

ECO-LITERATURE AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

For literature to be functional, it must address contemporary challenges to bring about a better society. There is no doubt that humans at the turn of this century are confronted with environmental issues such as, pollution, deforestation, depletion of the ozone layer, flooding, ice-melting, global warming, earthquake, etc. These constitute some of the contemporary challenges which are faced by Africans especially, and the world at large. These problems are threatening human existence. As such, urgent steps need to be taken if planet earth is to be preserved. It is against this background that this paper x-rays eco-Literature, a new area of scholarship in literary circles, with a view to accessing the contribution of literature to the fight to rescue the earth, our environment. Literature is used as a veritable instrument to protest against further degradation of our natural environment. This is the concern of recent Nigerian writers among whom are Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide. This paper concludes that the protection of the ecosystem is a duty which all must participate in so that our earth will not die.

Introduction

Are they of the earth
Who fritter the forest and harry the hills
Are they of this earth
Who live that earth may die
Are they? (Niyi Osundare. 1986:45)

The last stanza from Niyi Osundare's poem, "They too are the earth" echoes the fact that Nigerian literature has taken a decisive turn. The main subject is not that of revolution as preached by the Marxists or the glorification of Africa's lost heritage as seen in the works of elitist writer such as but that of serious protest against environmental degradation. The poem captures the devastation, destruction and annihilation of the vast forest resources that abound in Nigeria before the onset of western education and its allied technological advancement. This is the view of one man writing for his younger generations.

It has been argued by scholars that the art of writing is individualistic and that any lesson derived is coincidental. Ahmed Yerima (2002:2) affirms this when he writes that:

The art of writing is a very personal art. It is self evolving, it is private, it is subordinate, it is subjective and no matter how conscious a writer might be about his society and his immediate environment,... it starts from self before it spreads into a sense of collective predicament propelled by a will the ills or remain the gifted voice of vision in any given society.

Yet, a writer cannot stay aloof from the society which shapes his ideas, emotions and thoughts. It is from the pool of the thoughts of the community that the individual draws. Thus, writers are not outcasts, though they may be exiles; and they do not write in a vacuum. According to Adebayo Williams (1988:38), "if a writer is true to his calling, he must mirror the agony and desperation of his society." This is the idea of a committed and a functional art.

Wojciech Malecki (2012:49), in *Save the Planet on Your Own Time?: Ecocriticism and Political Practice*, believes that "promoting some environmentally enlightened work may prove fruitful in the long run, for raising ecological awareness." However, he disagrees that it can be achieved by the present literary forms and methods that have been in vogue prior to the advent of ecocriticism which has come to address the challenge. According to him, "Critical literal discourse simply cannot be heard by CEOs and politicians" (50). This is perhaps because they sit in the comforts of their board rooms and legislate on issues that do not for the most parts affect them. If Malecki, who is writing from western background, has this to say, what do you think of a writer who is operating from Nigerian background? Ekpenisi and Anyira (2010:127) lament the poor reception of literary artefacts by the populace and leadership class:

Most writers are drawn from the academia that has one or two statements to make in furtherance of their academic pursuits. Literary artefacts by literary scholars use complex syntax and, therefore, inaccessible to the majority of the populace. Much to the writer's chagrin, all his creative energy to bring about a better society is wasted. He wakes up to the painful reality that the leadership class who is his target audience has no time to read.

The writer to some extent agrees with Malecki that the present literary tradition cannot adequately cater for environmental issues. Biodun Jeyifo (1981:419) in the search for a popular theatre re-echoes this idea. He says:

...they have not been written for and about the popular urban and rural masses, these groups play an invincible role in these plays. And these plays have, more or less, been imbued with a mood and spirit of despair, disillusionment, and sometimes with savage cynical misanthropic vision.

