

A REVIEW OF ECOLOGICAL ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY STUDIES

By

Aishatu ABDULSALAM

English Department, IBB University, P. M. B. 11, Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria

E-mail: aeeshapeace19@gmail.com, a.aishatu@ibbu.edu.ng

+2348036344852, +2347081112637

Abstract

Over the years, literary writers and critics have contributed immensely on several topical issues of literary values like feminism, postmodernism, classicism, Marxism and so on. But down the ages, issues of environmental concerns are not fully integrated into emergent literary discourses; given that the term eco-criticism may not have been popular before the nineteenth century. In recent times, ecological issues have become sensitive to the literary artists. In this article, the role of prose narratives in creating environmental consciousness (eco-conscious) is examined. The article demonstrates how literary writers imagine change in the context of pollution-related crises and collapse. The methodology used is textual and thematic exposition of selected literary masterpieces which are analysed in order to relate them to environmental presence. It is recommended that the study eco narrative be encouraged in our educational institutions. It is superficial that eco-critics lend their voices in protest against ecological injustices in their works.

Keywords: Review, Ecological Issues, Contemporary Literary Studies

Introduction

Adamu and Barau (2008) remark that Nigeria has entered another significant phase of its national development when the impacts of environmental neglect are clearly visible and felt all over the country's landscape. From north to south, and west to east, the checklist of ecological failures is long and awesome. Interestingly, each region has its peculiar pressing environmental woes. The consequences of ecological crises in our towns and villages cause internal displacement of population as the situation is with dam failures or drought occurrence. Conflicts between nomads and farmers are growing with increasing desertification and land desiccation. Poverty and poor health may all be a direct corollary of ecological dismemberment. To fence the failures of natural resources in Nigeria, environmental experts advocate for application of scientific knowledge, land reform, land use control, resource management and environmental education. In spite of such suggestions the pathetic environmental problems remain in the state of flux. But of course, the cited recommendations of the experts remain instructive though need to be complemented by our common heritage - the literature resources. This paper overviews the major ecological challenges in the discourses of Nigeria writers. It also offers a prognosis of the effects of such ecological disasters on national development. In addition, also, it highlights some of the potentialities of the regional literature in the promotion of public sensitization towards environmental

protection, enhancement and in achieving the overall goals of sustainable development in the region and Nigeria as a whole

Ecocriticism was hoisted as a branch of Anglo-American literary studies. Development in this literary subfield over the years is demonstrated in previous studies in form of journal articles, newspaper reports, and edited collections, special issues of journals, monographs and conference papers which focused on the relevance of ecocriticism in literary studies. Eco features mostly evolve unconsciously in African literature as mere conventional nature writing, bucolic backgrounds, motifs or orientation. Only a handful of literary works properly address the loss of rustic serenity in literary context. The African society is built on nature and preservation of environment is a daily practice. Key writers like Niyi Osundare, Nardine Gordimer, Amos Tutuola, Ferdinand Oyono, Ngugi Wa Thinog'o, Helon Habila, Isidore Okpewho, Chinua Achebe and a host of others were highly inspired by nature. These writers directly or indirectly advocated for eco-consciousness and contest/protest against nature degradation by addressing the issue of nature havoc in their themes.

In contemporary African/Nigerian literary discourses, there is an increase in ecological writing or environmental literature which is gradually replacing the average conventional nature writing. This development is the result of ecological movements like Green Studies, Romantic Ecology, Political Ecology, Conservation Ecology and Environmental Humanities. Ecology has been the muse of humanity on account of man's affinity to nature. The task of ecologists and eco-critics is to develop ways or strategies of preventing human activities from wreaking havoc and recklessly or indiscriminately destroying the natural environment. The act of destroying nature is dangerous to humanity. The environment and nature co-exist, whilst the environment is harnessed for man's existence. The literary artist and ecological ideas aim at sustainable development of a society.

