

Eco-Metaphoric Construct as Resonance for Sustaining Nature: An Interrogation of Kelechi Ogbonna's *The Tamarisk: A Healing Shrub*

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Abstract

The world over the years has been experiencing a great number of natural disasters with all its vagaries of draughts, flooding, hurricanes, tsunamis, fire outbreaks, volcanic eruptions, tornadoes, earthquakes, just to mention a few. Nigeria, as a country, is not spared of some of these disasters. All these can be linked to humans' indiscretion towards their natural gifts, mostly in the area of habitat wreckage, commercial exploitation, pollution, among others. In an attempt to forestall further havoc on its fauna and flora, Nigerian environmental activists have been putting ink on paper to create awareness on the management, control and impacts of negative ecological practices. Under the auspices of different taxonomies and polemics such as ecotheatre, ecocentrism, ecocriticism, ecopoetics and many others, quite a substantial quantity and quality of literary discourses have been generated. Adopting qualitative methodology, this paper attempts an analytical study of *The Tamarisk...* (though figuratively), with a view to adding a voice to the sustainability of nature in order to give life more meaning. It is believed that this piece of theatrical metaphor will be the catalyst that would spur more Nigerian creative writers to furnish eco critical treatises in the area of appreciation, management and control of natural environment.

Keywords: Eco-metaphoric construct, Deforestation, Eco-drama, Sustainability of nature.

Introduction

The world over is experiencing various degrees of challenges ranging from economic recession and depression, terrorism, humanitarian concerns, political violence, environmental degradation, tsunamis,

climatic change, drought to mention but a few. Therefore, the resultant effects of these cataclysms have left and are still leaving its trail of poverty, loss of lives and homes, and host of others on humanity. Yet, recent surveys about these natural calamities threatening human existence on the surface of the earth have shown that they are actually and greatly instigated, schemed and perpetrated by wo/man her/himself in the guise of eking out means of livelihood. For instance, in the opinion of Damar, Rakun, and Saidu, wo/man engages in the act of deforestation; by burning, cutting or overgrazing. Such deliberate acts have been done to improve cultivation, provide space for settlements, provide timber for construction purposes, provide fuel for house hold use, provide charcoal, smelt metals or provide feed for animals (81).

To further advance this discourse from above, wo/man in her/his bid to satisfy her/his insatiable luxurious penchants, explores, exploits and even plunders her/his environment to her/ his own peril. This is so, because “humans conduct their affairs to the detriment of the environment and therefore have failed to recognise the need for the common survival of human and non-human elements alike” (Bernard 261). Hence, “in recent times, countries of the world... have incurred colossal losses in life, resources and property due to climatic and climate-related problems, such as floods, drought, storms, desert encroachment, radiation problem and global warming ...” (Akon, Esu 6), as a result of man’s ruthless mismanagement of his environment.

Furthermore, ironically it is established in some quota that, wo/man existence is greatly dependent on the good will of its immediate environment just as the existence of the environment to a very large extent equally hinges on the courtship of wo/mankind. Be that as it may, suffice then to say, there exist an equilibrium state of relationship between these variables, and any attempt to upset this scale of eco-human balance spells doom for either of the two parties. Giving an instance between man and the wildlife, this argument is substantially buttressed by Shikha, Kumari that: In this relationship they are so much interdependent on each other that any disturbance in one disturbs the other. History has proved this every now and then that every change in the civilization of animal and human beings have also changed and the effect on civilization of the changes in environment has been so acute sometimes it has wiped whole civilization from the face of the earth (1).

In advancing the above assertion, Okuyade, Ogaga, talking about human unfriendly dispositions to the non-human world, agrees with Shikha positing that: this relationship between humans and the environment is not that simple if one considers the fact that humans continue to consistently reduce the environment to a mere object or item that can be exploited for their sustenance or corporate greed (x-i). Drawing a leave here from Okudaye's position pops up an issue which is also of great importance to this study. That in spite of all cautious effort put in place like; holding of global and national conferences, seminars, sensitization programmes being carried out by Governments of nations and Non Governmental Organisations etc, at all times to secure and maintain this eco-human equilibrium. Wo/man has consistently violated the rules that would have guaranteed a symbiotic relationship by treating the flora and fauna as mere pawns in their hands and equally refusing to acknowledge their devastating effects until havoc is wrought. Hence, wo/man at a commensurate or even more score suffers its consequences beyond her/his control.