Suffice it to say, this piece and literature generally has roles to play: the role of enlightenment and entertainment. For the developing world, literature should and actually does focus on the education of the people with a view to righting the wrongs. This is one way of bringing commitment to bear on literary writers and literature, for the onus of enlightenment of the people lies, to a large extent, on the shoulders of writers and literature. Despite the negative comment about our present literary monuments, it is high time literary scholars began the interpretation and re-interpretation of our cultural artefacts which constitute literary domain. For John Bennet and Ian Hunter, According to David Oswell (2010:xxv), culture must be constructed as an object and as a vehicle through which people, things, individual and population must be organized. One greatest challenge of humans in the last decade and throughout the twenty first century is the problem of our environment. Literature as a field of study must not fold its arms to this trend threatening global humanity.

Conceptual framework

Eco-literature is an aggregate of two words: ecology and literature. In order to understand and explicate the issues on ground, it is pertinent to provide a working definition of the concept of ecology and literature. Ecology

Ecology is derived from two Greek words "oikos" meaning home and "logos" meaning knowledge. Therefore ecology means the knowledge of our home and this stems from the studies of our environment. It is from these words that fundamental concept such as ecology emanates from. Home is used to interpret human environment where the biotic and abiotic factors interact. The knowledge of ecology has increased human awareness of the need to strike a balance in the relationship between living organisms on one hand and our relationship with environment on the other hand. The healthy relationship which has hitherto existed between humans and their environment is jeopardized by human capitalist tendencies. If the alarming deterioration of our home is not checked, it will place our fate hanging on a precipice and this can lead to irreparable catastrophic end. Global change is caused by deforestation, pollution, oil exploration, mining and nuclear test, etc; and all these are manifestations arising from the efforts of man to create comfort for himself. The irony is that this creation of comfort leads to more and greater discomfort. So, it is a vicious circle.

Literature

Literature, generally, refers to both the written and unwritten works with high artistic value. It is manifested in poetry, prose and drama. At the turn of twentieth century, it has proliferated into medley of forms. Many sub genres can be accommodated within the general genres. It employs the use of words as vehicle for the expression of ideas. It can be studied for its aesthetic value, exploring the interaction between elements of form and content. It can also be evaluated from its functional point of view, investigating its relevance to solve practical social problems. Literature as an artistic artefact is a cultural manifestation and this is a reflection of the artistic sensibility of a particular social environment, expressing their joys, sorrows and anxieties. The cultural dynamics of the society is responsible for paradigm shift in the topics and subject matters explored. Therefore, it is not only aesthetic, but also educational, ideological as well as political. Perhaps, this is where Faizal Risdianto. S. S. M. Hum's classification and definition of the concept of literature becomes very appropriate. He has made two classifications, and has defined a type as, "...written material that deals with thought and feelings in imaginative or 'serious' literature" (4); and also cites Rees as saying, "this kind of literature is [a] writing which expresses and communicate thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards life (5). This is the type he has called "imaginative literature." The second type is the one he has called "Informative literature."

Eco-literature

The twentieth century witnessed giant strides in science-space, maritime, arms and seismology. The growth in these areas is accompanied by a corresponding increase in the danger posed to our environment, and most importantly occasioned by humans. Global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, earthquake, flooding, desertification, ice melting are all its attendant effect on the cosmos, yet this phenomenon is sustained under the guise of economic development. As a matter of urgency, literature in Africa, of which Nigeria is one, must align with their counterparts in other parts of the world, to solve the nagging and

dangerous problem bedevilling our world, "that earth may not die"(1986:50). The interaction between literary pedagogy and the science of ecology has produced a new and emerging trend known as eco-literature.

The evolution of a new pedagogy in literature has placed the literary scholar in a sceptical and difficult position. Everyone understands that literature and science are antipodal. The complementing role of art and science raises the question which Festiner (2009:7) ask in *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* "What can poetry say, much less do about global warming, sea rising, specie endangered and so and so on?" Poetry can educate the people on the goings on in the society as well as the effects of such occurrences. Poetry can and does involve people. This is the idea of commitment. Commitment on the part of the writer requires not only sheer will but extraordinary will considering the inadequacies identified with the present literary method.

William major (2012:7) in *Introduction: The Function of Ecocriticism; or Ecocriticism, What Is It Good For?* advises that:

For ecocriticism to be effective as a discourse, it needs to be effective in its approach. Only by recognizing the perversity of and absurdity of actually having an ecocriticism in the face of overwhelming environmental disaster might we liberate ourselves from the self righteous posturing that affects so much environmental writing.

