

Ecotherapeutic Discourse in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Peter Oghenerioborue Udi, PhD

Okiemute Jacinta Uge

University of Delta, Agbor, Nigeria

Abstract

The natural environment plays a vital role in psychological well-being, an idea increasingly explored in contemporary interdisciplinary research under the umbrella of ecotherapy. Ecotherapy, or nature-based therapy, posits that interaction with nature enhances emotional and mental health. This study investigates how ecotherapeutic discourse is articulated in two seminal African novels: Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. These works are selected for their literary depth and their rich portrayal of characters grappling with psychological stress within oppressive socio-cultural environments. The research employs psychoanalytic literary criticism in conjunction with qualitative close reading to identify narrative instances where characters engage with natural environments as a form of emotional reprieve. The study examines the ecological settings and their symbolic resonance in the lives of the protagonists. In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye, contending with widowhood and marital betrayal, finds solace in nostalgic recollections of nature shared with her friend Aissatou. These scenes—beaches, gardens, and communal outings—emerge as psychic safe spaces that counterbalance emotional fragmentation. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Auntie Ifeoma's garden and flowering plants serve as both literal and figurative refuges for Kambili and Jaja, offering hope, healing, and a model for autonomy beyond patriarchal control. Both Ba and Adichie position nature as a therapeutic force that enables psychological resilience, particularly for female characters navigating socio-religious constraints. The analysis affirms that ecological imagery in African literature is not merely decorative but functions as a profound symbolic and psychological resource. This study thereby enriches ecocritical and psychoanalytic discourses by illuminating the unique convergence of nature, memory, and healing in African women's writing.

Keywords: Ecotherapy; Nature Therapy; African Literature; Mariama Ba; Chimamanda Adichie

Introduction

African writers often depict the natural world as intimately tied to human emotion. The physical environment provides food, shelter, knowledge and symbolic meaning, as well as *therapeutic* benefits (Kottak 12). In the novels under study, the authors use landscapes and plants to express characters' inner states. Mariama Ba and Chimamanda Adichie, prominent West African novelists, explore how memory of nature can alleviate suffering. This article

examines *eco-therapeutic* discourse in Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, asking: how do these narratives use nature to promote healing of psychological wounds?

Interdisciplinary theory suggests that mind and environment are entwined. Ecopsychologists argue that human well-being depends on ecological health (Arbuzova and Kubrina 692–93). Likewise, psychoanalytic critics note that literature often reveals the author's unconscious and formative experiences (Shahwan 2; Tyson 12). Both perspectives imply that recalling nature can affect the psyche. For example, psychoanalytic theory recognises nostalgia as a defence mechanism that restores a sense of social connectedness and meaning (Sedikides and Wildschut 48; Smith and Watson 357–58). Building on these ideas, ecotherapy scholars define “ecotherapy” as a broad psychotherapy focusing on the healing role of nature (Buzzell and Chalquist 54; Summers and Vivian 3). Spending time mindfully outdoors, they argue, reminds us of our place within nature's cycles of growth and renewal (Buzzell and Chalquist 54; Summers and Vivian 3).

