon \(2011\)](#) identifies as narrative's particular contribution to environmental politics, and [Waithiru \(2022\)](#) and [Opondo and Odongo \(2025\)](#) demonstrate its operation in children's and oral literature respectively.

The environmental conflict in *A Hole in the Sky* also raises questions that extend beyond literary interpretation. The play provides a basis for reflecting on the responsibilities of investors, public institutions and communities in the management of natural resources. It highlights, first, the importance of environmental accountability: commercial activities involving natural resources should be evaluated against their ecological consequences and their effects on affected communities, and economic benefit cannot automatically justify pollution, deforestation or the destruction of resources essential to human life. It draws attention, second, to community participation: people

whose livelihoods depend on land and water should have meaningful opportunity to participate in decisions affecting those resources, so that community need and local knowledge enter development planning. It reinforces, third, the understanding of environmental protection as a shared responsibility, in which public institutions establish and enforce standards, investors answer for the consequences of their activities, and communities and civil society contribute through engagement, monitoring and advocacy. These are implications raised by the literary text; the study makes no claim to have measured the play's influence on environmental policy or public attitude, which would require empirical research with readers or theatre audiences.

This paper has examined environmental degradation in Austin Bukenya's *A Hole in the Sky*, focusing on the relationship between ecological destruction, capitalist development, ancestral land, community displacement and environmental justice. The analysis demonstrates that the destruction of Lake Riziki, the clearance of forests and the degradation of streams are central to the play's environmental concerns, revealing the consequences of commercial activity that prioritises economic gain over ecological sustainability and community welfare. It has also shown that environmental degradation in the play is connected to unequal power relations: the commercial interests driving development stand against the needs of communities whose livelihoods and security depend on the natural environment, and the threatened displacement of Kibichi and his family illustrates how ecological destruction can simultaneously threaten belonging, cultural continuity and access to ancestral land. Kijani's resistance provides the counterpoint, marking the possibility of challenging development practices that threaten community rights, and presenting environmental protection as a question of ecological responsibility and social justice together.

The study builds on recent East African scholarship, particularly [Edwin et al. \(2023\)](#) on capitalist environmental destruction in the same play and [Murage and Rutere \(2022\)](#) on environmental activism and social cohesion, and its distinctive emphasis is the relationship between ecological damage, ancestral land and community displacement. It concludes that *A Hole in the Sky* challenges narrow understandings of development that equate economic growth with social progress, and suggests that development must be evaluated according to its environmental consequences and its effects on the people whose lives depend on natural resources.

Three limitations frame these findings. The study interprets a single dramatic text and does not claim generalisable conclusions about East African environmental drama as a whole. It treats the play as a text rather than as performance. And it makes no empirical claim about readers or audiences. Further research could investigate the reception of environmental drama among students and theatre audiences, compare the play with other East African environmental texts, and examine how performance practice communicates ecological concern. Bukenya's play ultimately invites its readers to reconsider the meaning of progress: development that destroys essential natural resources and threatens community survival raises fundamental questions about responsibility, accountability and whose interests are served. By bringing these concerns into dramatic focus, the play demonstrates the value of literature as a space for interrogating environmental exploitation and for imagining more sustainable relationships between people and the natural world.

Declarations

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