Isabel Gallymore (2012:15) does not mince words and enjoined eco-literary scholars to do away with biblical injunction in genesis 1 ;28:"... have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and all over things that creepeth over the earth. "The axiomatic statement from the bible provides the locus stand! for humanity to engage in actions inimical to the environment. Therefore humans become the greatest destroyer of their environment and the benefit is what we are ironically facing. Rather, Gallymore opts for the opening of the mind in the "context of earth's expanding technological and man-made environment" (47).

The eco-literary scholar's must reflect on the effectuality of their product, the character and the quality of their ecological engagement. A major way to sustain the quality is to target children in primary and secondary schools. It is only through this that objects of nature become recurring phenomena throughout their lives. The action is that of catch them young about which McEwen (2000:100) writes that:

Again and again teachers of nature writing emphasize the value of close-looking...but for many children, reared on the exotic close-ups of the TV nature documentary, such local moments can seem thoroughly humdrum. They are simply not interested, either in their natural world, or in their own ability to describe it. One of the best exercises I know for counteracting such an attitude is quite simply, pretending to be blind.

The fight to save the planet is not an exclusive reserve of the writer alone. It calls for interdisciplinary action and study in order to muster the political will needed to achieve this onerous goal. This is what literature under the new politics seek to achieve. There is no doubt that the dynamics of economy shape government policies. Therefore, eco-literary scholars must transcend mere writing just for entertainment and broaden the communication media used to short circuit the abuse of our environment. Eco-literature in Nigeria

Eco-literature is virtually a new area of scholarship in Nigeria's literary landscape. The obvious reason for this cannot be farfetched. Nigerians are still grappling with primordial problems of existence such as food, shelter and clothing. This is aggravated by the political climate that is characterized by corruption, abuse of office, policy somersault and lack of vision. With this background in mind, ecological enterprise has received scant attention from government and literary scholars.

In the literary field, which is the trust of this discourse, Niyi Osudare broached the idea of environmental awareness in his collection of poems, *The Eye of the Earth*. The collection is a nostalgic rendering of his youthful life that depicts the environment in its natural state. The first three parts: "Back to Earth", "Eyeful Glances" and "Rainsongs" expose in depth the natural environment that is resplendent with natural vitality and rock deposits found in former Ondo now Ondo and Ekiti states. He paints a panoramic picture of the beautiful landscape of Ikare-Ekiti his place. In "Home Call", which is the last part, he raises pertinent fears about the state of the earth. In the poem "Ours to Plough, Not To Plunder", he says:

This earth is
Ours to work not to waste Ours to man not to
maim This earth is ours to plough, not to plunder
(49).

The concluding stanza of this poem is a clarion call on all and sundry on the overriding need to protect our natural environment. In "They too are the earth", he laments that the need to create wealth has plunged humans to engage in action injurious to the natural world. The opening lines of this article have said it all. He ends this section with a glimpse of hope, "our earth will not die".

Equally Tanure Ojaide (1997) in his collection of poems, "Delta Blues" and "Home Songs" depicts in totality environmental degradation in Niger Delta region. The region that abounds in aquatic and terrestrial habitat is now a ghost of past glory. The cry of the poet is found in "when green was the lingua franca":

I see victims of arson wherever
my restless soles take me to bear
witness. The Ethiope waterfront
wipe out by prospectors-so
many trees beheaded and stream
mortally poisoned in the name of
job wealth!

More worrisome to the poet is that the ecological problem has given rise to unprecedented violence. Saro Wiwa and nine others lost their lives in the process. The youths have formed themselves into militant unit to tight this issue. The tight by Niger Delta militants is a far cry from ecological issue because they see it as an avenue to get a share of the national cake.