Literary texts can thus be seen as *symptoms of the author's mind* (Shahwan 2). When authors incorporate ecosystems into their narratives, those scenes may reflect emotional strategies. In African contexts of patriarchy or postcolonial trauma, retreating into natural memory can be a form of resistance. This study applies Freud's psychoanalytic framework (the “unconscious”) to ecological symbolism. Psychoanalytic critics maintain that literature can reveal hidden desires and coping mechanisms of characters and authors (Lončar-Vujnović 69; Tyson 12). We explore how nature imagery in the novels functions as a sublimation for unresolved grief and stress. The focus on Ba and Adichie aligns with an interdisciplinary African studies approach. Both texts are major works of contemporary African literature that address themes of gender, tradition and change. By investigating the interplay of environment and psyche, this analysis meets the Abuja Journal of Humanities' interest in cultural and African experience. It also contributes new insight to literary scholarship by naming and explicating an “eco-therapeutic” discourse in these narratives.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on ecotherapy underscores its growing empirical and theoretical relevance across disciplines. Critics have challenged the notion that ecotherapy is vague or anecdotal: robust evidence now shows that engagement with nature improves mental health outcomes (Berry 54). For instance, Wilson et al. argue that utilising green spaces to promote psychological wellness predates many modern treatment modalities and is particularly suited to populations suffering from reduced mobility or social withdrawal (23). Parades-Céspedes *et al.* observe that nature-based therapeutic interventions have significantly reduced stress, depression, and anxiety in diverse populations (609). These studies affirm the role of ecological interaction in emotional regulation and suggest an interdisciplinary platform for examining mental distress and recovery. Psychologists also distinguish between biological, experiential, and sociocultural causes of psychological disorders. While King highlights the role of individual experience and personality in mental illness (499), Ferguson and Tyson stress that such disorders often originate from unresolved unconscious trauma and can be alleviated through symbolic or narrative sublimation (Ferguson; Tyson 12). Accordingly, Freud's concept of the unconscious, alongside more recent psychoanalytic models, offers tools for decoding literary representations of psychic fragmentation, repression, and sublimated healing. Tyson's assertion that literature serves as a conduit for the author's repressed emotional landscape aligns with Shahwan's claim that the literary text functions as “the symptom of the author” (2). These approaches legitimise the reading of fictional ecosystems as metaphoric healing grounds.

Yet while ecotherapy literature and psychoanalytic theory are increasingly established, their application to African literary texts remains limited. Existing ecocritical studies often prioritise environmental degradation or postcolonial ecology (Caminero-Santangelo 17–21) without addressing the psychological role of nature in African narratives. Ecofeminist perspectives, such as those advanced by Nfah-Abbenyi, show how African women writers position the natural world as a site of emotional agency and resistance, particularly against patriarchal structures (89). This is highly pertinent to *So Long a Letter* and *Purple Hibiscus*, where female

protagonists engage with nature both literally and symbolically in their struggle for psychological autonomy. Moreover, memory and trauma studies in African literature provide complementary insights. Kehinde, for instance, demonstrates how narratives of dislocation, marital breakdown, and spiritual repression in African women's writing are often refracted through remembered landscapes or spatial motifs ("Postcolonial Memory" 75). Jackson further argues that African novels frequently stage "healing" through modes of intellectual or philosophical retreat into the self or the past (Jackson 33). In both Ba's and Adichie's texts, nostalgic recollection of ecological settings (gardens, seashores, fruit trees) becomes an imaginative means of reconstituting wholeness.

Recent work by Egya Sule on psychological realism in African literature also supports a close reading of characters' inner lives in relation to their environments. Sule's studies suggest that African fiction increasingly internalises psychological suffering as a consequence of sociocultural contradictions, and that natural imagery often operates as a symbolic counterforce (Sule 106). Within this framework, Ramatoulaye's memories of childhood landscapes and Kambili's response to Ifeoma's blooming garden emerge as therapeutic alternatives to trauma. Despite these developments, no major study has yet framed Ba's or Adichie's narratives within an ecotherapeutic paradigm. While scholars have discussed the significance of nostalgia in *So Long a Letter* (McNeill 49), or the symbolism of the hibiscus in Adichie's novel (Neblett 84), these elements have not been connected systematically to healing or mental restoration. This gap highlights the novelty of the present study, which combines ecotherapy and psychoanalytic theory to offer a more integrated reading of how African women's fiction represents emotional resilience through nature.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The analysis is guided by psychoanalytic theory and ecotherapy concepts. Freudian criticism contends that literary works manifest the unconscious desires of author/characters (Lončar-Vujnović 69; Tyson 12). Shahwan observes that "the literary text is the symptom of the author," containing repressed wishes in symbolic form (Shahwan 2). Applying this, one may view the pastoral scenes in *So Long a Letter* and *Purple Hibiscus* as symbolic expressions of suppressed emotional needs for freedom and comfort. Nostalgia theory (Sedikides and Wildschut 48) also informs the framework: recalling a past scene (e.g. a family outing or garden) brings existential solace and social connection.

