

## Narrating Environmental Sustainability in Véronique Tadjo's *In the Company of Men*

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### Abstract

This article examines how Véronique Tadjo's (2017) *In the Company of Men* constructs ecological awareness within a postcolonial African context. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism, the study argues that the novel reframes environmental crisis not as passive loss but as the historically embedded consequence of human violence, ecological dispossession, and exploitative modernity. Through qualitative content analysis, the article explores the novel's thematic patterns, multispecies narration, and symbolic landscapes to demonstrate how indigenous ecological epistemologies are foregrounded as ethical alternatives to extraction-driven development. Tadjo situates sustainability within communal responsibility, spiritual cosmologies, and reciprocal human–nonhuman relations, emphasising the need to mend fractured interspecies bonds. At the same time, the novel distinguishes between destructive technological expansion and responsible scientific practice aligned with ecological balance. By narrativising interdependence and tracing the causal links between environmental degradation and epidemic outbreak, the text advances a relational vision of environmental justice that challenges dominant developmental paradigms. The article positions Tadjo's work as a form of literary environmental activism that reimagines sustainability through ethical recalibration and ecological consciousness.

### Keywords:

Fiction, Ecology, Nature, Environment, Eco-criticism

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## **Introduction**

Severe environmental crises continue to affect many parts of the African continent, including prolonged droughts, soil erosion, biodiversity loss, toxic pollution, and rising temperatures. These crises are not merely natural phenomena; they are historically produced and socially intensified through extractive economic systems, neo-colonial resource exploitation, and unsustainable patterns of consumption. As Aduana (2014, p. 21) observes, environmental degradation stems largely from destructive human-nature relationships that demand conscious transformation. Addressing such crises, therefore, requires not only scientific and technological interventions but also ethical, cultural, and epistemological reorientations. While environmental science provides quantitative data on ecological decline, literature offers an interpretive space where the environmental crisis is translated into lived experience. Contrary to critics who question the cognitive value of fiction (Stolnitz 1992; New 1999), ecocritical scholars argue that literary narratives mediate ecological knowledge through affect, memory, and imagination (Buell 1995, Nussbaum 1997). To further emphasise this point, I quote Nixon (2011, p. 15), who argues that “literature renders climate statistics experientially meaningful by narrativising the slow violence of environmental harm”. In this sense, literature does not compete with science; rather, it complements it by shaping environmental consciousness through its imaginative power.

However, this article moves beyond examining literature merely as a tool for portraying environmental challenges. It focuses instead on how literary texts conceptualise and model environmental sustainability as a transformative ethical practice. In this paper, environmental sustainability refers to the responsible interaction with the natural environment to avoid the depletion or degradation of natural resources and to maintain long-term environmental quality. It means meeting present needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs. It entails recognising the land not as an inert property or extractable commodity, but as a living presence embedded within communal identity, spirituality, and intergenerational responsibility. It involves practices of restraint, stewardship, and collective accountability that challenge capitalist logics of accumulation and disposability. Within postcolonial African contexts,

environmental sustainability acquires additional political urgency. Environmental degradation is often entangled with histories of colonial extraction and contemporary neo-colonial exploitation. Thus, ecological consciousness becomes inseparable from questions of justice, sovereignty, and epistemic reclamation. Indigenous ecological knowledge systems, frequently marginalised by dominant developmental paradigms, offer alternative frameworks for sustainability grounded in coexistence rather than domination.

Against this backdrop, this article examines how Véronique Tadjó's *In the Company of Men* (2017) narrates environmental sustainability within conditions of crisis. The paper investigates how language, thematic configurations, and character trajectories articulate a shift from environmental vulnerability to ethical agency. It argues that the novel portrays environmental sustainability not as an abstract policy discourse, but as embodied practice enacted through communal solidarity, spiritual cosmologies, and reconfigured human-nature relationships. By foregrounding ecological interdependence, Tadjó's narrative advances a decolonial vision of sustainability that reframes environmental consciousness as both a moral obligation and a form of political resistance.

### Literature Review

Ecocritical scholarship in African literary studies has increasingly examined how fiction engages environmental degradation, postcolonial exploitation, and ecological ethics. Existing studies demonstrate that African writers do not treat environmental crises as peripheral concerns; rather, ecological disturbance is frequently intertwined with war, corruption, extractive capitalism, and moral decline. However, while this body of work has established the thematic centrality of environmental issues in African fiction, fewer studies have interrogated the formal and linguistic mechanisms through which ecological consciousness is narratively constructed.