In other genres of literature, there is dearth of eco-literature. This does not mean that scholars in these areas have not depicted in depth their natural environment. In fact Wole Soyinka's and J.P. Clark's successes as literary icons can be attributed to their ability in portraying the dynamics of their natural environment. Clark's leaping allusion is woven

around the image of water. Every Nigerian knows that the traditional occupation of the Ijaw fishing. Soyinka's works is lacerated with symbols and images drawn from the forests of Abeokuta. Any environmental issue raised merely served to portray the social, political economic or religious aspects of human society. Even when there is direct reference to the issue of nature, it is glossed over. For instance, in Femi Osofisan's "No More The Waste Breed", Saluga says:

... the sea has come on such flood that we have been completely cut off from the mainland, no one dare put a canoe on the raging waters. Food supplies are short, the fishes have fled, all the plant have rotted away (1982:92-93).

Despite the fact that this statement captures the adverse effect on human environment, shows man's revolt against established norms. To create eco-literary awareness in Nigeria, Victor Shklovsky's (1990:6) advice is relevant: "objects from nature achieve recognition when it is repeated over and over". Allusion to nature must constantly adorn the pages of our literary works so that the mind will internalize it through constant perception.

Wole Soyinka in *A Dance of the Forest* presents a society circumlocuted by greet corruption and wanton destruction of vast natural resources that abound in Nigeria at the bin of the new nation. This is also juxtaposed with symbols drawn from Ogun, the Yoruba god of creation and destruction. This dual god is also the patron god of carvers. The wood destroyed for carving is merely a child's play when compared to the destruction caused by human activities under the guise of civilization. The totem carved for the gathering of the tribes triggers the depletion of the forest resources. Demoke's says:

For one thing, I did not know what it was all about. The council met and decided they want it done. In secret. The tree was in the groove of Oro, so it was possible to keep it hidden. Later I learnt it was meant for the gathering of the tribes when I finished it, the groove was cleared of other trees, the bush was raised and a motor road we built right up to it. It looked different. It was no longer my work. (7-8)

Despite the fact that the action of the play takes place in the forest, a home of trees and natural habitat for both plants and animals, this extract touches on t\\ in environmental issues of deforestation and pollution occasioned by bush burning which to a large extent is threatening human existence at the turn of twenty-first century. Deforestation and pollution according to scientists are very strong conservative factors of global warming and depletion of the ozone layer.

Apart from bush burning, the play pinpoints another conservative factor of pollution -petrol fumes from automobiles. To show the devastating effect of this type of pollution, the vehicle is nicknamed "Chimney of Ereko." This idea is further buttressed in the following lines: "Old Man: ... the Chimney ought to do it. When the monster travels at anything over two miles per hour you can't see the world for smoke or smell a latrine for petrol fumes" (31).

Another way eco-literature can thrive is through theatre for development practice. In this situation environmental enterprise is freed from the encumbrances of words which literature is known for and develops action to create necessary awareness through sketches improvised for the occasion. Despite the fleeting nature of dramatic presentation, it plays functional role by addressing a particular problem of an immediate community. Ekpenisi (2010:40) writes that:

Developmental goal pursued by theatre is culture based development that takes into cognisance what is on ground and how it can be harnessed. Practitioners have to ascertain the area of development they want to tackle from the beginning. Base on this extensive data will be collected, analyzed and scenario formed, perfected and produced.

A number of developmental programmes in drama/theatre have been carried out through theatre departments that offer courses in theatre for development. Also development partners such as British Council, Ford Foundation, German Protestant Agency for Development have sponsored programmes that touch on environmental issues. A good example is the Katsina project that is sponsored by the British Council. Led by Oga Steve Abah, participants explore various ways to check desertification. In this way, theatre becomes an effective tool to conscientize and mobilize the citizens on matters of grave concern about nature. However a lot need to be done if theatre for development outreach is to generate the awareness that will attract political mandate. The programme cost time and money. Sacrifice must be made by the apostles of this theatrical area in order to preserve this earth, our earth.

Conclusion

The issue of ecological engagement is a global one. Technology has dominated the world to the extent that it is now seen as the harbinger of doom. Human advancement and civilization have turned our home into monstrous absurdity. In the words of Niyi Osundare "our world will not die". The need to protect our ecosystem is an exclusive reserve of all Nigerians. Writers, despite their ideological standpoint should embrace this contemporary trend of using literature to contribute to environmental discourse.

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