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Natural Endowment and Environmental Sustainability: A Paradigmatic Reading of Nwamuo's *Wisdom of the King* and Mbajiorgu's *Wake Up Everyone*

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Abstract

In all humanity, the earth is regarded as a veritable resource for the preservation of natural endowments. The reason is not far-fetched given its pride of place in the creation of wealth amongst nations. This paper is not ignorant of the fact that works already exist in this field of natural endowment and environmental sustainability but the need to look at this area from the theatrical perspective necessitates its investigation. Thus, this paper takes a simple approach of play-text analysis; to review the effects of deforestation, bush burning, oil spillage and other acts capable of defacing and dehumanizing the earth and adversely affecting the environmental sustainability of the resources therein. These are examined within the context of the discussion. This paper therefore, is of the opinion that the activities of man contribute immensely to the erosion of natural endowments which grossly affect the production of food for humans, herbs for medicine, raw materials for industrial growth and development as well as the retardation in infrastructural development. It recommends among other things that for natural resources to be sustained, proactive measures should be taken to first of all to ensure the preservation and sustenance of the earth surface.

Key words: Natural endowment, environment and sustainability

Introduction

Nature refers to humanity in all its ramifications and man derives his existence from nature. It will therefore not be out of place to argue that nature provides the necessary ambiance for the survival and growth of humans. Nature of course is pure and undiluted. It is within this natural environment that resources for socio-cultural, religious and economic growth are embedded. However, keeping tabs with developmental imperatives as it is desirable of modern societies come with its challenges. One of these challenges is finding a balance between preserving the natural endowments and at the same time engaging in productive ventures. The zeal for expansion and growth has placed more emphasis on the later at the detriment of the former with varying degrees of environmental problems and challenges. The Industrial Revolution brought with it, not just progress in technology, science, medicine and modernity; it also introduced the degradation of the environment and

other resources therein and its associated dangers to humanity. Nwamuo (1997, p. i) in the preface to his book titled *Appreciating Industrial Theatres* writes that:

as manufacturing and distribution aspects of industries dominate the economy, the fear is that people become more greedy for money, more callous, more indifferent, less human and more likely to emphasize the industrial product rather than the process, the machines rather than the *environment*.... (emphasis mine)

In all these, man's activities become the bone of contention. It is man who creates this imbalance in the distortion of the natural resource and by extension, the malignancy of the environment. Ironically, it is man who suffers most from its effect. There is the need therefore to recognise the dangers associated with the degradation of the environment – the ecosystem – as a new form of threat.

Over the years, efforts have been made by scholars (literary, poetic and dramatic) to create awareness on the problems therein. According to Effumbe (2009, p. 91):

from the ancient times to the present, various peoples or groups, and for varying interests, have shown grave concerns about the significance of the natural world, the world of flora and fauna. They have identified in basic and minute terms the use to which certain features in our environment could be beneficial to man.

In the words of Umukoro (2010, p. 15) “unlike the sculptor or the painter who seeks to gratify his artistic ego, the dramatist in our society has always endeavoured to fulfil definite socio-cultural functions beyond the primary objective of entertainment” Added to this, Eshiet (2002, p. 26) opines that “anciently and down through the centuries, artists have revered the power and imagery embedded in the environment. The protection of this vital resource from economic, social, cultural and political abuse is an often evoked motif in the arts.” In a similar vein, Nwadiwe (2001, p. 595) avers that:

essentially, from the earliest times, the theatre has always shown concern for the environment. This led to the theories of environmental theatre or environmentalism which is an avant-gardist movement in theatre practice concerned with the environmental space of performance....

This paper therefore is yet another voice in the pool of voices in the quest for the preservation and sustenance of the earth and the resources therein. Therefore, this paper is primarily concerned with the contextual analyses of the postulations of Chris Nwamuo in *The Wisdom of the King* and Mbajiorgu's *Wake Up Everyone* as it regards the aforementioned problems. The concepts of climate change, biodiversity, ecosystem and ecology, ozone layer depletion and other terms related to the topic under review shall be elaborated upon.