Amita Kamat's "Ecocritical Reading of Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Akachi Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*" (2020) situates environmental degradation within the context of armed conflict. Kamat argues that the Biafran War devastates both biotic elements (humans, animals, forests) and abiotic components (land, air, landscape), thereby collapsing the distinction between ecological and human suffering. Her

analysis underscores how environmental destruction exacerbates trauma, displacement, and gender-based violence. By foregrounding the ecological consequences of war, Kamat contributes to a broader understanding of how environmental harm operates alongside political instability. However, her focus remains largely thematic, emphasising representational content rather than the aesthetic strategies that mediate ecological awareness. Similarly, Moussa and Akyen, in “Re-reading Sembène Ousmane’s *Xala* and Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*: African Postcolonial Fiction and the Poetics of Eco-Cultural Decadence,” interpret environmental decay as a metaphorical extension of moral and political corruption. They argue that filth and pollution symbolically depict ethical degeneration in postcolonial states. Environmental imagery becomes a visual register of corruption, embezzlement, and civic irresponsibility. While this study effectively links ecological degradation to moral decadence, its emphasis remains on metaphor and allegory, leaving the relational ethics between human and nonhuman life underexplored.

A more sustained engagement with African ecocriticism appears in the work of Cajetan Iheka (2018), who analyses oil pollution in Nigeria, war in Somalia, deforestation in Kenya, and agricultural transformation in Botswana across diverse African texts. Iheka demonstrates how environmental harm disproportionately affects vulnerable communities while destabilising multispecies ecologies. Importantly, he critiques certain postcolonial resistance strategies such as militant attacks on oil installations in Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist*, arguing that retaliatory violence can reproduce ecological damage rather than resolve it. Iheka’s intervention expands African ecocriticism beyond descriptive accounts of environmental decline toward ethical interrogation of human agency. Nevertheless, while his work theorises proximity and environmental vulnerability, it does not focus specifically on the narrative microstructures through which environmental sustainability is imaginatively configured in individual novels.

Scholarly engagement with Véronique Tadjó’s *In the Company of Men* (2017) has predominantly situated the novel within epidemic discourse, postcolonial environmental ethics, and memorial studies. Messay (2021), in

“Nous étions ici pour durer: Memorialization and Environmental Advocacy in *En compagnie des Hommes*,” reads the novel as an ecological archive in which nonhuman narrators, such as the Baobab tree, bats, and the Ebola virus, bear witness to disrupted ancestral ethics. Messay persuasively demonstrates how Tadjò challenges anthropocentrism by granting voice to the nonhuman world, framing the narrative as both a memorial and a moral intervention. Mahdeb and Mouloudj (2022), in “The Epidemic Novel ‘In the Company of Men’ by Véronique Tadjò: Literary Commitment with Multiple Functions,” approach the text primarily as epidemic fiction. They interpret the aestheticisation of contagion as a critique of ecological imbalance caused by human intrusion into wildlife habitats. In their reading, the novel performs a therapeutic function by addressing psychosocial trauma alongside environmental crisis. Likewise, Cephass Sallah (2023), in “Étude Écocritique de *En Compagnie des Hommes*,” conceptualises Ebola as ecological backlash, emphasising how severed human-nature relationships generate catastrophe.

Collectively, these studies establish three dominant interpretive trajectories: epidemic narratology, environmental ethics and nonhuman agency, and literary memorialization. They convincingly demonstrate that *In the Company of Men* interrogates anthropocentrism and situates Ebola within ecological imbalance. However, despite these valuable contributions, existing scholarship largely privileges thematic interpretation over formal analysis. The critical focus has been on what the novel says about environmental degradation rather than how it narratively constructs ecological awareness as an ethical practice. Specifically, there remains limited attention to micro-level textual strategies, such as polyphonic structuring, semantic repetition, symbolic configurations, and distributed narrative agency, through which ecological consciousness is linguistically and aesthetically produced. While scholars acknowledge nonhuman voices and ecological disruption, fewer studies examine how Tadjò’s formal choices generate a model of sustainable coexistence grounded in relational accountability. The narrative mechanics through which proximity is dramatised, and slow violence rendered perceptible, have not been systematically analysed.

This article addresses that gap by shifting the focus from thematic identification to formal construction. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism, particularly Iheka’s concept of proximity and Rob Nixon’s theory of slow

violence, the study examines how Tadjo's deployment of polyphony, characterisation, and symbolic imagery articulates ecological sustainability as a symbiotic, non-extractive mode of existence. By foregrounding narrative technique and linguistic patterning, this paper advances current scholarship beyond descriptive ecocritical readings. It demonstrates how literary form itself becomes a site for modelling environmental consciousness and sustainable relationships.

### **Materials and Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual analysis. The primary materials consist of *In the Company of Men* (2017) by Véronique Tadjo. This novel was selected purposively because it foregrounds ecological consciousness. Again, the novel deploys distinct narrative strategies such as polyphonic narration that enable a nuanced exploration of environmental sustainability as lived experience rather than abstract policy discourse.