In recent times, ecology has come in contact with dominating ideologies/philosophies like colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism which become a nick in nature preservation. Nature and literature are interdependent; nature writing is quite promising for future developments as well expressed by Thomas J. Lyon in his book *A Taxonomy of Nature Writing*. Lyon presents three dimensions of nature writing: information of natural history, personal response to nature and philosophical interpretation of nature. These dimensions provide the different directions in which eco writing revolves. Ecocritics and Environmental literature underscore the significance of nature in their works and invariably providing eco-consciousness to the community and humanity in general.

According to Aswin Prasanth (2016:5), the most notable aspect of nature writing is the concern for non-humans in literature. Many postmodern texts are implicit lessons on ecological awareness and activism. The earth and its myriad forms of life remains a puzzle, still mystifying writers and philosophers. Nature is gifted with adaptive strategies far more complex than any human being can imagine. The greatest challenge of ecological writing is to examine the complexity of human life in the context of the complexity of nature.

This implies that environmental literature expresses human feelings in terms of the components of nature. In African literature the celebration of nature and wildness is more dynamic than in any other literatures. The reasons for these are stated below.

Nigerian and African natural environments constitute dominant features/tropes/motifs in imaginative writings. Nigeria is endowed with good geographical features and climatic conditions. These dominant natural characteristics are reflected in Nigerian literature. The writings of key literary artists like Soyinka, Osofisan, Osundare, Achebe and others clearly demonstrate these attributes. This further establishes that there is symbiotic relationship between nature and humanity. On the other hand, South Africa as one of the leading countries in Africa explores its geographical landscape and wilderness in her literature. Coetzee in his work *Disgrace* expresses his personal encounter of alienation through the eyes of David Lurie, the protagonist. Gokhale (2000:9) asserted that ‘The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to the predicament of man in a threatened natural world.’ And ‘Nature writing has therefore emerged as a “literature of hope” in its assumption that the elevation of consciousness definitely leads to wholesome political change’.

The understanding that human and non-human species had shared the same fate under a variety of colonial and postcolonial regimes, and that any ecological literary or artistic inquiry should begin from that perspective, had given rise to a new genre: postcolonial ecocriticism within the wider field of environmental humanities. Postcolonial ecocritics such as Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, Anthony Vital, Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Rob Nixon had all emphasised the need for ecocriticism to take as its object not only the struggles and aspirations of nature but also of people who feel closely related to nature in postcolonial societies bedevilled by ecological hazards, many of them caused by despotic governments in collaboration with multinational institutions. There had therefore been attention to the fate of the poor in zones of ecological degradations, what in current scholarship is referred to as the environmentalism of the poor (see Nixon’s *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*). Most journalists and writers, in their reportage, description, and study of environmentally diseased areas, had always focused on the effect of such environmental sickness on the life of the poor people, of the poor animals, and other biodiversity (Okuyade, 115-131). However, while this was certainly the case in many African nations, postcolonial ecocritics (Anthony Vital, Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers) had tended so far to focus on the southern parts of the continent; there had been a general neglect of West Africa.

This article is an attempt to redress the balance by focusing on the interactions between human beings and the environment as these were presented in a wide range of contemporary, environmentally oriented Nigerian literary works and personal narratives. While early Nigerian writing such as Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* foregrounded the environment as having a harmonious relationship with the people who inhabited it, especially in the period before Western incursion, more recent writing such as Kaine Agari’s *Yellow Yellow* and Nnimmo Bassey’s *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* focused on the sociological tensions and dislocations caused by the exploitation of the environment for economic ends. In Nigeria, a greater awareness was created about the adverse effects of oil exploration by the activism of

Ken Saro-Wiwa, also an accomplished writer—and Saro-Wiwa's execution by a military junta in 1995 led to an avalanche of literary works on soil, water and air pollution. In the northern part of Nigeria, there was the problem of desertification which is also being represented in literary narratives, such as Aliyu Kamal's *Fire in My Backyard* (Egya, 6). However, the efflorescence of writing on the environment in Nigeria had failed to produce a matching critical response.

