ISSN: 3141-5636 E-ISSN: 31415644 Vol. 1, No. 2; December (2025)

Eco-Trauma: Examining Environmental Pollution in Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of The Earth*

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Abstract
The subject of environmental pollution and degradation by man seems to be receiving more attention in recent years. However, the knowledge of the importance of pacifying the earth has been from even the times of our forefathers as evident in their intentionality towards periodic earth cleansing rituals. This is an indication of their awareness of the consequences of a traumatized earth. Sadly, the earth has continued to suffer exploitation from man who seems centred on poisoning the earth for the purpose of enriching himself. This paper studies Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) which poignantly portrays the malevolent nature of man's inhumanity to Mother Earth and the consequences that springs forth from these actions. Using the ecocriticism approach and trauma theory, this paper examines the trauma experienced by the earth through the activities of man and how the earth retaliates through the release of acidic rains, scorching suns, droughts and hostile weather. It seeks to highlight that man's violence towards nature is violence towards himself in that anything done against nature is returned to man in manifold degrees.
Keywords: ecocriticism, environmental pollution, eco-trauma, degradation, nature

Introduction

Man is a product of his environment. The health or devastation of an environment inevitably affects the people found in the affected environment. This is why even in the scripture the land becomes unproductive for God's people when the activities of man tend towards negativity. Here, the health of the land could only be restored through repentance and humility. Even in the precolonial African society, the ancestors were careful in the way they lived in order to ensure that the environment is not desecrated as this will usher in unbearable realities such as famine and pestilence. Some of these ancient communities always sought the guidance of the earth goddess whose office is to host cleansing ceremonies that will ensure that the land is favourably disposed towards the people, and also appeases the earth in the event of desecration by any member of the society.

This reality undergirds the activism for the preservation of the ecosystem by different bodies and individuals who are using various tools and platforms to educate man on the dangers of environmental degradation. All over the world, the environment is endangered by the activity of man. From the industrial revolution of 18th century England to the gas flaring activities of oil companies in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the environment has constantly faced pollution and destruction from the people it exists to cater for. Literature which has the study of nature and its influence on man as one of its preoccupations, therefore, becomes a platform with which environmental activists and critics employ to enunciate the gains of environmental care and the dangers of its degradation because literature has always been an effective vehicle for the representation and analysis of diverse issues including environmental issues. Hence, the engagement of the environment as a literary trope has been in existence even before the emergence of ecocriticism theory.

Ecocriticism Theory

Ecocriticism is a literary theory that studies literature and its environment. The term ecocriticism originates from William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" published in 1978. It is "literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint" (Kerridge, 1998, p.1). In time past, nature and environment were not paid adequate attention as they deserve. Literary preoccupation has always been centred on man without proper examination of nature as one of the key determinants of the wellbeing of man on earth. The realisation of the invaluable role played by man's environment in the totality of his wellbeing has engendered a rise in critical analysis of literary works through the prism of ecocriticism theory. Hence, the focus is no longer just on man, but on his natural environment. It espouses:

> a fundamental shift from one context of reading to another- more specifically, a movement from the human to the environmental, or at least from the exclusively human to the biocentric or ecocentric, which is to say a humanism (since we cannot evade our human status or identity) informed by an awareness of the 'more- than – human. (Branch and Slovic, 2003, p. 267)

Glotfelty (1996), one of the pioneers of Ecocriticism theory simply defines Ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm, p. xviii). She elaborates that it is:

> the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production

> and economic class to its reading of its texts, ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p. xviii)

This submission is supported by Love (2003) who avers that the focus of ecocriticism is on the "inter connections between the material world and human culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature" (p. 196). These definitions have given rise to issues such as this:

> a central question in environmental ethics is whether to regard humankind as part of nature or apart from nature. It is the task of literary ecocriticism to address a local version of that question: what is the place of creative imagining and writing in the complex set of relationships between humankind and environment, between mind and world, between thinking, being and dwelling? (Bate, 1991, p. 8)

The existence of literature as a platform for the examination and analysis of different disciplines therefore provides an easy interconnection between man, who has always been the subject of literary analysis, and his natural environment.