The study employs qualitative content analysis combined with close reading. Content analysis in this context refers to the systematic identification, coding, and interpretation of recurring ecological motifs, thematic patterns, and narrative structures related to environmental sustainability. During data collection, the novel was read iteratively to identify textual units such as descriptive passages, character actions, dialogues, and symbolic representations of landscape that explicitly or implicitly construct ecological relationships. Close reading was then used to interpret how specific linguistic choices, narrative techniques, and character trajectories produce meaning. Particular attention was given to figurative language, shifts in narrative voice, symbolism of land and nonhuman entities, and moments where characters articulate ethical positions toward the environment. By examining both thematic content and formal strategies, the analysis moves beyond identifying environmental concerns to interrogating how ecological awareness is aesthetically constructed. Through this methodological approach, the paper demonstrates how literary form, character agency, and symbolic structuring collectively generate a framework of ecological sustainability.

combination of systematic thematic coding and interpretive textual analysis ensures analytical rigour while preserving sensitivity to the novel's aesthetic complexity.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

This study is grounded in postcolonial ecocriticism and draws on the complementary insights of Cajetan Iheka's concept of proximity (2018) and Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence (2011). These two frameworks are employed with distinct but interrelated analytical purposes. While Nixon's concept of slow violence enables an examination of the structural and often imperceptible dimensions of environmental degradation, Iheka's notion of proximity provides a lens for analysing how environmental sustainability is imaginatively constructed as an ethical and relational alternative within the selected novel. Nixon conceptualises slow violence as a form of environmental harm that unfolds gradually, dispersed across time and space, and frequently escapes immediate public attention. Unlike spectacular disasters that command global media visibility, slow violence is attritional and cumulative, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities whose suffering remains marginalised. Within this study, slow violence functions as a critical tool for analysing how environmental degradation is narrated as systemic rather than incidental. It allows the examination of ecological collapse as historically embedded in neo-colonial extraction, exploitative tendencies, and development paradigms that privilege profit over sustainability. By foregrounding the temporal dimension of environmental harm, the framework highlights how ecological destruction becomes normalised, rendering its long-term consequences politically and socially invisible. In the selected novel, environmental decline is therefore interpreted not as an isolated catastrophe but as the outcome of entrenched structures that produce gradual destabilisation of both human and nonhuman life.

Complementing this diagnostic function, Iheka's concept of proximity offers a constructive framework for analysing the representation of ecological sustainability. Proximity, as Iheka theorises, extends beyond spatial nearness to encompass relational interconnectedness and shared ontological ground between human and nonhuman beings. His articulation of distributed agency, interspecies relationships, multispecies presence, and the porous boundaries between human and nonhuman entities provides a valuable model for examining how African literary texts destabilise

anthropocentric hierarchies. In this study, proximity is employed to investigate how the novel depicts ecological sustainability as lived relationality rather than abstract environmental discourse. Through narrative voice, symbolic configurations, and character development, the text foregrounds mutual dependence, communal stewardship, and ethical accountability to the land. Environmental sustainability, in this sense, emerges as an embodied consciousness rooted in reciprocity rather than extraction. The interaction between slow violence and proximity structures this study's understanding of human agency in the novel. Slow violence exposes the destructive consequences that arise when humans imagine themselves as detached from ecological systems. Such perceived distance legitimises exploitative practices and enables gradual environmental collapse. Conversely, proximity counters this detachment by restoring awareness of interdependence. As characters recognise their embeddedness within multispecies networks, they transition from passive witnesses of environmental degradation to active participants in ecological protection. The restoration of proximity thus becomes a narrative strategy for resisting slow violence. Together, these theoretical frameworks allow the study to trace a movement from ecological destabilisation to ecological consciousness. Slow violence diagnoses the structural conditions that necessitate environmental sustainability, while proximity articulates the ethical orientation through which sustainability becomes imaginable and actionable. By integrating these concepts, the analysis demonstrates that environmental sustainability in the selected novel is not merely framed as resistance to destruction, but as a profound reconfiguration of human-nature relations grounded in relational responsibility and moral reciprocity.

### **Discussion of the Research Findings**

#### **Ecological Disruption and the Ethics of Sustainability in *In the Company of Men***

Veronique Tadjo is an Ivorian author, poet and illustrator. Her works entwine African oral traditions with current issues of history, identity and resilience. Set in an unnamed fictional village in Africa, *In the Company of Men*

