

Ecology in Literature: A Study of Niyi Osundare's *Eye of the Earth*

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ABSTRACT:

The devastating state of the entire human environment has for sometimes now become a cause for a global concern and attention. Scientists, environmentalist as well as concerned stakeholders all over the world have consistently warned of the imminent danger inherent in the depleting eco- system. Literary experts in the Nigerian society, especially poets, have also joined their counterparts to lament this menace. They paint the picture of the Nigerian environment as that which has been seriously and dangerously dealt with by human activities. Niyi Osundare champions this in his collection of poems *Eye of the Earth*. pointing out the degeneration level and status of the Nigerian environment. From here, the study takes a critical stance in analyzing Osundare's works. Through a combination of the science of ecology and the art of literature, using eco criticism as its main discourse tool, the study embarks on a critical analysis of its primary text (*Eye of the Earth*), as well as the sociological, and formalistic theoretical frameworks, which the study employs as supporting theoretical frameworks and tools. The study espouses the gross damage done to the environment through an interplay of literary imagery and subject matter, through which the extent of these menace was made vivid. The study finds out that the environment and its habitat has been endangered by human activities, and that as long as these menace continues, that not only the ecosystem, but human lives will be put to a greater risk of destruction. The study is of the view that the environment and its eco system has been grossly mismanaged and suggests the following actions as rehabilitating efforts towards reinstating the ecosystem in its rightful status and shape. Every human being has conscience and should apply this in all his dealings. Human beings should be conscientized on the negative effects of damage and harm to our nascent environment. Laws should be enacted against environmental degradation. Government should constitute and institute necessary task force and stakeholders to enforce laws against offenders.

Keywords: Ecology, literature, eco-system, rehabilitation and national development

INTRODUCTION:

Eco-criticism is a branch of literature that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plants and animals in their physical habitats. It designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and the physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought to the environment by human activities. Representations of the natural environment are as old as recorded literature and were prominent in the account of the Garden of Eden, as well as in the Pastoral poetry inaugurated by Theocritus in the 3rd century B.C and later imitated by Vigil – an idealized depiction of rural life viewed as a survival of simplicity, peace and harmony that has been lost by a complex and urban society. The nostalgic view of a return to un spoilt nature in order to restore a lost simplicity and concord remains evident in James

Thomson's long verse, *The Season*, and in the widely practiced genre – nature writing. Abrams further posits that all living things and their earthly environment, no less than the human species, possess importance, value and even moral and political rights. (Abrams, 71)

Eco - criticism concentrates on environmental issues. The environment occupies a place of prominence on the front burner of global concerns. It has gained ascendancy over such issues as poverty, wars, unemployment, economic reform or the corruption campaign. In 1992, the United Nations organized Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and gave a legal bite to the global enforcement of environmental reforms in sync with economic and political change. The resurgent issue is that the environment is driven by the understanding that the earth is a cognate natural complex and its destruction in one part will ultimately affect the whole. *The Time*

International Magazine 2000, quoted in Asomugha (2008), reviews a 2000-2001 projects undertaken by four major agencies and partners of the United Nations on the state of the earth's environment which returns a bleak report:

Its conclusions are divided into assessment of five major types of eco-systems – forest, fresh water systems, coastal / marine habitats, grasslands and agricultural lands and all five are showing signs of deterioration.....(18)

The global panic about the state of the environment springs from the core of our humanity. There is a sense in which the human species inhabit nature. As Robin Grove - White, quoted in Asomugha, (2008) observes:

.....Concern for the environment reflects a deep human insecurity in the face of a growing complexity and uncertainty of society. Although our relationship with the natural world is the explicit issue, what is really at stake beneath the surface is humanity's understanding of its place within the whole. The real question is "What is it to be a human being"(36)

Human activity exerts the most debilitating impact on the environment. Robin Grove identifies environmental problems as physical problems arising from specific human interventions in natural forms. (15 – 16). The reason for this is not far-fetched. Human beings are the most deliberate, the most mobile of all species, and they are most able to assert themselves positively or negatively on the environment. The one million question then is why humanity should not resolve to save the environment seeing the danger their degradation poses to life. Africa certainly lags behind the rest of the world in the articulation conscience, and this is traced to the underdeveloped scientific capacity of the continent. Thus while the problem exists, the continent lacks the capacity to discover and delineate it in real terms. The only apprehension of the danger is theoretical and the urgency soon peters away in the subterfuge of political rhetoric. (Asomugha,10).