Another concern that is also consequential to this study is that, Africa as a continent is not spared from wo/man's unfriendly dispositions to her /his environment and its backlash towards her/him. Though, Africa as a continent is said to be a lesser contributor to these world damaging effects when compared to continents like Asia, America and others, yet its damaging effects can be felt in Africa as it is evident in the area of droughts, desert encroachment, unpredicted climatic change, shortage of water supply and at another dimension, flooding to mention but a few. In continuance of this contention, Obama in Anyokwu, Christopher relates thus: Africa gives off less greenhouse gas than any other part of the world, but it is the most threatened by climate change. A warming planet will spread disease, shrink water resources, and deplete crops, creating conditions that produce more famine and conflict (353). From the foregoing, even though Africa does not contribute so much to world environmental crisis, the above mentioned environmental hazards are currently plaguing nations like Nigeria with its attendant negative trappings playing out in the semblances of hunger, poverty, sicknesses, violent crises, among others. Therefore, this study, to say the least, is timely to environmental apologists, because Nigeria is experiencing (coming) out of one of the worst economic recessions coupled with farmers-herders clashes in recent

times. We have this situation on our economy because, as the desert encroaches and water depletes at the northern region of the country, pressure is mounted on herders to move down to the western and southern part of Nigeria, and this is one of the reasons, why the people of this state have not enjoyed good neighbourliness and in the main, growth and development is stampeded. Hence, the need to save her from further economic depression and other climatic crisis, because Nigerian polity operates in an environment where wo/man (even at his advantaged position as ordained by nature) over other non-human beings, still treats nature with reckless impunity as it will be revealed in the continuance of this interrogation.

Arts in general and drama specifically, being a product of the environment among others, has vehemently lend a voice to the maintenance, management and the sustainability of nature towards saving wo/man from its reciprocal damnation when it strikes. Because from Adeoye Abdulrasheed's position; ...the theatre artists, who are the voice of humanity, should recover the race from climate change and environmental degradation through film production, radio drama, dance theatre, television drama and performance by dramatizing the evergreen African imagination and the problems posed by climatic change for meaningful sustainable development to take place (576). From Adeoye's point of view, drama then, as a theatrical art has the ability to incite in its audience, (either as a closet or public) the need to have a rethink about certain negative happenings in the society with the view, to bringing positive change that should bring about a better living. It is on this premise that this paper attempts an eco-metaphoric interrogation into *The Tamarisk: A Healing...* with a view to forestalling further environmental hazards that make wo/man helpless when they occur

Conceptual Clarification

The literary study of wo/man and her/his relationship with nature, falls within the purview of many nomenclatures as earlier observed in the abstract of this investigation. To give this study a sense of direction, we shall therefore attempt to practically situate a nomenclature that will approximately navigate this discourse through without too much detour or obscurity. Therefore, considering the arguments this paper has put on so far, this

interrogation falls under the broad theory of Eco criticism which Estok in Dobie, Ann sees as: [Any] theory that is committed to effecting change by analysing the function-thematic artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise-of the natural environment or aspects of it, represented in document (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds (239). What one can deduce from Estok's claim is that, any literary work, stage performances, films or others that are concerned with the business of engaging its readers/audience to go into critical thinking.