(2021) draws on the accounts of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. According to Messay (2021), Tadjó's story was inspired by the largest Ebola outbreak, which occurred in Guinea between 2014 and 2016 and subsequently extended to Liberia and Sierra Leone, resulting in 28,652 cases and 11,325 deaths. The outbreak caused concern worldwide and garnered international news coverage. Tadjó crafts a formally innovative and ethically resonant meditation on the Ebola pandemic by embedding the outbreak within a wider ecological, historical, and moral continuum. Rather than centring the narrative on a singular human protagonist, the novel unfolds through a polyphonic constellation of voices: human survivors, medical workers, community members, bats, trees, and even the virus itself. This deliberate decentralisation of narrative authority unsettles anthropocentric assumptions and repositions the human as one actor within a broader multispecies ecology. The polyphonic structure is not simply a stylistic experiment; it functions as a critical ecological strategy. By animating nonhuman entities and granting them testimonial authority, Tadjó transforms nature from a passive landscape into an interpretive agent and an ethical interlocutor. As Cephas Sallah (2023) observes, the novel's anthropomorphised voices intensify its ecological dimension, allowing trees and animals to articulate a counter-narrative that exposes the violence of human disturbance.

The trajectory of the Ebola virus in the novel is carefully structured to emphasise causality rather than coincidence. While the disease appears to erupt suddenly, its emergence is narratively traced back to prior acts of ecological intrusion, deforestation, wildlife hunting, mining expansion, and habitat fragmentation. In this sense, the epidemic is not portrayed as a supernatural curse or arbitrary catastrophe but as the embodied consequence of disrupted interspecies equilibrium. Tadjó thus reframes Ebola as a symptom of ecological imbalance, situating viral spill over within a chain of human-induced environmental disturbances. This repositioning destabilises conventional biomedical narratives that isolate disease from environmental context. Instead, the novel insists that the epidemic and the ecosystem are inseparable.

Such narrative construction resonates with Cajetan Iheka's formulation of proximity as relational entanglement grounded in shared vulnerability. Proximity, for Iheka, extends beyond spatial closeness to denote a moral and ontological interconnectedness between human and nonhuman beings.

Tadjo dramatises this entanglement in the novel through the early juxtaposition of a tranquil forest and a neighbouring village, an image of coexistence that is at once intimate and precarious. This equilibrium is violently disrupted when two youths enter the forest to hunt bats, an act depicted less as subsistence than as a prideful assertion of dominance. Their subsequent deaths from haemorrhagic fever become narratively emblematic: the intrusion into bat habitats collapses the fragile boundary between species, transforming ecological nearness into biological exposure. The spillover event is therefore structurally produced. Habitat disturbance displaces bats; displacement intensifies contact; contact facilitates contagion. Through this chain, the novel reveals how proximity becomes catastrophic when stripped of ethical regulation.

At the same time, Tadjo's portrayal of the epidemic aligns with Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, environmental harm that unfolds incrementally, often invisibly, and whose consequences accumulate across time (Nixon 2011). The fever that devastates the village is the visible climax of prior, less perceptible acts: trees felled for timber, earth opened for gold, animals hunted for consumption. These activities do not initially appear catastrophic; they are normalised as economic advancement or survival practice. Yet their cumulative impact destabilises ecological systems, a destabilisation that eventually returns as human suffering. Ebola thus occupies a dual position in the novel: it is both a biological agent and a narrative revelation, exposing the long-term effects of extractive and exploitative practices that had previously escaped scrutiny.

By synthesising proximity and slow violence within its narrative architecture, *In the Company of Men* reconceptualises ecological sustainability as an ethical imperative rather than a technocratic or biomedical solution. The novel insists that environmental crisis cannot be resolved solely through medical containment, infrastructural reform, or policy intervention; instead, it demands a fundamental recalibration of human self-understanding. Humans are not sovereign occupants of inert landscapes but participants in multispecies ecologies structured by interdependence, vulnerability, and reciprocity. When proximity is grounded in ethical responsibility, it sustains coexistence; when

reconfigured as domination, it produces systemic destabilisation. Through its multispecies narration and sustained tracing of ecological causality, Tadjó advances a relational paradigm of sustainability, one predicated on restoring moral balance within an interconnected ecological world.

This relational framework becomes legible through the logic of Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, defined as "environmental harm that is incremental, accretive, and frequently obscured from immediate visibility" (Nixon 2011, 2). The Ebola outbreak, though experienced as a sudden catastrophe, is narratively revealed as the culmination of prior acts of ecological disruption, deforestation, mining expansion, wildlife consumption, and habitat fragmentation. Tadjó condenses this causal chain into the stark confession: "We killed the bats, we ate the monkeys, we tore down the forest. Then came the fever" (23). The paratactic sequencing of verbs eliminates ambiguity; causation is rendered syntactically inevitable. The fever follows not as a coincidence but as a consequence. By compressing ecological history into a lyrical admission, the novel exposes the epidemic as the visible eruption of accumulated environmental violence. Ebola thus occupies a pivotal position within the ecological cycle: it is the embodied manifestation of slow, normalised destruction.