Because the reality of this problem is vague and without concreteness, the human beings who run the eco- system within the African continent ignorantly carry on as if nothing is at stake. The primary global challenge, especially in Africa as *Time International Magazine* posits, is how to position the campaign for

environmentally correct behavior to govern the "mainstream behavior and policy", (April-May,2000.18). People should be sensitized through various information, education and communication strategies. An initial step towards this objective is to do a comprehensive accounting of the state of the environment within the continent. All viable instrument for achieving this goal should be harnessed with the overall objective of eliciting positive responses through sustained behavioral change. This is where the peculiar resources of literature, especially poetry, yields great dividend. The functionality of literature rooted in its relationship with its milieu, has been established over the centuries. Literature has been proved to have the capacity to identify, synthesize and intensify perceived reality. The average African writer is more likely than not to have some real sense of vision and mostly deploying art in the service of addressing his milieu in certain result oriented ways. With regards to commitment, Nwoga, (ALT, No. 639) posits that:

" commitment should be seen in its dual possibilities of external call to action or internal orientation of awareness," (639)

Chinua Achebe collaborates Donatus Nwoga's submission, *"that all good literature is cause - based, and that it is the duty of the writer to "tell the people where the rain began to beat them"(Ohaeto, 12, & G.D Killam,8).*

Irele again locates the African writer's vocation in the area of identification with the heart beat of his milieu: *"It is perhaps not too much to say that if modern African writing has any value at the present moment, any significance, it is essentially a function of the comprehensive testimony it offers of the turns and patterns of an unfolding drama of existence in which we have been and continue to be involved....."(1)*

Nwahunanya on his part stresses the need for the message of a literary artist to be of social relevance, hence:

“ *Contemporary society poses a lot of challenges that provide*

a variety of working materials for the creative writers. Therefore because of the surefeit of socially relevant topical issues, writers believe they have a message worth listening to, once they deep their hands into the available pool of ideas and experiences which may not be new to their presumed audience. Indeed the writer has not yet started to write who does not believe he has a socially relevant message.....”(398)

These views succeed in putting certain co - ordinates to the poetic intent of Niyi Osundare in his collection, *Eye of the Earth*. Osundare’s collection attracts academic attention; it establishes socio- cultural relevance, and it does so with a high sense of technical discipline.

The paper examines the manifestations of ecological traits in Niyi Osundare’s poems made pungent by the poet’s use of imageries that are vivid in projecting the degree of this devastation, as well as the use of local Yoruba terms that are apt in assigning African aesthetics to the poem.

Review of Related Literature and Criticism:

There is no doubt that a lot has been written on nature and environmental concerns, both locally and internationally. In a bid to establish a relationship between the science of ecology and literature, Osundare is not alone in this crusade. Emerson, sets forth the main principles of transcendentalism, postulating the need for an original relations to the universe and viewing nature as the expression of a divine will. Love for nature is the characteristic feature of the romantic poets – Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Byron and so on. Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* achieves the same shift of perspective. Perhaps the most striking example of Wordsworth’s changed view is the beautiful meditative nature poem *Tintern Abbey*. A few years later, Wordsworth in Muotolu (2011), had himself visited the ruins of the abbey in the Wye village on the Welsh border and he also knew of William Gilpin’s observation of the River Wye . Gilpin’s book, like the contemporary accounts, protests the intrusion of industry and the presence of homeless vagrants in the ruins and surroundings woods.

Relating eco - criticism to the Negritude philosophy, Darko (1999), dwelt on the metaphors of the Negritude poetry which he views to be largely environmental.

J.O. Agbada (2009) countered the level of environmental degradation in Isidore Okpewho’s *Tidal Victims*. In the

study, Agbada confined his analysis to the problems emanating from the crisis that eventually submerged the entire Niger Delta community, in which the desired change could not be realized.

Nwizu (2009), highlighted as well as exposed the various environmental degradation and exploitation in the Niger Delta and saw the entire scenario as condemnatory.

Asomugha (2008) examined the literary writer’s commitments and his response to societal issues through his use of appropriate imagery in Nnimo Bassey’s *We Thought It was oil But it was Blood*. It was a study of environmental concerns and the possibility of salvaging the eco system.

Onyema (2017), was largely concerned with the oppressed victims of the Niger Delta and issues around them as subalterns and saw poetry as an alternative to misrepresentation of the press.

Asogwa and Anaeto Uba (2012) examined environmental pollution that are rarely mentioned such as noise, thermal and radio active waves. The findings of the study showed that unnatural cold water released from reservoirs can dramatically damage the fish and macro vertebrate, fauna in rivers and reduce their growth. Recommendations to the thermal pollution include cooling ponds, man made bodies of water designed for cooling by evaporation ,convection and radiation.