Kroeber (1994) enunciates the forgoing in *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* where he posits that:

> an ecologically oriented criticism directs itself to understanding persistent romantic struggles to articulate meaningful human relations within the conditions of a natural world in which transcendence is not an issue…Ecologically oriented criticism thus recognizes a foreshadowing of its own understanding of humanity's relation to nature in the romantic view that it is natural for human beings to be self-conscious, and natural, therefore, to construct their cultures out of complexly inter assimilative engagements with their physical and biological environment. (pp. 38-39)

Consequently, the ecocritic who according to Howarth, is "a person who judges the merits and faults of writing that depict the effects of culture upon nature with a view towards celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (1996, p. 69), and for Barry in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, ecocritics are critics who:

> re-read major literary works from a major ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world. They extend the applicability of a range of ecocentric concepts, using them of other things in the natural world-concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources… they turn away from the 'social constructivism' and 'linguistic determinism' of dominant literary theories and instead emphasize ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and the claims of the world beyond ourselves. (2009, p. 254)

The ecocritic, therefore, celebrates the natural world and advocates its preservation. He also fights against its pollution and degradation from human. He recognises that the earth that houses human should receive as much care and attention as the humans, otherwise, when the house collapses, the humans will have no place to live.

Ecocriticism and Environmental Pollution

Environmental pollution occurs when harmful materials called pollutants are introduced in the environment. Pollution may be as a result of industrialisation, mining, burning of fossil fuels and plastics, agricultural activities and urbanisation. The subject of environmental pollution could be engaged by ecocritics through the production of works where man experiences wholesomeness because he is in harmony with nature because he has worked towards the preservation of the environment from despoilers. The focus could equally be on the struggles man faces because his environment has been pillaged through industrialisation.

The issue of environmental pollution has been copiously engaged in the different genres of literature as represented in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", Emerson's "Nature", Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" even in several works from Nigeria such as Agary's *Yellow Yellow,* Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* and Habila's *Oil on Water* which explore the socio-cultural effects of coastal communities in contact with the sea in the Niger Delta. A lot of critical works on environmental pollution have also been published. Savatri, Wahyuningtyas, and Rizky in "The Representation of Ecocriticism in the Novel *Mata dan Manusia Laut* by Madasari" examine ocean exploitation as an impact of modernity and the Bajo tribe's wisdom in maintaining marine conservation. Savatri et al. point out the enormity of the damage caused in the marine ecosystem by plastic waste which is often thrown indiscriminately into the water bodies. This damage happens because plastics, a synthetic polymer, is made through a polymerization process, and so takes about 60-70 years to decompose. This waste in the marine body has resulted in the death of sea turtles, 100,000 marine mammals, 1 million seabirds, and large amounts of fish each year according to the data updated in 2017 by The UN Ocean Conference in New York. They highlight the wisdom of the local people of Bajo who use local methods in catching fish with tools like *kedo-kedo* which are environmentally friendly unlike the modern tools such as bombing, the use of potassium and compressors which harm the fish and the water bodies (p. 358).

The Trauma of a Polluted Ecosystem

Trauma theory is an offshoot of psychoanalytic theory used in the analysis of the psychological effect and the influence of traumatic experiences on the self. Freud and Breuer's theories in *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) as well as concepts from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1953) formed the conceptual basis for critical approaches to studies on trauma in the literary field. They built on Charcot's (1888) discovery of hysteria as a disorder caused by psychological factors instead of the earlier assumed physiological factors which was treated through hysterectomy. The diagnosis from sexually exploited women and children as well as PSTD in war veterans, psychic scars and disturbances from victims of torture and the holocaust provided insight to the understanding of the traumatic conditions of the patients. According to Kurtz, trauma is "a pathological mental and emotional condition, an injury to the psyche caused by catastrophic events, or by the threat of such events, which overwhelm an individual's normal response mechanisms" (2018, p. 2).

Though the trauma theory is centred on the study of psychic injury in man and his reactions to the traumatic event, it could also be applied in studying the injuries inflicted on nature and the earth and the reactions that is birthed as a result of that injury. In Amorok's (2007) "The Eco-Trauma and Eco-Recovery of Being", she avers that "the traumatic loss of intimacy with the

Earth and the cosmos creates a *deficit* in the realm of eco-Being and is a core cause of human-upon-nature and human-upon-human violence" (p. 29). In "Wounded Planet, Wounded People: The Possibility of Ecological Trauma", Woolbright (2011) submits that "ecological trauma…is characterized by a fully physical expression of trauma the nonhuman natural world experiences" (p. 42). In his discussion of the damage of deforestation and desertification, Nixon (2011) uses the term "slow violence" to describe this damage. Woolbright elaborates this term thus,

> The trauma is protracted, and though the problems are in evidence, most people think it ridiculous to apparently privilege the lives of a few birds over the recreational and financial benefit of humans. In reality, a disrupted ecosystem benefits no one in the long run, but developers rarely have the foresight to imagine their projects more than ten years into the future…and this myopia and focus on short-term financial gain spells trouble for the nonhuman natural world on both a local and global scale. (pp. 25-26)

However, this exploitation of the natural world has proven to be detrimental to man in that he eventually loses what he has gained through exploiting the environment. This is primary because environmental violence is cyclical: when man pollutes the environment, the environment in turn becomes hostile and unproductive to man.