This is with a view to ensuring that they take actions either individually and (more importantly) collectively to reconsider their relationship with nature towards striking an interdependent eco-human balance falls under this umbrella body called Eco-criticism. This thinking should have given birth to eco-literal concerns like; eco-centrism, eco-poetics, eco-theatre, eco-drama etc. Because, "most eco critical work shares a common motivation, that is, awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planets basic life supports" (Shikha 3). Also, in setting the template for the criteria for evaluating an eco-literal piece, Buell in Caminero-Santangelo, based it on "the degree to which a piece of literature strives to represent non-human nature (as opposed, for example, to making it a screen for other concerns,) give it a voice, invest it with value, emphasize human interdependence, decentre the human, alleviate environmental degradation" (699-700). Therefore, suffice then to say, that Eco Drama is an offshoot of eco criticism, since in the opinion of Tse, Andrea and Odeh, Jerry Eco-drama: ...specifically deals with challenges confronting ecospheres and ecosystems, therefore exists at the luminal (sic) between human behaviour and nature. It thrives to examine the consequences of human actions on the environment more importantly educates on the various ways and steps to make in order to avert eco-depletion and protect the environment. (59)

Drawing strength from above, eco drama then, can be seen as plays where metaphoric and aesthetic concerns are geared towards exposing environmental degradations, their causes and its brunt on humanity and equally path find or navigate pragmatic ways out of this quagmire, with the view to forestalling these challenges associated with an upset in the ecospheres and ecosystems that are

mostly perpetrated by humans. Through these metaphoric and aesthetic constructions, the playwright reaches out to her/his audience employing creative explication to interrogate environmental concerns, mostly, pointing out its negligence and consequences through metaphors. Therefore, this paper adopts Eco 'Metaphor' as a nomenclature for the purpose of this study. Hence, this intellectual metaphoric discourse on *The Tamarisk: A Healing...*, is to bring about its extrinsic textual interpretation on the need to constantly strike a balance between wo/man and her/his relationship with or to her/his environment, even though the text is an evaluation for other thematic questions. This "quest becomes imperative given the habituated pollution of the ecosystem, the degradation and despoliation of the natural environment as crystallized by industrial production of goods and services in the globalized neighbourhood" (Nder, Mathias 4).

Humanism and the Concept of Ecological Disaster

Eco Drama, and for the sake of this study, *Eco Metaphor*, which has been at the fore front of using dramatic appreciations, to address the concerns of wo/man's ruthless tinkering with her/his environment, which results in an upset in the ecospheres and ecosystem, with its attendant consequences, with the view to proffering solutions to this mind boggling issues has been around for sometimes now. Ironically, these challenges have not been averted completely. What this portends is that, drama per se, may not be the magic that could turn around the challenges confronting the ecospheres and ecosystem with abrupt sway. However, drama has the ability to incite thoughtful provocations, so much that its audiences are gingered to collectively take actions that could bring about the desired change. That is to say, drama here is not an end to the means, but vice versa.

Then, this dramatic approach remains relevant since these ecological disasters and their resultant effects which come in the form of floods, drought, storms, desert encroachment, radiation problems, global warming etc are here with us (as stated earlier), and are varied, compounded and widespread in nature. Drama (generally speaking), as a product of the society, has universal appeal and addresses gamut of concerns that touch on human life also on a very wide scale. Because incidentally, the mentioned effects of ecological catastrophes above "transcends all facets of human life,

from ephemeral to routine and occupational activities. It knows no political or social boundaries, respects no military-type make over, and tolerates no ignorance” (Akon 6). Akon’s position therefore, brings to the fore the need for eco dramatists to persistently and consistently champion the course of reducing if not completely annihilating environmental cataclysms by writing more plays/scripts and stage and film performing them.

Play Brief

The play in view, relays a story about a priestess, Chikere, who uproots the groove, sets the entire shrine of the community of Umuobasi Ano ablaze and leaves for the city as retaliatory gauge for her heart throb, (Thomas,) who is allegedly killed by the gods. The gods are angry with her because, they do not want her to share her responsibility of looking after the welfare of the community with any man being the only channel of communication between the gods and the community members. The Igwe is briefed on this development; he places a curse on and banishes her from the community, as her name is never to be mentioned in the community again. Her absence creates a lacuna in the cosmological chain of relationship between the people of Umuobasi-Ano and their deities. Hence, the groove turns against the people. The community members reconsider their position on Chikere’s private life, then Igwe sends a message to the Nwokekauba family, (Chikere’s clan), telling them to find and restore her before the next Eke-ukwu or risk ejection of their family circle from the community.