Between the Earth and Natural Resources: An Operational Definition

It is incontrovertible that the survival of man is hinged on the natural provisions of the earth resources. These resources are located within the environment. The environment in this context is inclusive of water, air, land and all plants and human beings or animals living therein and the inter-relationships which exist among these or any of them. All these are for the satisfaction of human needs and aspirations. However, it is imperative that before a full blown discussion is undertaken in this paper, the key words must be defined, at least to situate them in context.

Natural environment or the ecosystem is defined as "the space occupied by various natural creations other than man." It includes the rivers, lakes, seas, forests, birds, animals and fishes. These creatures share the same space and atmosphere with man.... (Bell-gam 132). Natural resources as a concept are naturally occurring substances that are considered valuable in their relatively unmodified (natural) form. A natural resource's value rests in the amount of the material available and the demand for it. The latter is determined by its usefulness to production. A commodity is generally considered a natural resource when the primary activities associated with it are extraction and purification, as

opposed to creation. Thus, “mining, petroleum extraction, fishing, hunting, and forestry are generally considered natural-resource industries, while agriculture is not” (<http://www.sbs.utexas.edu/resource/onlinetext/definitions/resources.htm>).

Therefore, natural resources are things that occur naturally, and that are useful to us. They include fuels such as oil and natural gas, and materials such as iron ore, and timber. Humans do not make natural resources but may only *modify* natural resources and it is these modifications that generate most of the problems this paper is investigating. On the other hand, the earth may refer to the material that covers the roots and part of the stems of plants, from which they grow but, in this context, it is taken to mean the planet in which we live; one of the planets that are in the solar system. Therefore, both the earth cum environment and all the natural endowments cum resources have mutual interconnectivity and ordinarily, should not be antagonistic of one another. However, the activities of man have made it seem otherwise. This we intend to substantiate in the course of the paper.

Sustaining Natural and Environmental Treasures: The Two Plays Contextualized

As earlier stated in this paper, dramatic works by dramatists have always been used in the quest to sustain the environment and the resources therein. The two plays in question deal primarily with the problem of ecosystem and the need to preserve it. Eshiet (2002, p. 25) substantiates this with reference to *The Wisdom of the King* when he argues that:

the environment, the primal source of life, is at once the plot and setting of action. The focus is on the rites essential to stability. Thus, dark forces threatening environment, order and continuity are fore grounded and locked in a deadly conflict with man’s ancient struggle for self-preservation.

The Wisdom of the King by Chris Nwamuo opens with the meeting of the king and his council of elders where issues bothering on the environment amongst other things are discussed. The king’s son was called a bush man in school and the king felt that the arrays of bushes and forests

surrounding his community is giving it a bad name, hence the dire need to cut and burn them. He therefore sought the consent of the elders in order to put his ideas into action. He was however surprised at the response he got from the elders and thought it was a calculated attempt to ridicule his stool. However, in as much as the elders believed it was derogatory and insulting to call their prince a bush man, they saw no wisdom and justification to deforest their forest, because according to them, they have economic, religious, cultural and social potentials. These are explored in the following conversations:

1st Chief: the-the point my lord is that we ka-ka-cannot afford to loose all the things the trees and bushes in the environment provide us. They- they are ve-ver-very valuable to us.

King: (*looking at him sternly*) What is valuable to you Ndimele?

2nd Chief: T-the tree. They protect our houses from wind and storm.

3rd Chief: Na dem de give us timber for build and roof house and for make timbre.

1st Chief: T-t-trees provide us shades from the sun.

2nd Chief: trees help to arrest ecological problems as erosion and earthquake. Animal from the bush provide meat which we all eat.

King: (*feeling beaten*) don't dangerous snakes live in those bushes? Don't they bite and kill people?

3rd Chief: some plants from the bush drive away snakes when you plant them for house.