Examining Environmental Pollution in Poems from Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986)

Osundare's poems on nature dates back to years before the popularity of ecocriticism and have been extensively studied in critical evaluation. Ngumoha (2011) in "The Poet as a Rainmaker: Fertility and Pluvial Aesthetics in Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*" submits that:

> Osundare, in *The Eye of the Earth,* assumes the role of shamanic rainmaker not only for the material good of his seed-planting and food-growing Ikere community but also for the symbolic salubrious enrichment of the citizens of the universe whose ultimate well being depends on the fertility of the earth (p. 124).

Ngumoha (2011) views Osundare as a poet who seeks the well being of his people, and since he knows that rainfall is fundamental to that well-being, he assumes the position of a shaman to call forth rain so as to rescue his people from the disaster that comes with drought. Odinye (2015) studies "The Influence of Yoruba Concepts and Worldview on Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*" and posits that "To some extent Osundare's poetry is close to oral traditional poetry that it can be considered as almost identical to it" (p. 2). For Odinye (2015), Osundare's ability to borrow from the Yoruba's oral culture such as their chants and proverbs gave him a distinctive poetic voice that is different from the first generation of Nigerian poets (p. 2). Odinye's submission converges with Ezenwa-Ohaeto's (1998) view that "the poetry of Osundare illustrates interesting patterns in orality. The poet consciously fashions his poems to reflect those patterns of orality that are functional and give immediacy to the themes" (p. 151). Consequently, Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* proves to be a work that not only possesses a major thrust in ecocriticism – a work that advocates for a healthy environment, but also one that has a deep connection with the poet's traditional root. This connection therefore compels him to seek the good of humanity.

Niyi Osundare's poems are poised towards not just the praise of the beauty of the natural world but they also expose and condemn the pollution of the earth by man and his activities. His poems enunciate man's need for the benign attributes of nature, and also show that nature has the

potential for malignancy when exploited by man. He demonstrates a commitment to environmental justice, saving the earth from her oppressors and all those who are only interested in the commodification of the earth's resources through proclaiming the injustice caused by industrialization on nature, and nature's reaction to this treatment. In "Let Earth's Pain be Soothed", he writes:

The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst
Our earth has never lingered so dry
In the season of falling showers
Clouds journey over trees and over hills
Miserly with their liquid treasure
The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst
Prostrate like famished horses
Brown hills cast vacant looks
At balded plains where playing kids
Provoke the dust in what was once
The cradle of green
The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst
Dust
Dust in brewing kitchens
Dust in eating halls
Dust in scheming boardrooms
Dust in retrenching factories
Dust in power brothels
The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst
Let it rain today
That parched throats may sing
Let it rain
That earth may heal her silence
Let it rain today
That cornleaves may clothe the hills
Let it rain that roots may swell the womb of lying plains
Let it rain today
That stomachs may shun the rumble of thunder
Let it rain that children may bath and bawl and brawl
The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst
The roofs have been silent too long
The seeds noiseless in the dormitory of the soil
The earth has been lying too long, and songless
Time to leap, time to lilt
Let the sky's boil of anguish burst today
The pain of earth be soothed. (pp. 27-28)

In this poem, earth is personified in order to enunciate its emotions. The persona highlights the longing for rain and the difference it makes in the earth, to both the people and the environment. However, the title, "Let Earth's Pain Be Soothed" appears to be an indication that the withdrawal of the rain is a result of the activities in the environment. It seems like the dryness being experienced on the earth is earth's own way of giving back to man what it has been given for in "Our Earth Will Not Die", Osundare writes:

Lynched,
the lakes,
Slaughtered,
the seas
Mauled,
the mountains.
But our earth will not die.

Here
There
everywhere
a lake is killed by the arsenic urine
from the bladder of profit factories
a poison staggers down the hills
coughing chaos in the sickly sea
the wailing whale, belly up like a frying fish,
crests the chilling swansong of parting waters.
But our earth will not die.

Who lynched the lakes. Who?
Who slaughtered the seas. Who?
Whoever mauled the mountains. Whoever?
Our earth will not the die.