A meeting is convened by the Nwakoebas, and after a serious deliberation by the family members considering her contribution to the wellbeing of the community arrives at a conclusion that, she deserves a better treatment and that she only acted impulsively in the heat of that moment. So by simple majority she is restored and the curse placed on her revoked. She returns to Umuobasi-Ano, falls in love again, though after a long persuasion from friends, but this time with Njoku, who is also a pastor. But, the union came after both parties accepted each other’s terms of reference. The entire community, friends from the cities and neighbours from other villages troop out to celebrate this great memorable union in music and dance.

Play Contextualised

Tamarisks are evergreen or deciduous shrubs or trees growing 18-21 m in height with dense thickets having about 50-to 60 species of flowering plants in the family of *Tamaricaceae*. They usually have slender branches and grey-green foliage. Some species are fire adapted with long tap root to penetrate the deep water table. For instance, *Tamarix aphylla*, as an evergreen tree grows 18 m tall. They grow on saline soils, allowing up to 15,000 ppm soluble salt and alkaline condition. The tamarisks are valued for their ability to withstand drought, provide shelter at sea coasts, wind break in the desert, serves as ornamentals, raw material for carpentry and fuel, etc (“tamarisk” Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/tamarisk>). The account given by the two sources above, brings to fore, the importance of the non-human world to wo/man. By implication, human beings depend greatly on the non-human world for their existence, nonetheless findings have revealed that, wo/man has consistently ignored this fact, hence, s/he has consistently treated this partner of hers/his with reckless abandon. Atreya’s summation captures the above contention aptly that, human beings:

Living in the luxury that technology and machines have provided, human beings of the city have forgotten about the original place from which they evolved-nature. They have shut it out, along their fellow natural organism (from the tiniest to the largest), who are not as evolved as they are. They do not feel the need to include them. They do not care if their ruthless exploitations of the natural resources are hampering the survival of other living beings. (377)

Advancing further from above, on the argument of this age long human’s unfriendly and endless search, discovery and manipulative dispositions which have led to quantum destruction of the environment and nature, humans therefore, pay dearly with even their own lives. With this on our hands, then there is the immediate need for the humans to begin to chart a course for a friendlier human disposition towards the non-human world. This call is clarion considering the impromptu destructive dispositions of most of these natural disasters towards human. Most times, it comes so sudden carting away and destroying everything on its path. This graphic image Kelechi paints, when Ajonu barges into the palace to disrupt council proceedings accordingly:

- Igwe: What is it! What matter of urgency has made you break the rules of the palace?
Ajonu: Another abomination has struck!
Elders: What?
Ajonu: The priestess of the groove has gone berserk!
Igwe: How?
Ajonu: She has uprooted the heart of the groove and set the shrine on fire.
Igwe: Where is the priestess now?
Ajonu: On the run! (21)

The implication of the discussion from above, throws up how humans are unexpectedly caught up in the snare of these natural disasters. The human world goes to rest, taking a break from their destructive tendencies after tempering recklessly with the non human world to celebrate their scientific and technological advancement in road construction, estate development, communication, astronautic, oil and industrial exploration among others. This is evident in the area of indiscriminate cutting down of trees, careless mismanagement and dumping of refuse, release of dangerous gas into the atmosphere etc. Then suddenly, the repercussions come in the body of; desert encroachment, global warming, environmental pollution and degradation, severe health (COVID 19) pandemics and so on. These upshots have always left the humans confused and divested (in the heat of that moment) and its traumatic resultant effects are often attributed (from certain quarters) to something abominable, because they could destroy the very essence of a people's survival and if the people ever survive, the recovery process could be a near impossible or even long lasting. Furthermore, another concern which the playwright puts on the burner of literary discourse is the reckless dispositions of humans towards their environment. Most of these disasters are occasioned by many inconsiderable human treatments melted on the environment. They do not just happen. Substantially, Kelechi captures this argument thus:

- Chikere: (*very sober*) My friends, I am not made of stone. I am a woman with flesh and blood {*walking towards her alter, near the shrine*}. Has anybody considered how I felt before Thomas came into my life? Thomas was my very first...the experience was heavenly and quite understanding, a vessel willing to learn...but the groove who permitted it at first

took away the only man who has ever given me joy
{sobbing}...who cares for me? Did my people whom I served
dutifully consider how I felt? ...has anybody really cared
how Chikere feels? (75)

Humans have consistently treated their environment with reckless abandon as if their existence absolutely has no connection with it. Therefore, in their attempt to satisfy their insatiable quests for luxury, habitats to fauna and flora are degraded. This they do not minding that the non-human organism equally needs care as much as they. Consequently, bushes are burnt or trees are cut down either to cultivate or to build and construct edifices to the detriment of the non human environment. Yet, the environment provides for most of the human needs in the area of food, herbs, coal, tourism and leisure, furniture and so on, hence the need for them to take care of these natural endowments with utmost care and caution to avoid eco imbalance. Additionally, *The Tamarisk*...as a piece of art, draws our attention to see the non-human world as a partner that needs the human care. The non-human kingdom, like the Tamarisk plants, can only grow to provide humans all the services individuals enjoy directly or indirectly from the plant and its by-products on the grounds that humans equally take care of them. This assertion she emphasizes through the conversation between Chikere and her friend who come to pay her a visit while on exile. Hear her: Chikere...Yes it is obvious that the groove care and loves...oh, how I wish the gods will come to me in the likeness of men. But I want to be cuddled! I want to turn in the night and feel like a woman... (75).

Drawing a strong point from above, human beings have blatantly refused to accept that they are supposed to court their environment like a husband and a wife relationship, where the durability of their union anchors greatly on the level of mutual respect between the twosomes. It is yet to dawn on them that the non-human world is a partner in progress, 'who' needed to be treated like a woman who needs superlative affection. Hence, the need to pamper, nurture and nurse her. It is not enough to appreciate that nature has made this provisions for their edification; they owe it a moral obligation to be faithful to this contractual arrangement so as to prevent either party from becoming a renegade. Another concern which the playwright pokes at is the need not to see the

already bartered relationship between natural and human world as non-remedial dispute. The management of the non-human world depends largely on the care from the human's world, a little push from their angle and there is a restoration of the equilibrium of the eco and human relationship to some reasonable extent. Aptly, the playwright graphically addresses this challenge thus:

Chikere: Is there any hope for a tree that is cut down? Will it sprout again? Will the tender branches not cease'?

Njoku: Yes, It shall not cease, 'Through the scent of water, it shall bud again'!

Chikere: I am like the tamarisk, issuing forth healing and goodness. Yet, great are my afflictions. But the dwarfed shrub cut down, will it sprout again? (80)

Taking a leave from the conversation between Chikere and Njoku, her new found love, clearly situates the position that no matter the level of the environmental degradation and its reprisal consequences which would have led to loss of lives, property, potential tourist centres, cultural monuments among others, concerted effort from the human angle, to begin to treat nature with little respect would definitely lead to forestalling desecration and the restoration of the abused environment. And when this is in place, normalcy will return to the benefit of all. To this end, there is the need for the reorientation of the human world to become aware of their responsibility to this non human world. This fact the playwright advances through the lead character, Chikere that: Yes, but I have no intention of crossing that path with a novice who simply feels he is in love. Nkechi: With time he will learn and come to appreciate your worth. Education refines a man... (76).