In this article, we undertook an in-depth analysis of recent environmentally oriented literary works and personal narratives that draw attention to the valuable contributions made by Nigerian creative writers to ongoing public debates around the humanitarian and ecological crises brought about by environmental degradation, both in their own immediate region and elsewhere. More importantly, we compared the literary situation of depicting the environment with the realities of the environment which we got to know as we travelled across Nigeria. The project therefore afforded us the opportunity to place the literary side by side with the real and to see the point at which the writers intervened in order to save the environment.

The Literary Artist and Environmental Justice

Over the years, there has been a considerable literary work within and outside the Nigeria literacy spectrum that venture on ecological crises. Helon Habila's *Oil on water*, Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*, Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Bina Nengi-Ilagha's *condolence* all demonstrate the catastrophic degradation and exploitation of the Niger-Delta ecosystem. Hitherto, environmental crises continue to escalate in the region. This attitude is demonstrated in Okpewho's novel *Tides* where the minister of petroleum categorically states that "the Federal Government is committed to petroleum as the mainstay of the nation's economy, its chief source of wealth (126).

In the same vein, Zeki, a character in Ilagha's novel *Condolence* laments that "with the rivers polluted and the delicate ecosystem damaged, fishing had become unattractive, what could be happening". (153). This demonstrated a continued environmental wreckage in the region. Further, Okpewho's protagonist Bickerbug laments over the cause of the environmental problem. Now let's look at the various sources of pollution. First the Wellhead is fitted with what's known as blowout preventer... But the preventer is never able to stop a blowout.... The only effort made so far is to reduce the volume of oil blown out, from someone or two thousand homes to about six hundred tonnes per rig. So, there is always an overspill (144).

The character further laments on how the oil drifts to their fishing enclaves and their farms. The character further complains on how the oil escapes to the water as a result leaking or fractured pipes. Overloading, blown gaskets, corrosion from chemical processes all drifts to the waters (145).

A similar experience is recorded in Helon Habila's *'Oil on water'*. It is a testimony of how environmental pollution via exploitation of oil leads to human social crises characterized by disease, poverty, violence, corruption and illiteracy connected to energy problem. On page 41 of the Habila's masterpiece, the writer laments on how environmental exploitation endangered the lives of the people of the community, where it is stated thus:

One of the patrols (local vigilantes or militants) came upon two oil workers piling soil samples into a speedboat. There was a brief skirmish... one of the oil workers escaped with a swollen jaw, the other with a broken arm... the next day the soldiers came chief Malabo was arrested, his hands tied behind his back as if he were a petty criminal, on charges of supporting the militants and plotting against the Federal Government and threatening to kidnap foreign oil workers.

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* centres on the consequences of oil exploitation demonstrated by the act of kidnapping of some British women, petroleum engineer and two other journalists. Consequently, Helon Habila draws the attention of the society to the consequences of environment pollution which could be disastrous.

Literature and the literary artists accurately reinvent reality of nature. Apart from personifying the natural elements in form of literacy in Nigeria, literature expresses the beauty of nature and humanity will recognize the importance of nature.

Indigenous knowledge and traditional practices here have a tradition of nature conservancy. Both history and biometric records have demonstrated that cultural practices in different societies have the affinity with their environments for ages. Communities frown at deforestation and activities that can cause damages to natural resources. However, in contemporary cultural societies, environment degradation is on the increase due to rapid and growing urbanization and intense or rigorous cultivation, as well as depleting ground resources. In addition, the rapid population explosion and the increase on human natural activities for food, constitute a threat to environmental safety. The present state of per-capital income is increasing on a daily basis leaving more than 60% of the population (Nigeria) still living below poverty line. This generated environmental infected activities like trees cutting and burning for conversion to charcoal for commercial purpose, corruption and underdevelopment do not allow technological alternation for the exchange of firewood for daily domestic chores thereby depleting the natural resources meant for human health benefits.