2nd Chief: Besides, a good number of the plants in our environment are medicinal. They are used in curing diseases.

1st Chief: S-s-some of them are edible as vegetables. O-o-others serve decorative purposes (20)

As revealing, inciting and informative as these arguments are, yet, the king was reluctant to toe the line of wisdom. His unassailable moves was further complicated when one of his workers was thoroughly beaten up by the villagers. The councillor who brought him justified their actions thus:

Councillor: ... you know that our bushes and natural environment provide us with most of what we need for survival. The environment is like a mother to us. To destroy the bushes and forests is to threaten our existence. You could not have sent him (21-22).

Most of the things man need can be found in the environment. Even traditional medicine is not left out. This is also made manifest in the play by the playwright. Effumbe (2009, p. 91) is of the view that:

...ancient man had used some herbs and roots to heal and renew bodily discomfiture. But modern man, being aware of the scientific discoveries, tends to disregard these rudiments of the natural vegetation, and ploughs and destroys these natural systems to his own peril.

Egharevba (2004, p. 24) intones that this is "...an age when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support system." This perilous plague of our life-cycle is further emphasised by Sarre and Smith as quoted by Effumbe (2004, p. 91) when they observe that "... the harmonious integration of the natural environmental systems is being damaged by the range of human impacts that seems ill-informed, disorganized and even perverse". In the play, *The Wisdom of the King*, the playwright sought to celebrate and emphasize the virtues of the natural world when he creates a counterpoise between the advocates and proponents of forestation and deforestation. Currently, national and international agencies are floated as NGOs which strongly advocate for the conservation of our flora and fauna. The decimation of the environment and its effects on the people's physical and spiritual wellbeing, of course, come with its problems. It has been argued that when the human community destroys the ecology, it advertently destroys itself. This is because; every act of ecocide, according to Rueckert (1996, p. 107) "...is what ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing or paradoxical attitude toward nature."

On the other hand, *Wake Up Everyone*, though talks about the environment but focuses more on the problems of global warming,

prevention of natural disasters, and their implications on the survival of humans. Professor Aladinma, an environmentalist who uses drama to fight against climate change, approached the Chairman of Ndoli Local Government on the need to, amongst other things, build dyke that would fortify the river banks so that the lands does not become vulnerable to flood in the future because of its closeness to the sea. This advice was jettisoned by the chairman in pursuit of his personal aggrandisement. When eventually the flooding starts, the wrath of the people was visited on him and he lost everything. Authorities believe that the quest for modernity, no doubt, is a contributory factor to the problems of environmental degradation and global warming in Nigeria. Betiang (2009, p. 58) writes that:

The reality of climate change is becoming self-evident with increasing population pressure in urban areas due to man's increased insensitivity to the environment with ever-mounting waste production that is hardly managed.

In support of the above, Adeoye (2013, p. 575) asserts that:

certainly, climate change is real and its lyric is no longer melodious. It is now dirge-like. Sadly enough, climate change is threatening human existence and whether for good or bad, scientific innovations have tampered with natural climate and gratuitously, we have all come to accept its vexed issue of climate change.

In a similar vein, Bakut (2000, pp. 239-240) makes a comprehensive analysis of the different causes of global warming. He says that:

The causes of global warming are many. However, it is generally explained as the result of huge increase in the emission of carbon dioxide (CO₂) through industrial and commercial processes. The uses of oil, coal, wood and so on which are extracted by plants from the atmosphere is often seen as the main sources of global warming. While vegetation continues to withdraw CO₂ from the atmosphere, the rate at which it does this however, is slower than the rate at which it is released again by combustion. Also, as the forests of the world are depleted (by cutting of trees for firewood, making of furniture and

roofing buildings), the rate at which CO₂ is withdrawn is further reduced. Consequently, the cause of global warming cannot be separated from industrialization, which precipitates a large-scale change in the composition of the atmosphere (239-240)

All through the two plays, the problems associated with these are made manifest. For instance, in *Wake Up Everyone*, the Secretary to Ndoli Local Government Chairman and Desmond argued thus:

Secretary: you are right there. The idea of city in our modern sense of it is inimical to the natural order of the universe. Our so-called modern cities are designed against the guiding principles of our ecosystem.