Okey and Ndum examined the underdeveloped nature of the Niger Delta reflected by such gross inadequacies as poverty, backwardness, insecurity, unemployment and general impoverishment associated with the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The paper anchored on the conclusion that the Niger Delta is termed underdeveloped as a result of the intervening activities like degradation, deforestation, oil spillage, gas flaring and lots more, that have consequently impacted negatively on the region, thereby making development difficult. The study recommends that the existing oil companies should strengthen their partnership philosophy with the oil bearing community.

Tavershima (2012) observed that the Niger Delta has gained attention from both national and international, socio, political and economic actors. The stud saw the amnesty program as one of the ways through which the government tackled the problem and finally concluded that all Nigerians have a stake in the issue confronting the Niger Delta people and that the resolution would be for the benefit of the Nigerian state and its people.

Omosuyi (2012) discussed the concept of waste disposal as a majoe environmental problem confronting and affecting the quality of the environment. The study observed that public enlightenment programmes lack the needed coverage, intensity and continuity to correct the apathetic attitude towards the environment. It

recommends public enlightenment as a major way of enhancing waste disposal in our environment

Tashie (2021) examined the control and command based policy instruments in achieving environmental objectives in Nigeria. The study explores how and what regulatory instruments are employed to address air and water pollution, oil spillage, gas flaring, solid and other hazardous wastes. The paper effectively highlighted some suggestions in the process of establishing and implementing environmental policies and programs in Nigeria.

Niyi Osundare's *Eye of the Earth* has not been properly addressed in terms of the environmental issue therein and this has created a gap which the present study has to fill. Therefore the present study espouses Niyi Osundare's poetry collection as a literary oriented analysis that shows the poet's use of apt and appropriate imagery as well as the use of his Yoruba traditional terms to draw attention to the devastation of the environment in his collection, *Eye of the Earth*.

Theoretical Framework:

The study adopts eco-critical, sociological and formalistic theories as its theoretical frameworks.

Eco-critical theory provides us the framework to analyze the work in question, and according to Abrams, it investigates the interrelations of all forms of plants and animals with each other and with their physical habitats. It designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on the environment by human activities. (2005).

The sociological approach to literature begins with the axiom that literature is an expression of the society, since it originates in society. It believes that literature represents life and since life is a social reality, literature represents reality. It therefore assumes that social forces inevitably form and condition the writer, his work and the audience, and therefore what he creates has to be studied as a social phenomenon. Literature it is assumed occurs only in a social context, as part of a culture, in a milieu. The writer is not only influenced by the society, he also influences it, because as a member of a society, he possesses a specific social status, and receives some degree of recognition and reward as a result of that status. (Nwahunanya, 28.)

Formalism emphasizes literary form and the study of literary devices within the text. As Victor Erlich points out, formalism was intent upon delimiting literary scholarship from contagious disciplines such as psychology, sociology, intellectual history.....(1976 : 1101). The consideration of a literary work as an independent object originates from the reaction against the nineteenth century positivist tendencies to reduce

literary work to sociological, historical or other kinds of document, or to an expression of some sort, moral or political position. Also rejected is the attempt to interpret literary works by references to the author's biography or psychology. The formalist approach is essentially aesthetic, and assumes that the literary artifact is an aesthetic object capable of arousing aesthetic experience. Such aesthetic objects appeals in its own qualities and qualitative structures. (Wellek and Warren, p. 241)

Analytical Framework:

Osundare's *Eye of the Earth* provides us with the site for the exploration of the thesis in this paper. It dwells on the redemptive mission of salvaging the environment and indeed the society. Like the romantics, Osundare advocates that nature has all potentials and by all standards should not be tampered wrongly with. The work reveals an array of environmental depletion alongside its negative effects through appropriate use of Yoruba imageries to invoke the feelings of pity on the eco-system. The subject matter surrounding the work shows indices of eco-critical bearings in the text.

In the first movement, "Forest echoes", the poet visits the virgin forest of Oke-Ubo-Abusoro as he just returned from his sojourn to see the bounty vegetation but he was shocked to behold the sorry sight of the forest. Instead of trees, there are stumps. Left are echoes whispered in the stubborn ears of memory and most trees have met a rapid and sudden death in the hands of timber merchants, whose indiscriminate exploitative impudence is symbolized through the imagery of "agbegilodo" (timber lorry). As the poet laments the destruction brought upon the forest, one's attention is drawn to the use of another imagery of "a missing finger" to indicate the unwanton disappearance of some parts of the trees. Though the poet points out the features and usefulness of the trees in this forest, he in a very special way highlights the deliberate activities of the traditional medicine men whose ready and willing machetes leave the trees "bleeding" through the imagery of "wanton machetes".