Notwithstanding, research has shown that rural communities still engage in activities that preserve the natural environment. Sutherland (1998), Gokhale (2000), Negic (2010:44), Mehta (2016) and Shashi Mehta (2017) revealed in their studies that communities via indigenous knowledge and traditional/cultural practices which encourage natural resources conservation include;

- i. Conservation of ponds,
- ii. Preservation of watershed,
- iii. Conservation of soil,
- iv. Preservation of trees,
- v. Preservation of medicinal plants and shrubs,
- vi. Digging of small ponds, and
- vii. Taming and saving birds and other wildlife.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of eco-criticism is adopted for the study. It relates the relationship between literature and nature or the environment. Eco-criticism discourses expound on environmentally related themes, ideas, issues or subject matter with the aim of bringing about environmental sustainability. To critically examine environmental justice and sustainability in the prose narratives of literary artists, a diversified method of eco-criticism, energy humanities, environmental humanities and other sub-theories are employed in the textual analysis of various eco-writers in Nigeria. The relationship between nature and literature is the primary concern of eco-criticism (Cheryll Glotfelty, 19). Energy humanities according to Szemen and Boyer (107) relates to the methods or ideas that human sciences can contribute to the analysis of natural sciences.

William Rueckert (107) also contributes on the idea of ecological concern, the linking of science and literature (Arts) as ecological subject of considering the environment as all-embracing for human achievement. These theories are very essential to this study because they are all concerned with creating an ecological balance where all living things coexist in the environment.

Regardless of what name it (ecocriticism) goes by, most eco-critical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. 'We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse.

The need for the investigation of the relationship between the natural world and humans in literature is, thus, central to ecocriticism. The purpose is to raise the conscious level of people that man's existence on earth is heavily dependent on the sustainability of the environment as Glotfelty has stated that this consciousness raising is ecocriticism's most important task.

Surprisingly, Literature has not always been seen as an important tool in this regard. However, recent scholarship has shown that quite a number of writers have always tucked in ecological concerns in their writings, as part of their engagements, while many others have made them the central focus of their narratives. Unlike in the past (if at all), African writers can no longer be said to be found wanting in this noble endeavour, and as such supports Slaymaker's (2007:690) prediction that the green revolution will spread to and through communities of readers and writers of African literature, "ecoing" the booming interest (in eco-criticism just like) in other parts of the world. In Nigeria, for example, writers like Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Helon Habila, Sophia Obi-Apoko and Ogochukwu Promise have demonstrated that they are not oblivious of the ecological implications of man's exploitative tendencies on earth's resources, proving in the process that the issue of environment and its preservation are not an exclusive preserve of the western world or those in the sciences.

Selected Empirical Review

Sule E. Egya in *Nature, Environment, and Activism in Nigerian Literature* looks at environmental writing, covering a range of genres and generations of writers in Nigeria. The author studied the Nigerian experience in postcolonial ecocriticism, with attention to textual strategies as well as distinctive historicity at the heart of the ecological force in contemporary writing, focusing on nature, the environment, and activism. According to the author, the study decentres African ecocriticism, affirming the eco-social vision that differentiates environmental writing in Nigeria from those of other nations on the continent. The author further demonstrates how Nigerian writers, beyond connecting themselves to the natures of their communities, respond to ecological problems through indigenous literary instrumentalism. Anchored on the analytical concepts of nature, environment, and activism, the study is definitive in foregrounding the contribution of Nigerian writing to studies in ecocriticism at continental and global levels.