Ecotherapy theory provides complementary lenses. Buzzell and Chalquist characterise ecotherapy as acknowledging the vital role of nature in mental health, arguing that time in natural settings reminds people of life's regenerative patterns (Buzzell and Chalquist 54). Summers and Vivian define eco-therapy as the healing interaction with nature (Summers and Vivian 3). Both authors warn that neglect of this "ecosystem service" (i.e. psychological support from nature) incurs costs in distress and slower recovery (Summers and Vivian 3). Furthermore, some scholars contextualise ecotherapy philosophically: Chaudhury and Banerjee note that many cultures (e.g. Indian tradition) view humans as intrinsically connected to nature (Chaudhury and Banerjee 5). This idea resonates with African cosmologies where land and ancestors are intertwined.

In sum, our theoretical approach combines psychoanalytic and ecopsychological insights. We will analyse the texts for instances where characters' interactions with nature (literal or remembered) function as coping strategies. This includes examining how the authors use natural imagery to suggest unconscious healing. Key concepts such as "ecotherapy," "nostalgia," and "narrative self" are thus defined through this dual lens.

This qualitative study performs close reading of two primary texts chosen for their thematic relevance. *So Long a Letter* (Ba 1981) and *Purple Hibiscus* (Adichie 2003) are examined for ecotherapeutic content. We first identify passages describing natural settings or vegetation. We then analyse these passages in context, assessing how characters relate to them emotionally. The method is essentially descriptive-analytical: we describe the ecological imagery and interpret its psychological significance using the theoretical framework above. Literary criticism sources on African narratives, trauma and ecotherapy supplement our analysis.

Analysis

Ba's epistolary novel centres on Ramatoulaye, a Senegalese woman facing widowhood and polygamy after her husband marries a younger woman. Throughout her letter, Ramatoulaye frequently revisits memories of nature shared with her friend Aissatou. These childhood recollections serve as a refuge from present suffering. For example, early in the novel the narrator describes the scenic *Dakar Corniche*: "the Dakar Corniche, a sheer work of art wrought by nature" (Ba 21). The prose dwells on stones, ocean vistas and breezes. Later, Ramatoulaye recalls an "verdant garden" with Aissatou and walks along Ngor Beach near fishermen mending nets. She notes with affection that "our favourite spot was Ngor beach... where old bearded fishermen repaired their nets under the silk-cotton trees" (Ba 22). These images are detailed and sensuous: children "played in complete freedom when they were not frolicking about the sea" (Ba 22).

These nature scenes activate *nostalgia*, which scholars say fosters social belonging and positive meaning (Sedikides and Wildschut 48). In *So Long a Letter*, the nostalgic memory of Ngor Beach bridges the emotional distance between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, both facing marital upheaval. The narrator reports that recalling "the benevolent caress of the iodized breeze and the warmth from the sun's rays" on public holidays brought people out for relaxation (Ba 22). She even notes that "depression and sadness would disappear, suddenly to be replaced by feelings of plenitude and expansiveness. Reinvigorated, we would set out for home" (Ba 22). This quote explicitly links nature with the disappearance of "depression and sadness." For Ramatoulaye, communing with the open sea cures envy and restores cheer: "The sea would put us in good humour... Our communion with deep, bottomless and unlimited nature refreshed our souls" (Ba 22). In psychoanalytic terms, the sea (with its infinite "bottomless" nature) symbolizes an order and security beyond human conflict, thereby healing the characters.

The garden at Ngor Beach similarly functions as a private haven. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou would gather there to escape the "old beatings of the heart" caused by their husbands' betrayals (Ba 21). One passage vividly describes a summer scene:

Greenery, sometimes a veritable hanging garden, spread out under the clear sky... Our favourite spot was Ngor beach... where old bearded fishermen repaired their nets under the silk-cotton trees. Naked and snotty children played in complete freedom... (Ba 21–22)

The language (hanging gardens, clear sky, fishermen) evokes timeless and universal pleasure. After quoting Smith and Watson's insight that autobiographical writers "seek to find a meaning for every event" (Smith and Watson 357), Ba's narrator indeed derives meaning and comfort from minor details of her youth. The beach scene "magnificently activate[s] nostalgic feelings" between the friends (Udi and Uge). In sum, *So Long a Letter* portrays Ramatoulaye's healing as largely coming from **recollections** of nature shared with loved ones. These ecological memories counterbalance her marital conflict by providing a sense of continuity and communal joy.