Deforestation intensifies this dynamic and is articulated with symbolic force through the Baobab's voice. The tree proclaims, "I am the Baobab, the first tree, the everlasting tree...I hold up the sky with my broad arms" (3). This self-description elevates the Baobab from botanical presence to cosmological pillar. The metaphor of "holding up the sky" signals structural indispensability; destroying the tree destabilises the very architecture of existence. When the Baobab warns that killing trees entails "breaking the chains of existence" and observes that displaced bats consequently "seek the company of men" (15), Tadjó delineates the ecological continuum linking habitat destruction to zoonotic spillover. Habitat loss produces displacement; displacement intensifies interspecies contact; contact enables contagion. Proximity, once a condition of ethical coexistence, becomes coerced exposure when stripped of restraint.

Cajetan Iheka's assertion that proximity in African ecologies "imposes responsibilities on the human toward the nonhuman" (12) clarifies the moral rupture at the novel's centre. The degeneration of responsible proximity into exploitative intrusion is conveyed through the Baobab's unembellished indictment: "They cut down the trees. They killed the

animals. They ate them" (6). The blunt repetition of verbs underscores the normalisation of violence. These actions are not framed as neutral economic transactions but as violations of an ecological covenant. By stripping the language of ornamentation, Tadjo foregrounds the systemic character of destruction, exposing how the denial of moral proximity authorises slow violence to proceed unchecked.

Extractive industries further exemplify this creeping devastation. The bat recalls a time of ecological balance: "We were many. We lived in the forest, far away from humans" before the arrival of "loggers" and "miners" who "tore down the trees" and "opened up the earth" (14). The verbs "tore" and "opened up" evoke penetration and rupture, transforming the landscape into a wounded body. Mining's impact on the village is rendered with similar intensity: "Everything was ransacked...All they could think of was splashing...to churn up gold deposits" (18). The frenetic imagery of "splashing" and "milling about" conveys chaotic greed, while the description of gold as "wretched metal" ironises its promised prosperity. In Nixon's terms, such extraction epitomises slow violence: degradation accumulates gradually through eroded soil, contaminated rivers, and fragmented habitats long before its consequences crystallise into crisis. The fever represents only the final stage of a protracted ecological unravelling.

Crucially, the novel reframes Ebola not solely as a catastrophe but as a revelation. It exposes the illusion of human separateness from ecological systems and underscores the biological entanglement that binds species together. Humans may attempt to dominate forests and animals, yet their survival remains contingent upon ecological balance. By granting interpretive authority to the Baobab and the bat, Tadjo restores ecological consciousness through multispecies testimony. These nonhuman narrators do more than witness destruction; they diagnose its causes and implicitly gesture toward alternative modes of coexistence grounded in reciprocity. Within this framework, slow violence and proximity function in dynamic tension. Slow violence elucidates the structural and temporal dimensions of ecological degradation, revealing how normalised practices of extraction culminate in crisis. Proximity, by contrast, illuminates both the vulnerability inherent in interspecies entanglement and the ethical

possibilities embedded within it. When governed by reciprocity, proximity sustains life; when driven by domination, it accelerates collapse. Ebola, situated at the intersection of these forces, becomes both the embodied consequence of exploitative proximity and the narrative catalyst for ecological reckoning.

### **Living in Harmony with Nature and Co-Existence Among Species**

Central to Tadjó's ecological vision is the Baobab tree, which functions as a repository of ancestral memory and an emblem of ecological ethics. At the novel's opening and closing, the Baobab frames the narrative within a temporality that exceeds human lifespan. It introduces itself with authority: "I am the oldest. I am the wisest. I am the tree of life" (Tadjó 3). This self-positioning establishes the tree not as decorative scenery but as a spiritual elder and ecological anchor. Through this narrative strategy, Tadjó enacts what Iheka describes as proximity and an intimate relationality in which human and nonhuman life share ontological ground (Iheka 65). The Baobab's voice restores ethical nearness between species, challenging anthropocentric hierarchies by granting trees epistemic authority. The Baobab's lament over modern destruction reinforces this moral proximity. It rebukes humanity: "If only man were more clear-sighted! he would surely end the violence and lay down his axes and machetes. He would silence his chainsaws, stop his bulldozers..." (Tadjó 15). The machinery listed: axes, chainsaws, and bulldozers symbolise mechanised intrusion into ecological systems. The critique is not only material but ethical. The tree suggests that exploitation yields neither happiness nor fulfilment, exposing the emptiness of extractive modernity. Here, proximity functions as recognition: the tree's speech invites humans to see themselves as morally accountable to the living world they damage.

At the same time, Tadjó situates ecological breakdown within the framework of Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, environmental harm that is incremental, dispersed, and often invisible (Nixon 2011, p. 2). The novel condenses this causal chain in the striking confession: "We killed the bats, we ate the monkeys, we tore down the forest. Then came the fever" (Tadjó 23). The brevity of the sentence mirrors the inevitability of consequence. Yet the fever is not sudden in origin; it is the culmination of accumulated disturbance. Deforestation displaces bats; displacement intensifies interspecies contact; contact produces viral spillover.