In another research terrain, Sule E. Egya in a study titled *Eco-human engagement in recent Nigerian poetry in English* referenced the work of Nnimmo Bassey and Ogaga Ifowodo, where he discusses the ongoing engagement of Nigerian poets with issues of ecology. The study argues that, for these poets, issues of ecology are largely bound up with the fate of the human beings who depend for their survival on their environment, through fishing and farming. These poets emerged in the 1980s with a strong sense of commitment to their immediate environment, which, in their view, had been brutalized by the national government and corporate bodies, and so their concerns are identified as part of a larger crisis over leadership.

The poetry of environmental excoriation, otherwise known as ecocritical poetry, which has subsisted over the last two decades in Nigeria, appears to be overtaken by a new kind of eco-sensitive writing, but this time by ecotopian poetry. The problem with ecocritical poetry on the one hand is that it draws attention to ecological problems without suggesting solutions to them, leaving the reader with the sense of hopelessness, fear and defeat. Ecotopian poetry, on the other hand, rekindles the hope for environmental reclamation, resuscitation and in fact, redemption. This essay, analytical and prescriptive, explores ecotopianism in recent Nigerian eco-poetry with the aim of demonstrating the new consciousness in eco-sensitive poems.

The poems of Niyi Osundare and Nnimmo Bassey are examples eco narratives as they are contained in Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* and Bassey's *I Will Not Dance to Your Beats*. The essay exploits the critical theory of Ecotopianism to interrogate Osundare and Bassey's presentation of their eco-vision on the environment. Equipped with this theoretical insight, the essay concludes that Osundare and Bassey propagate environmental protection, eco vigilance and eco-activism as positive responses to eco-challenges confronting Nigerians.

Clement eloghosa odia in a research titled *Ecotopianism in Recent Nigerian Eco-Poetry The New Threshold in Niyi Osundare and Nnimmo Bassey's Eco-Poems*, the author studies the poetry of environmental excoriation, otherwise known as ecocritical poetry, which has subsisted

over the last two decades in Nigeria and appears to be overtaken by a new kind of eco-sensitive writing, but this time by ecotopian poetry. The author also state the problem with ecocritical poetry where it draws attention to ecological problems without suggesting solutions to them, leaving the reader with the sense of hopelessness, fear and defeat.

J.P. Clark looks at the rich ecological imagery in research titled *the 'Pepper' of the Niger Delta activism stew*. Clark's exploration of the intersection between our natural environment and literature is an inspiration to writers and critics. He often found ways to accommodate nature, even when he addressed the mundane issues within politics and academia. His viewpoints can be found in his poetry collections *The Casualties* and *Incidental Songs for Several Persons*. His poem, *The Usurpation*, is a great example of what Clark's constant ecological imagery shows great knowledge of, and strong attachment to, natural entities. In all their dealings, human beings operate within the natural realm, interacting with other non-human entities.

Furthermore, J.P. Clark's *Bekederemo: Nigeria's bard, playwright and activist*, also discusses the exploration of nature in his poems and stimulates a romantic awareness of the African ecosystem, which goes beyond the current agitations for environmental justice in Nigeria. They project 21st century African literary traditions beyond the domains of activism. Clark's works are multifaceted. His attachment to his home region, coupled with his training in the arts and the humanities may have conditioned him towards exploring nature in his works. And he did so alongside other nagging socio-political and economic themes that he equally projected.

Also, critical works on Nigerian writing with an overriding focus on the environment have begun to emerge. Ugwu's 'Ecological Degradation in Selected Niger Delta Novels' (2014) brings to the front burner the issue of wanton environmental devastation in the Niger Delta region. Using Nengi-Ilagba's *Condolences*, Abagba's *The Children of Oloibiri*, Okpewho's *Tides* and Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* to foreground the worsening environmental hazards in the region, Ugwu analyses the attendant consequences of man's misuse of his natural endowments, and, therefore, recommends adoption of ecological friendly methods and practices while exploiting natural resources, as well as the need to exercise care and responsibility while doing so. In 'Eco-poetics and Contemporary Nigerian Poetry: A Study of Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood*' (2011), Aliyu analyses Bassey's collection to further accentuate the global clamour for a careful handling of the environment in view of emerging environmental challenges. Aliyu avers that humane exploitation of the environment and readiness on the part of government to combat ecological damage are possible solutions to unavoidable violence in the affected region.