As the poet laments a senseless deforestation by lumbermen in Oke-Ubo-Abusoro forest, one observes a solemn low tone and sad mood which he feels. He condoles the *Oganwo* which falls an easy prey to the "curing machetes of the Babalawo". And the ever soft and irresistible nature of "Ayure", the willing wick of the blazing earth. Thus in a highly emotional tone, the poet exposes and condemns man, whose action is thoughtless and insensitive, in his bid to satisfy his selfish needs. Using vivid images like "wanton Matchets", 'weeping wounds', and 'curing matchets', the poet shows the extent of harm and injury inflicted on the vegetation. In "Our Earth will Not Die", we are presented with yet a different form of environmental depletion not

synonymous with that presented in 'Forest Echoes'. Here in a most mournful tone, the poet laments the thoughtless, insensitive and deliberate deaths brought to both the fauna and flora in the eco-system. The poem made it specific that the tone is elegiac. The sudden and untimely demise of our natural environment is what is being mourned. In a highly lamentative tone, the poem tells us that:

"A lake is killed by arsenic urine From the bladder of profit factories A poisoned stream staggers down the Hill coughing chaos in the sickly sea The whaling whale belle up like a frying fish"

The images of "killed lake", "poisoned stream", "sickly sea" and "wailing whale", appropriately depict the dangerous state of the entire environment made unfit for living by the "arsenic urine from the bladder of profit factories". Acid rain further brought so much harm to the vegetation as its leaves and branches are destroyed. The poem made use of images of a "balding forest" and "amputated branches" to register in the mind of the reader, the degree of harm done to the vegetation. In the midst of this chaos and destruction, the poet in a rhetorical manner seeks to know the perpetrators of these crimes when he asks:

*"Who lynched the lake, who slaughtered
The sea, whoever mauled the mountains
Our earth will not die" (p. 50)*

Through the lines quoted above, the poet lets man know that his evil works are in vain as the earth will surely survive the ordeal. In the second part of the poem, he comes with a message of hope – "when new rains will come and the trees blossom, and the sea and everything in it will jump about with life. When the willows will no longer weep, nor a nuclear sun rises like a funeral ball". This message of a turn around of good is rendered in a festive mood with the music at its height.

The eco-critical theory offers us the platform to look at the degradation and destruction of the eco - system by man which Osundare presents in a poor and pitiable manner (using vivid Yoruba imageries which he aptly cushions with their English equivalents to ensure wider readership and understanding), where acute devastation is brought on the biological and physical environment. He decries the present state of the environment and longs for a return to the unspoilt nature lost to modernism and civilization. Secondly, the poet seeks to redirect man's orientation towards handling nature with caution knowing that they too possess some value and importance.

The formalistic theory of literature on its part affords us the opportunity to look at the form, which is the style employed in the collection. Hence, the traditional terms which are mainly of Yoruba origin: *Oke- Ubo- Abusoro-forest, Anyure-tree, Oganwo-tree, Agbegilodolorry, Babalawo-doctor, Bata-music*, aptly cushioned with their English equivalents, enable the reader to envisage the enormosity of the harm complained about. Again, aside helping to trace the source and the root of the poem's subject matter, these local Yoruba terms accord the poem some degree of African aesthetics. Again, the tone of the poem is condemnatory and satiric. Furthermore, the poem is an elegy of the destroyed environment. The entire eco system is depicted as weeping, "the whaling whale", "the sickly sea", "the weeping willows", "the killed lake", etc and the poet lowers the tone of his *bata* music in mournful reverence of the dead eco system.

Finally, the sociological theory comes into view as the scenario of the damaged environment stems from the society and therefore the event depicted in the poem is simply a metaphor of the larger contemporary society.

Findings and Conclusion:

The study of *Eye of the Earth* has shown that Osundare is a visionary who not only frowns at the devastated state of the human environment but reminds humanity that today's profit is tomorrow's loss. He has used his artistic ingenuity to satirize totally human wickedness to the environment and further re-orientates, re-educates and re-directs man's actions in the bid to transform his woes into glory. It is a conscious effort that aims at reversing the environmental status quo by instilling in the conscious and sub-conscious of man the right attitude to life.

Eye of the Earth is committed to ensuring a better and healthy environment for every living thing and completely discourages a state of total disorder. Literature by extension is committed to ensuring a problem free society, when it exposes and condemns societal ills and negative values and re-directs man onto a path of life. That is why the poet presents the looming doom that faces humanity and through this platform proffers a solution to this malady through a free and healthy approach to life. This study has again shown a strong affinity between the science of ecology and the art of literature. The paper recommends as part of the effort to salvage the environment, that human beings should be conscientised on the dangers of harming the environment. Humanity is seriously admonished and urged to thread softly, wisely and justly in all her dealings. Lastly, the government should constitute appropriate taskforce to checkmate these ills and bring offenders to book.

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