Ebola is thus positioned within a cycle of ecological disruption rather than framed as divine punishment or random misfortune. It represents the visible eruption of invisible processes. The Baobab further recalls an earlier mode of coexistence: "Things were not always like this. There was a time when men used to talk to us, the trees...If one of us had to be cut down, our pardon would be begged first. Libations would be poured..." (Tadjo 16).

This recollection foregrounds indigenous ecological principles rooted in reciprocity and restraint. The phrase "we shared the same gods" collapses the boundary between spiritual and material worlds, suggesting a cosmology in which trees participate in sacred life. This portrayal resonates with Mbiti's (1969) account of African cosmologies in which trees are sacred companions integral to communal survival. Such ritualised practices in the novel, begging pardon, pouring libations, reflect what may be termed ritualised reciprocity: the understanding that taking from nature requires acknowledgement and moral balance. As Sallah (2023) notes, this spiritual dimension of human-nature relations embeds environmental care within cultural identity. Through this memory, Tadjo contrasts two epistemologies: a kin-centric stewardship model and a commodified extractive model. The former recognises distributed agency in trees and animals, and that they possess presence and value; the latter reduces them to exploitable objects. The erosion of ritual practices symbolises the erosion of proximity. Humans remain physically near to forests, yet spiritually and ethically distant. This severance enables slow violence to unfold unchecked. The novel's hints of developmental expansion reinforce this displacement of ecological wisdom. The Baobab, once central, is pushed to the margins, crowded by development. Its marginalisation metaphorically reflects the sidelining of indigenous ecological knowledge in favour of rapid industrial growth. Tadjo thus situates the environmental crisis within a broader epistemic crisis, the abandonment of relational worldviews for profit-driven rationality.

Importantly, proximity in the novel is ambivalent. It is both a site of exposure and a site of healing. When proximity becomes intrusion through hunting, mining, or logging, it can lead to zoonotic diseases and ecological imbalance. Yet when proximity is grounded in dialogue and reciprocity, it

fosters sustainable coexistence. Tadjó articulates this ethical reorientation explicitly: “We must learn again how to live with nature, not in dominance, but in dialogue” (Tadjó 112). The shift from dominance to dialogue encapsulates the novel’s ecological argument. Sustainability is framed not as technological mastery but as relational humility. Ebola, therefore, functions as both a warning and a pedagogy. It reveals that violence against nonhuman life reverberates back upon human communities. At the same time, it exposes the illusion of separation between species. Humans attempt to dominate forests and animals, yet their biological survival remains intertwined with that of the forests and animals. By narrativising this interdependence, Tadjó transforms ecological catastrophe into a call for moral recalibration. Eventually, the Baobab embodies the possibility of renewal. As keeper of memory, it preserves ancestral ecological ethics that can guide future sustainability. Through its voice, the novel asserts that healing requires restoration of ethical proximity, recognition of shared vulnerability, distributed agency, and reciprocal care. In this way, *In the Company of Men* advances a model of ecological awareness grounded in spiritual interconnection, cultural memory, and responsible coexistence among species.

Tadjó’s narrative further advances an ethic of sustainable science and technology as a critical pathway toward ecological resilience and long-term environmental sustainability. It is important to note that ecocriticism does not advocate for giving up on technology; rather, it encourages its sustainable use with caution to avoid endangering both humans and the cosmos. Hojjat and Daronkolae’s quotation from Dobson highlights that “ecocriticism is not against technology. It advocates soft, intermediate, and appropriate alternative technologies partly because they are considered more environmentally benign. Still, also because they are potentially democratic” (33). Using Africa as a case study, Christopher and Innocent argue that “environmental problems are a result of new technological advancements that have led to an increase in plants, factories, and other forms of manufacturing that have harmed the environment severely” (263). Tadjó employs the bat’s voice as an ecological non-human witness to expose the contradictions embedded in modern scientific and technological ambitions. Through striking satirical imagery, the bat articulates the paradox of human self-assurance, a belief that technological advancement equates to environmental mastery, while simultaneously criticising the deepening ecological harm that such practices enable. Observing humans’

confidence in their ability to “purify the air,” “clean up polluted water,” and halt planetary destabilisation, the bat critiques what it calls humanity’s delusional fantasy of “perfection” (Tadjo 92). The bat’s satirical voice in these words foregrounds what Nixon terms “slow violence”: the incremental, often imperceptible environmental destruction produced by techno-centric development. Humans’ promises of technological salvation function as rhetorical veneers that obscure the enduring structural harms of pollution, deforestation, and ecological imbalance, which accumulate over time and disproportionately affect both human and nonhuman beings.