Again, Dawodu, in 'Eco-critical Reading of Selected Poems of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide' (2011), explores how Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide have used their poetry to interrogate the socio-cultural and political dilemma of the Nigerian nation in regard to the issue of environmental degradation. His interrogation makes him conclude that there is a growing consciousness in the literary arts regarding environmental degradation in the Third World countries like Nigeria, and that the poets, under study, have exploited images, models and paradigms found in their locale to comment on the sustainability of their environment. Owhofasa in 'The Woman, the Earth and the Environment in Recent African Novels' (2011) is

more explicit in her description of environmental degradation and women's efforts in environmental preservation. The author's study of Vincent Egbuson's *Love my Planet*, Maathai Wangari's *Unbowed* and Lisa Fugard's *Skinner's Drift* affirms that efforts of women in this regard have yielded some desired results. She, thus, indicates the need for the discouragement of all activities that can result in environmental degradation, even as she calls for appreciation and encouragement of eco-literature.

Similarly, Nwagbara in 'Poetics of Resistance: Ecocritical Reading of Ojaide's *Delta Blues* and *Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*' (2010) analyses Ojaide's poems as illustrations of eco-critical literature geared toward exposing, reconstructing and negating the realities of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. He submits that Ojaide attempts to use his poetry, not only to resist further environmental despoliation of the Niger Delta region, but to also reclaim the history of the people therein.

Terrorism and Human Ecology: The Way forward

Eco-education also plays a role in environmental awareness. It is a necessity in our contemporary surety, people need to acquaint themselves with the knowledge, values and skills required for environmentally sound decisions and actions. We have to be ecologically alert and be nature stewards by playing a vital role in improving and protecting our cities, village, forests and other nature elements. This will help humanity to take responsibility for her actions and to contribute their aspirations for an environmentally sustainable future.

Literature has played and it is still playing environmental awareness. Given that literature has great affinity to nature, literary criticism in recent times has expressed concern to global ecological crises. The term 'ecocriticism' was first introduced by William Rueckert in 1978 when he published his prose work titled: *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. As quoted in Sandip and Itishri (2017), Rueckert's ecocriticism means "the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world" (Rueckert, 107). Believing that natural science or technology is not adequate enough in creating eco-consciousness among humanity Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm contribute their visions to Ecocriticism by making the movement take a form academic discipline towards the end of the 20th century. Ecocriticism does not concern itself with ecological disorder alone rather it plays a critical role of mediating an ecological understanding between humanity and its environment. Sandip and Itishri (2017:281) asserted that ecocriticism initially started as the celebration of nature, but via recent times, it has advanced and emerged as a revisionist movement.

It aims at correction of our anthropocentric attitude which harbors the notion exploitation of nature for human interest. Our global crisis is not because how ecosystems function it is because of how our ethical system functions. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature. It requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them (Sandip & Itishri, 2017: 281-82).

Finally, literature at its best has demonstrated the anthropocentric behaviours of human beings in relation to nature. Through literary works, nature disorders are unveiled and also solicit for

better relationship with nature. There is need to cortical human activities via development, industrialization and civilization that are actually destroying environmental health.

In conclusion, it is not debatable that nature and literature are interdependent; nature writing is quite promising for future developments as well expressed by Thomas J. Lyon in his essay *A Taxonomy of Nature Writing*. Lyon presents three dimensions of nature writing: information of natural history, personal response to nature and philosophical interpretation of nature. These dimensions provide the different directions in which eco writing revolves. Ecocritics and Environmental literature underscore the significance of nature in their works and invariably providing eco-consciousness to the community and humanity in general. The article demonstrates that Imaginative writers are in the vanguard of nature preservation and environmental justice.

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