And the rain
The rain falls, acid, on balding forests
Their branches amputated by septic daggers
Of tainted clouds
Weeping willows drip mercury tears
In the eye of sobbing terrains
A nuclear sun rises like a funeral ball
Reducing man and meadow to dust and dirt
But our earth will not die.

Fishes have died in the waters. Fishes
Birds have died in the trees. Birds
Rabbits have died in their burrows. Rabbits
But our earth will not die

Our earth will see again
Eye washed by a new rain
the weltering sun will rise again
resplendent like a new coin
the wind, unwound, will play its tune
trees twittering, grasses dancing;
hillsides will work with blooming harvests
the plains batting their Eye of grass and grace.
the sea will drink its heart content
when a jubilant thunder flings open the skygate
and a new rain tumbles down
in drums of joy.
Our earth will see again,
this earth, OUR EARTH.

With heart-wrenching words and imagery, the persona likens the treatment meted on the earth to that meted on a criminal or a slave. The earth and environment suffer degradation and pollution emanating from factories' waste product in a degree captured by the persona as "lynched", "slaughtered" and "mauled". This treatment and the "arsenic urine" contribute to the poisoning of the sea when it is channeled into lakes where it causes chaos leading to the wailing of the whales and the dismembering of the inhabitants of the seas. This inevitably results in the earth becoming miserly, balded, vacant and lying prostrate as seen in the poem "Let Earth's Pain be Soothed".

While these factories rake in money, they turn a blind eye to the poison they are feeding the earth with. When the earth becomes choked with this poison, it releases it back to man, sometimes through drought as evidenced in "Let Earth's Pain Be Soothed" where the sky is described as carrying a boil of anguish. Evidently, the sun which should be a source of light and joy turns to a boil of anguish, beating the inhabitants of the earth with ferocity because it has been poisoned with fumes and emissions from gas flares and factories' wastes. Even when the much sought after rain is released by the clouds, it is sometimes acidic – the kind that causes damage rather than rejuvenation. This results in balding forests and amputated branches in that this rain is a weeping of the clouds and not a release of fertilization, and so, what the environment receives is tears and not rain. Hence, these tears wither leaves and everything it touches.

Worse still, the earth continues to suffer the trauma of abuse and degredation through the different wars going on in the world leading to bombings and the pollution of the ecosystem through the release of greenhouse gas emissions. Hryhorczuk et al. (2024) in "The Environmental Health Impacts of Russia's War on Ukraine" submit that the war has exposed Ukrainians to toxic mixtures. The military operations have led to the pollution of fresh water resources to the extent that as of July 2023, according to the World Bank, Ukraine's Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources has recorded the destruction of 724 hydraulic structures, 71 water pumping stations, 64 sewage pumping stations and 23 water treatment facilities. Their findings show that one-third of the Ukrainian land is contaminated with explosives leading to landscape and habitat destruction as well as radiation risks amongst others (pp. 4-7). All these destructions in Ukraine coupled with the ones going on in Palestine and other countries of the world including the terrorist activities in some states of Nigeria, without doubt,

have impacted the environment negatively. The negative impacts on the environment eventually boomerang on man.

Countless times, farmers complain of the sun scorching the seeds planted in the soil. The general public also complains about the increasing harshness of the sun, but it has been proven that the sun which the persona describes its rising like that of a funeral ball shows the emotional state of the sun. It vents its anger on man and plant, instead of enhancing growth and wellbeing; it enervates the inhabitants of planet earth. This is an indication of the cyclic nature of violence against the environment. When man consciously or unconsciously plunders the environment, there is retaliation by nature on man. Unfortunately, the activity against nature could be committed by one man or a group of individuals, but most times, the whole earth or a larger group of people becomes the victim of this occurrence as many are made to suffer the result of the crime committed against the environment by just a few number of individuals.

Conclusion

Ecocriticism has enunciated the fact that the health of man's environment determines the health of man. Hence, man cannot exploit his environment and expect to have a wholesome existence being that the violence man metes out to the earth is returned to man by the earth in manifold degrees through drought, acidic rains and famine. Conversely, when man takes good care of the earth, the earth will in turn prove itself to be benign towards man. The collection of poems in Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) proves that nature and earth have emotions, and when these entities are exploited and abused like slaves and criminals, they vent their venom. The intensity of their venom is a reminder to man that he cannot exploit his host (the earth) and have a peaceful existence because victims of trauma, whether humans or ecological often retaliate.

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