The bat’s satirical tone, “Humans, alas, are still dreaming of a purity that doesn’t exist” (92), ruptures anthropocentric epistemologies. Tadjo uses the bat to expose the flawed assumption that techno-scientific intervention can compensate for long histories of environmental abuse. The bat rejects the human narrative of progress, insisting instead on the ecological truth that no technological future is viable without sustained, reciprocal relationships with the natural world. This echoes Iheka’s proximity, which calls for recognition of nonhuman agency and integrative coexistence. By granting the bat narrative voice and interpretive authority, Tadjo collapses the human-nonhuman divide, bringing into view the intimate entanglements through which ecological life is sustained.

Tadjo further underscores the violence of human exceptionalism. The bat describes humans as creators “driven by nothing but their desire to achieve perfection,” a phrase that reveals a compulsive pursuit of control and mastery. Iheka argues that such a worldview positions humans as ethically and intellectually superior, relegating nonhuman beings to the realm of the insignificant “other” (20). The bat’s commentary dramatises how scientific practices often perpetuate this hierarchy: in their enthusiasm to innovate, humans ignore the silent labour of the natural world, such as the forests that cleanse the air, the rivers that sustain life, and the animals whose ecological roles contribute to planetary balance. The narrative imagery of humans “dreaming” while the environment deteriorates evokes Nixon’s slow violence, where environmental degradation is concealed beneath fantasies of technological redemption. Importantly, Tadjo’s bat disrupts the narrative of scientific triumph by insisting on inclusive ecological agency:

“none of this will happen unless they learn to share, with us, and with every creature yet to be born” (Tadjo 92). This moment is central to Tadjo’s ecological vision. The imagery of “sharing” suggests multispecies commons: a future in which scientific knowledge is reoriented toward ecological restoration rather than domination. Iheka’s emphasis on recognising the “presence” and “vital force” of nonhuman beings resonates here; the bat’s plea is not merely moral but ecological, advocating for a science attentive to environmental interdependence and the lived realities of nonhuman others.

Tadjo intensifies this critique through another vivid image: humanity’s aspiration to flee the Earth and “colonise space with enormous rockets” (Tadjo 93). The verb “colonising” evokes imperial histories of extraction and dispossession, suggesting that humans attempt to extend their destructive logic beyond Earth itself. The bat’s rhetorical question “if they haven’t learned to live here, how can they possibly survive in the distant Beyond?” exposes the futility and arrogance of seeking salvation elsewhere while leaving behind a planet ravaged by slow violence. This imagery positions space exploration as yet another iteration of the same epistemic error: pursuing technological spectacle while ignoring the ethical and ecological imperative to repair the damage already caused. By allowing a nonhuman narrator to critique human scientific folly, Tadjo reimagines the narrative possibilities of ecological fiction. The bat’s perspective reinforces Iheka’s call for relational ethics and Nixon’s argument that environmental harm must be understood as a long-term, accumulative process. The combined theoretical lenses reveal Tadjo’s central message: sustainable science must be grounded in ecological humility, multispecies coexistence, and an awareness of slow-moving planetary harm. Rather than fetishising technological escape or mastery, Tadjo envisions a techno-science oriented toward healing, one that recognises the agency, value, and futurity of all living beings.

Merging science and endogenous ecological knowledge is also illuminated by the narrative. A recurrent concern in African ecological discourse is the marginalisation of indigenous environmental knowledge. This epistemic erasure has repeatedly undermined the development of sustainable, locally grounded solutions to ecological challenges. Before colonial disruptions, African societies relied on finely honed understandings of seasons, animal behaviour, vegetation cycles, and climatic patterns to navigate

environmental crises (Agrawal 1995, Berkes 2012, Nakashima et al., 2012). These knowledge systems emerged from intimate proximity to the landscape, as Iheka (2018) describes, a multispecies rationality in which nonhuman beings possessed epistemic and agentic significance. The imposition of Western scientific epistemologies during colonialism not only displaced these practices but also eroded the cultural identities and ecological worldviews embedded within them. As Iheka adds, colonial enlightenment rationality elevated the Western human subject by suppressing the agentic possibilities of the African human and the nonhuman world, thereby relegating African knowledge and the multispecies ecologies that grounded them to the realm of the primitive and the irrelevant.

Tadjo's *In the Company of Men* intervenes in this history of epistemic violence by advocating a synergistic relationship between scientific innovation and indigenous ecological knowledge. Through the figure of the researcher, an educated narrator embedded within the scientific community, Tadjo exposes the consequences of excluding traditional healers and plant-based remedies from the early stages of the Ebola response. The researcher recounts that "no one paid any attention to the traditional healers, because government agencies and NGOs deemed them ignorant and incompetent, even as the disease continued its rampage" (78). The narrative thus highlights a form of epistemic slow violence: the structural, long-term harm produced when Western institutions invalidate local knowledge systems, thereby delaying effective, contextually grounded responses to crises.