Nigeria will continue to experience human inflicted disasters as long as the humans will continue to treat the issue of environment with levity. The environment, as a partner to human existence, will never compromise its standard with human lackadaisical dispositions towards it. Therefore, there is the need for the humans to retrace their steps. But this can only be achieved through thorough sensitization of the human mind by all the eco centric government and nongovernmental agencies to make them embrace this call superlatively, so as to make them begin to see the environment as an equal partner in progress and relate with it as such. Finally, Ogbonna sees the harmonious relationship between the human and

the non-human world in view, but only when there is an attitudinal change by all towards the environment in their quest for material acquisitions. This she aptly captures at the village square through the Narrator during the traditional marriage rite between Chikere and Njoku accordingly: My people, the noble task to better our society rests on all of us. Our desire, greed and quest for power and material well-being have left us shallow and empty. While we are greedy for gains we trample even on the gods not minding whose ox is gorged. We are the society that needs to be changed or expunged. We are the people who have rejected ourselves. We can only change things from within. Now the people of Umuobasi-Ano are willing for a change, let us join them in the celebration of the new dawn (82).

What Nigerians, as a people need, is to collectively come together to champion the course for a more friendly environmental temperaments. Because, the pursuit for a free environmental disasters by humans, can be achieved only when the Nigerians' taste for material acquisition equilibrates with a considerate tempering of their God given natural endowments. Because, again in Anyokwu's opinion he advises that: Granted, one cannot make omelette without breaking eggs; the same way, one cannot exploit oil and gas without doing *violence* to the earth, without violating the natural beings. But in order for romance not to turn to rape, foreplay is advised (237). It is in an attempt to attain a comfortable living that humans explore, exploit and pillage the environment to their own detriment. Consequently, natural habitats, tourist sites and natural heritage are destroyed with huge economic implications. Therefore, humans are left with no option other than to attitudinally change their primordial ill treatments towards the environment. They should begin to see nature's blessing as a part of their existence. Hence, the need to explore and exploit them with considerable treatment, only then will their co-existence be in peace.

Conclusion

The article has demonstrated that the world is experiencing different shades of disaster ranging from economic depression, humanitarian concerns, terrorism, natural disasters and the most recent Covid 19 pandemics to mention but a few. These unpleasant occurrences leave behind their trails of losses of lives and property, farm lands,

natural habitats, tourist sites and lives among others. Humans are yet to come to term with the reality that their relationship with nature is mutual and reciprocal in nature. Hence in their quest for luxurious proclivity, natural habitats, tourist sites, natural heritage and ozone layer are destroyed and depleted. Evidences of disastrous events over the years reveal that Nigeria is not spared of these natural catastrophes, even though Africa seems to contribute less to environmental unfriendly practices. With this challenge at hand, the study tried attempting to bring this menace to a halt and if not, to reduce its negative impacts. Hence, drama comes handy since drama being a product of the society reflects on the goings on in that society with the view towards provoking its audience into critical thinking that could bring about collective action for a desirable change. Therefore, the study took a literary discourse into *The Tamarisk: A Healing Shrub* (though from an ecological perspective) to bring about mutual relationship and respect between the human and non-human world for a peaceful co-existence.

At a time when Nigeria is talking about diversification of her economy as a means to economic recovery, there is the need for the government of the day to consider environmental protection more stringently, because it is in this that her natural heritage and tourist sites are preserved and harnessed for tourism. Nigeria is one country that is endowed with these sites. Countries like Kenya, Malaysia among others have been able to sustain their foreign reserves through tourism. There is a saying that the youth are the leaders of tomorrow, and if Nigeria must be saved from further environmental degradation, human development in this group of persons becomes paramount. Therefore, there is the need for the Nigerian educational sector to review its curriculum on subjects, courses and others so as to produce pupils, students and graduates who are well trained to appreciate the dare need to become consciously environmentally friendly for their overall and national development. In line with the above recommendation, this study further recommends that drama should be a core subject even from junior secondary school so that they can be exposed to these concerns through performance from an early stage. There is the need for playwrights to look the way of eco metaphoric constructional engagements, with the view to having gamut of play texts and stage, radio and television performances to champion the course of environmental friendliness. The relevant Governmental and Non Governmental environmental

apologists should deepen their campaigns into the rural and urban rural areas. The city slums should also be visited, because most of the unhealthy environmental dispositions are found among the dwellers of these settlements.

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