In Adichie's novel, thirteen-year-old Kambili and her brother Jaja live under the tyrannical rule of their father (Papa), a strict Catholic. Escape comes in the form of a visit to Auntie Ifeoma's home in Nsukka, where vibrant nature abounds. The text richly describes flowers and trees that fill the garden. At the outset, Kambili notes that through her window she sees a **cashew tree** with yellow fruits drawing bees to her netted room (Adichie 16–17). Soon after, she notices plumeria (pangipani) blooms perfuming the rainy-season air and purple bougainvillea hedges separating the house from a dusty driveway (Adichie 17).

As they drive on holiday, Kambili observes how *flowers flourish under care*. She describes hibiscus bushes that "reached out and touched one another as if exchanging their petals," their red blooms being repeatedly trimmed for church use (Adichie 17). The omniscient narrator also reports that *religious and social rituals* involve these plants: members of Mama's prayer group habitually pluck flowers, and a woman even tucks a blossom behind her ear (Adichie 17). These details show characters deriving simple joy from the garden. In one telling moment,

government men steal away some hibiscus flowers, highlighting even corrupt agents are drawn to these beauties (Adichie 17–18).

Aunty Ifeoma's garden embodies freedom. The protagonist describes her apartment block with "a circular burst of bright colours" in the form of a fenced garden containing roses, hibiscuses and lilies (Adichie 120). The wild mixture of colours – like a "hand-painted wreath" – contrasts the drab oppression of Kambili's own home. Ifeoma is portrayed as an *ecologically conscious* character: Kambili notes how Ifeoma plucks off browned leaves, lamenting that the harmattan (dry wind) was "killing her plants" (Adichie 136). She even had to fence her garden because neighbourhood children kept plucking her unusual flowers (Adichie 136). This protective attitude shows Ifeoma's respect for nature's restorative role: she will only allow her church's altar girls to take blooms, preserving the garden's life.

Adichie also alludes to African herbalism as nature's healing. While riding in their car, Kambili and Amaka smell the dogonyaro (neem) trees lining the road: "the sharp, astringent scent of the dogonyaro leaves filled the car and Amaka breathed deeply and said they cured malaria" (Adichie 138). This moment is significant: it connects the garden to traditional medicine and suggests that nature's benefits extend even to physical health. Later, Aunty Ifeoma continues watering her flowers in the afternoon: Kambili hears the buzz of a bee lulling her toward sleep under the blossoming garden (Adichie 152–59). Here insects, an element of the ecosystem, produce a "poetry" that soothes the mind. Such passages imply that the familiar, benign countryside setting is literally therapeutic.

Overall, *Purple Hibiscus* ties emotional uplift to flora and fauna. Each description of hibiscus, bougainvillea or banana-coloured blossoms is presented through Kambili's admiring eyes. The garden stands in stark contrast to the stifling cathedral and home. For Kambili and Jaja, this natural world becomes an *emotional sanctuary*. In the novel's conclusion, Jaja rejects the stifling church tradition and demands more freedom, symbolised by his walk in Ifeoma's garden. By the end, when Jaja "blooms" emotionally and asserts himself (the red hibiscus suggests change), nature is clearly linked to his personal growth. In summary, Adichie uses flowering ecosystems as motifs of hope, renewal and resistance against tyranny.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis has demonstrated that both Ba and Adichie deploy natural environments as sources of psychological healing in their novels. Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* retreats into memories of Dakar's beaches and gardens, using communal experiences of the ocean and sand to mitigate her grief. Similarly, Kambili and Jaja in *Purple Hibiscus* find the blooming garden at Ifeoma's home to be a place of calm and freedom. In both cases, characters *actively* engage with nature – through nostalgia or actual sensory experience – to restore their mental balance.