Tadjo deepens this critique through the imagery of familiarity versus alienation. Traditional medicines are described as "familiar to the majority of the population," "readily accessible," and culturally resonant, inspiring confidence even amid uncertainty (Tadjo 79). In contrast, Western pharmaceuticals appear alien and intimidating, associated with fear, unfamiliar side effects, and the opacity of hospital procedures. The nurse says: "Even inside the hospital, the sick occasionally express doubts about us. They think we want to poison them with the needles we stick into their arms, or with the concoctions we make them drink" (Tadjo 32). This

dichotomy is not merely medical but ecological. The ease with which communities embrace traditional remedies arises from healers' proximity to their environment and their embeddedness within the flora and fauna that constitute African ecological life. Here, Tadjó makes visible what Iheka theorises as nonhuman presence: plant species become active agents in healing practices, not passive backdrops, and their medicinal capacities are recognised through long-term interactions between communities and landscape. The narrative imagery of plant species implicit in the healer's "ancestral knowledge" and "synergy with fauna and flora" also counters the anthropocentric bias of scientific rationality (78). By framing plants as collaborators in healing rather than inert raw materials, Tadjó challenges Western science's tendency to "other" the nonhuman. This resonates strongly with Iheka's (2018) argument that environmental storytelling must attend to how nonhuman beings participate in shaping narrative outcomes. The failure to recognise the agency of medicinal plants and ecological knowledge systems becomes, in Tadjó's story, a failure to recognise the very environment that sustains African life.

In this context, the researcher's reflections serve both as a critique and as a corrective. He acknowledges that "scientific reason cannot satisfy every human need" (Tadjó 77) and insists that effective responses to pandemics must emerge from proximity to local populations and their environments. The imagery of healers "prepared to cover great distances on foot" and "caring for the whole person" foregrounds an embodied ecological ethic, one rooted not only in treatment but in relational care, presence, and trust. This form of healing enacts what Nixon would call a counter-geography to slow violence: a resistance to the structural neglect and cultural alienation produced by imported medical models. The healer's work is depicted as cosmologically expansive: their knowledge is "more than plants and vegetation," representing "a complete worldview" attuned to the interdependencies of human and nonhuman life. This worldview contrasts sharply with the technocratic detachment of Western interventions, which often treat pandemics as discrete biological events rather than as socio-ecological phenomena embedded in communities and landscapes. Tadjó emphasises that local healers share daily life, environment, and interests with the people they serve, making them indispensable mediators of both medical care and cultural meaning. Their ecological knowledge emerges not from laboratories but from sustained engagement with the environment, what Iheka would call an epistemology of proximity.

By merging scientific and indigenous methods, the narrative demonstrates a more holistic response to Ebola. The failure of hospitals, as captured in the statement "Hospital is a failure..." (Tadjó 78), is not portrayed as a rejection of science but as an indictment of scientific exclusion. Tadjó argues for what we might call epistemic collaboration: an approach in which laboratory knowledge and plant-based therapies, clinical procedures and community trust, global expertise and local ecologies are integrated to produce sustainable, context-specific solutions. *In the Company of Men* presents a compelling ecological ethic: one in which scientific innovation flourishes not by overriding indigenous knowledge but by entering into meaningful dialogue with it. The containment of the pandemic in the narrative becomes a symbolic affirmation of this merged epistemology. By foregrounding traditional healers' ecological intimacy, recognising the agency of nonhuman species, and exposing the slow violence of epistemic erasure, Tadjó envisions an African future in which environmental and health challenges are met through relational, culturally grounded, and ecologically attuned knowledge systems.

### **Conclusion**

This study has shown that *In the Company of Men* by Véronique Tadjó advances ecological sustainability through a dual emphasis on harmonious multispecies coexistence and ethically reoriented science. Through its polyphonic structure and multispecies testimony, the novel reframes the Ebola outbreak as the culmination of disrupted ecological relations shaped by deforestation, extractive industries, and exploitative proximity. Drawing implicitly on Cajetan Iheka's notion of proximity, the narrative foregrounds relational entanglement and shared vulnerability, insisting that ecological sustainability depends upon reciprocity, restraint, and moral accountability toward the nonhuman world. Simultaneously, by exposing the incremental harms of environmental destruction resonant with Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, the novel demonstrates how extractive technologies produce long-term ecological destabilisation that ultimately rebounds upon human communities. Yet Tadjó does not reject science outright; rather, she differentiates between exploitative technological expansion and responsible scientific practice aimed at healing and containment. In doing

so, the novel reconceptualises sustainability not as technocratic management but as ethical recalibration within an interconnected ecological order, where coexistence among species and accountable scientific engagement converge as complementary pathways toward environmental justice.

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