Desmond: that is the stupidity of modernity; we have disposed our natural environment in our quest for modernity (2011, pp. 57-58).

The adverse effects on the environment as itemized by Obioma in the play include:

...increase in global atmospheric temperature, melting of polar ice, rising sea temperatures, sea level rise, appearance of radiation-related cancers, change in agricultural yield, proliferation of a thousand other diseases and health problems, and even diseases that we thought had gone away in some countries are coming back in full bang: diarrhoea outbreak in America, tuberculosis epidemics in London, cholera epidemic in Haiti. And countless natural disasters which you have been lamenting about, yet, we go on destroying the soil and trees that act as natural sinks for the absorption of carbon (2013, p. 47).

Furthermore, more often than not, these trees are cut for massive commercial logging and firewood. Cunningham, et.al (2015, p. 108) gave an estimated global harvest of about “1,700 million tons of fuel wood

yearly” and further added that this “alarming rate of extraction is detrimental to the ecological balance of our delicate earth.” In the view of Leeuw and Reid as quoted by Offiong et.al (2008, pp. 174-175) “...about 80-90 percent of it in Africa come directly from the natural ecosystem leading to loss of biodiversity, silting and alteration of the hydrological pattern” The development of societies has much to do with the use of energy for various activities. However, while energy is critical for economic and social developments, its production, transportation and use causes a wide range of environmental problems at the global, national and local levels. (see also Umeh and Devalsam 2008). However, the play (*Wake Up Everyone*) posits that “humanity’s brutal and outrageous quest for wealth and development has nothing but the promise of doom and poverty for the children’s generation” (2013, p. 37). The play therefore mounts a strong campaign against the use of firewood for cooking by advising people to “say no to fire wood in the kitchen” and that “now is the moment to save our forest, firewood fetching contributes to biodiversity loss” (2013, p. 64).

Another problem affecting the sustenance our natural environment is oil spillages. In the words of Embu (2011, p. 150):

Oil spillage is a common occurrence ... and this has affected their drinking water now rendered unsafe for drinking as well as livelihood. The main preoccupation of the people in the various communities is farming and fishing and they have to co-exist with the problem of oil spillages

The crisis rocking oil producing communities in the Niger Delta Region is hinged on this and it is one of the preoccupations of the two plays. Edde (2001, p. 107) argues that:

...the crisis wrought by our environmental pollution has been occasioned by the persistent culture of filth, waste disposal management, bad construction of roads and drainage system, creating massive erosion menace, as well as crisis brought about by deforestation and consequent desertification that have continued to strain our governments crisis management know-how, and

perhaps resources.... what is more, the massive and reckless exploitation of our forest resources continues unabated, threatening our ecosystem, biodiversity in marine and savannah lives in various dimensions. The threat to health and food self-sufficiency are equally crisis-generating.

The implications of these to the survival of human race cannot be over-emphasized. Therefore, the two plays call for a committed approach towards solving these man-made ecological problems. As a matter of fact, one of the factors the farmers complained is responsible for the non-harvest of good fishes in *Wake Up Everyone*, is oil spillage. Apparently, ...what we now witness are nothing but reactions to man's mindless activities on earth. The soil and the rivers have become unproductive because of the chemicals and oil we pour on them. The floods and erosions we experience are caused by our senseless attempts to reclaim wet lands and our blockages of original water channels and drainages" (2013, pp. 13-14).

Similarly, one of the high points in *The Wisdom of the King* is the sudden realization of the king that there is need to conserve nature and the environment at a time when the bulldozers of progress are felling trees, clearing massive areas of land for development purposes and decrees that:

from today, no citizen shall cut down a tree, kill an animal, burn bushes or destroy wild life in our environment without our permission. The punishment for the deforestation of our natural environment will be the seizure of farm lands from any offender. We must be grateful to nature for providing us all we need for existence in the bushes and forest around us.... we have a responsibility to protect our natural environment (2013, p. 35).