These findings support the idea that ecological elements in African literature can function as an "ecotherapeutic" discourse. Nature provides what Freud might call a transitional object for healing: it absorbs sorrow and rekindles pleasure without judgement. As Ba's narrator notes, communion with the "bottomless" sea refreshed their souls (Ba 22). The study therefore advances both literary criticism and interdisciplinary scholarship: it shows that African narrative (often overlooked by ecocriticism) contains ecological subtexts with therapeutic import. The analysis also aligns with AJH's emphasis on cultural context by highlighting that African women's coping strategies, embedded in local geographies, merit academic attention.

Further research might examine other African texts for similar themes, or explore how ecotherapy intersects with indigenous beliefs. For now, this article suggests that ecotherapy is not solely a Western psychological model but resonates in African storytelling. By celebrating the healing power of nature, Ba and Adichie offer a vision where ecosystems contribute to personal and communal resilience.

Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Algonquin Books, 2003.
- Arbuzova, Elena, and Lyudmila Kubrina. "Human Health and the Ecosystem: The Relationship between Ecological Status and Quality of Life." *Human Health and the Ecosystem... RT&A*, Special Issue no. 6 (81), Part 2, vol. 19, 2024, pp. 692–99.
- Ba, Mariama. *So Long a Letter*. Translated by Modupé Bodé-Thomas, Heinemann, 1981.
- Berry, Geoff. "Ecotherapy." *ResearchGate*, 2023, pp. 54–60.
- Buzzell, Linda, and Craig Chalquist, editors. *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*. Sierra Club Books, 2009.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Byron. *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice, and Political Ecology*. University of Virginia Press, 2014.
- Chaudhury, Supriyo, and Kiranmay Banerjee. "Nature and Human Harmony in Indian Philosophy." *Indian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–9.
- Ferguson, Steven. "Psychological Disorders: Types, Symptoms, Treatments." *Healthline*, 2023, www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/psychological-disorders. Accessed 20 May 2025.
- Jackson, Jeanne-Marie. *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing*. Princeton UP, 2021.
- Kehinde, Ayo. "Postcolonial Memory and National Allegory in the Nigerian Novel." *African Studies Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2008, pp. 72–92.
- King, Linda A. *The Science of Psychology*. McGraw-Hill, 2017, pp. 499–500.
- Lončar-Vujnović, Nataša. *Freud and Literature*. Peter Lang, 2013.
- McNeill, Maureen. "Narrating Identity: Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*." *Feminist Review*, no. 42, 1992, pp. 48–65.
- Neblett, William. "The Purple Flower in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2014, pp. 81–91.
- Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Indiana UP, 1997.
- Parades-Céspedes, Daniela M., et al. "The Effects of Nature Exposure Therapies on Stress, Depression and Anxiety Levels: A Systematic Review." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 14, 2024, pp. 609–22.
- Saadati, Nasim, et al. "The Psychosomatic Effects of Childhood Trauma: Insights from Adult Survivors." *Journal of Personality and Psychosomatic Research*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2024, pp. 34–40.
- Sedikides, Constantine, and Tim Wildschut. "Finding Meaning in Nostalgia." *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2018, pp. 48–61.
- Shahwan, John S. "A Multidimensional Approach to *Animal Farm*." *Review of Arts and Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1–6.

- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. "The Trouble with Autobiography: Cautionary Notes for Narrative Theorists." *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Blackwell, 2005, pp. 356–71.
- Sule, Egeya. *Nation, Power and Dissidence in Third Generation Nigerian Poetry in English*. African Heritage Press, 2014.
- Summers, Adam, and Jenna Vivian. "Eco-therapy: The Ability of Interaction with Nature to Enhance Healing and Growth." *American Journal of Ecosystem Services*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2018, pp. 3–7.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. Routledge, 2006.
- Wilson, Nick, et al. "A Review of Ecotherapy as an Adjunct Form of Treatment for Those Who Use Mental Health Services." *Journal of Public Mental Health*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2008, pp. 23–25.