The punishment, to the best of these writers is not enough. There should be more punitive measures. Obviously, there are guiding laws but:

Both the coastal and inland water law of 1915, the mineral act of 1917, the river basin development authority (RBDA) Act of 1987, the petroleum act and petroleum drilling regulation of 1968, the oil in navigable waters act of 1968 (Bell-gam 135)

Appear not to be working. That accounts to the impunity with which these environmental activities are carried out. These problems are created by man and man can still find solutions to them.

Conclusion

Obviously, man cannot be separated from his natural environment but it is imperative that he carries out his responsibility to the earth; one of which is to preserve and protect it. The advice of Bakut (2000, p. 234) should be taken very seriously if we are to make meaningful progress. He says that “we stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future.... we must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature....” This has become necessary in view of the perilous time we are in and the dangers posed by our indiscriminate actions. These natural endowments/resources are created for the sustenance of life and life may become difficult if efforts are not made to safeguard them. It is on record that some curative herbs have gone into extinctions because of the activities of man. Information should be given out at all times on the dangers these pose to the society. In the words of Ikolo (2010, p. 183):

Information needs in the neighbourhood could include information on oil spillage, information on contamination of streams and rivers, forest destruction and biodiversity loss, the environmental effect of gas flaring, effluent discharge and disposal problems of water supply, environmental sanitation and refuse disposal.

Therefore, all hands must be on deck to preserve these natural treasures for the sustenance of life of humans and other earthly creatures. The earth is dying, dragging all in it to its grave. We've got to cure it of its sickness. This is the time to save it; after all, we made it sick in the first place. "Wake up! Wake up everyone. To build our world anew, no burning down our bushes; no polluting our rivers; no more deforestation; to guaranty our future, no greenhouse gas emission; no heating up our planet..., let's stop oil pollution; no more flaring of gases, no cutting down our forests; wake up! For new green world agenda, let's plant some trees today; lets save wide life from dying; wake up! (Mbajiorgu 2013, pp. 70-71). Our leaders should also redirect their attention from sharing oil wells and buying fuel tankers that are the order of the day in Nigeria, towards evolving an approach that can give the people a broader vista into the extent to which we are destroying our planet. Furthermore, government must put together a planned process and take deliberate steps to create institutions and structures that will stimulate the adaptive capacity of rural dwellers to the threat of climate change.

The Way Forward

Apart from the ones already mentioned above, humanity cannot afford to be complacent in the face of this obvious threat to life existence. It is therefore recommended that people should make extra efforts to preserve and protect the environment and the natural resources therein. It goes beyond creating awareness but there has to be a genuine commitment on the part of the people concerned. We should not allow what happened in *Wake Up Everyone* to replicate itself before we take action.

The law on the preservation of the ecosystem should be made tighter and offenders prosecuted. It should no longer be a piece of document filed in the government cabinet, but that which requires implementation. This dastardly acts perpetrated on the environment is a daily occurrence and the people want action. If persons who perpetrate these acts are not made scapegoats, the problems will continue unabated.

We should draw lessons from the two plays analysed. A nation that fails to plan, plans to fail. It is therefore recommended that actions capable of affecting our natural endowments and the environment should

be stopped or curtailed at least, in order to ameliorate its adverse effects in the society.

Though it has always been used, but the opportunities provided by the media, churches, schools, hospitals and other places where people gather should be explored in the fight against the destruction of nature and all the resources embedded in it.

The campaign by some state governors to encourage the planting of at least one tree every year is a welcome development and should be embraced by all. Embarking on developmental projects is good but that which is tantamount to affecting the ecosystem should be jettisoned. Alternatively, concrete arrangements must be made to nurture a new environment.

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