



**Eco-Poetic Resonance in African Literature: Reading Selected
Poems of Onyekachi Peter Onuoha's *Drops of Fascination***

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Abstract

This paper shows the countless brutality unleashed on earth which is fast turning our world into a world of shriveled environment stressing that man is the brain behind this ecological destruction. By extension, this essay explains the miscarriage of earth to mean environmental vandalism and the danger that will confront humanity if man fails in his duty to harness culture and nature in a complimentary reflection. Outside the information literacy above that this paper creates, this essay also brings to the fore, the role that the writer will necessarily play in ecological survival while stressing that the writer is the seer of his time and his commitment to his art is evident in the deep vision of his creativity and how this creates awareness about the challenges of our existence and provokes change. This essay provides a throwback at beautiful and nurtured nature ages ago and decries over the alarming rate at

which uncontrolled technology, industrialization, urbanization and the misunderstood notion of what is modern are fast eating up nature's spicy contents. This paper concludes that man's exhibition of ecological piety through environmental replenishment and conservation of that replenished portion is a necessary end if humanity must experience earth's bliss and give mother earth a face lift.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, earth is carria

Introduction

Just as feminism is pro liberation of women from the oppression of patriarchy and Marxist criticism exposes the mainstream culture, showing how its philosophy controls and oppresses all the actions of the common people. eco-criticism in a similar spirit, champions the preservation of the environment and exposes the brutal activities of man on mother earth. In time past, studies about the preservation of the earth may not have had adequate attention but in recent time, earth studies with special regards to information literacy on the effects of environmental destruction has received tremendous writings from scholars across disciplines. This accounts of the robust body of knowledge that eco-critical scholarship enjoys in present time, corroborating this view above, Simon Estok states that "Eco-criticism has distinguished itself, debates not withstanding first by the ethical stands it takes; its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and secondly, by its commitment to making connections" (7). This commitment to making connections as discussed above is true of Eco-criticism especially, as eco studies in present time makes connections with not just environment but with feminism, politics among other variables that are present in the society.

However, in spite of this advantage that eco-criticism holds as revealed by Estok, man's senses still remain inhumane to the environment, especially as man still goes on with his destruction of the earth by his activities. In the past, man's destruction of the earth could be attributed to his ignorance on the dangers of a wrecked earth but in present time, man's uncaring behaviour toward the earth cannot be explained in the same light of ignorance since time has experienced expansive creation of awareness on the hazards of environmental wreckage. This implies that man consciously bullies the earth and the earthly creatures for sake of greed, selfishness and the mad drive for wealth without any concern for environmental

preservation. The earth is potentially equipped from the beginning to provide man with virtually all that man needs to survive. However, this was only to be possible on the premise that the degree to which the earth potentials are to be realized is dependent on the extent to which man can harness his knowledge to care for his environment. It is based on the things with which man as the controller of this environment imbues the earth with. This is where the natural law of “garbage in garbage out” finds relevance in eco studies. What farmer will plant beans and expect yam upon harvest? It’s no wonder that because man grossly engages in the abuse of mother earth by the things he pours into her and that which he violently takes from her that mother earth naturally births the environmental hazards that we experience today in our world.

Unfortunately, man with his great exploit, vast knowledge and giant strides is at the centre of these environmental hazards thus at the receiving end. It is the case of a man digging his own grave and that of his generation or better still, it is the case of starting the fire that may not be put out. This absence of land attachment that man ought to have naturally cultivated for land, this absence of passion for biosphere survival, this poor attitude towards the forest and jungle continuity and the overall environmental effect that comes with this negligence constitute our notion of a “miscarriage earth”. The eco-critical flourish that resounds in the selected works of Onuoha, Onyekachi Peter becomes the literary camera that will unveil these instances of miscarriages that mother earth had experienced and is still experiencing. Most importantly, the environmental nemesis of these several miscarriages will surely not escape our critique in the current essay.

Eco-criticism: A Brief Overview

According to Phillips Dana (1999) “Representation of nature is of environmental writing.” (592). The definition above, offers us the understanding that Eco-criticism is the study of the representation of nature in literary works. It is the study of the relationship between literature and environment. Eco-criticism as an academic discipline began in full swing in the 1990s although; its roots can be traced back to the late 1970s. William Rueckert’s 1978 essay entitled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism” brought the term Eco-criticism to limelight. This focus on green issues grew through the 80s and by the 90s, it has gained recognition in the literature departments of most American Universities.

Apart from William Rueckert, another pioneer of Eco-criticism is Cheryl Glofelty. Her introduction to *Ecocriticism Reader* is a clarion call on humanity and especially academic scholars in the discipline of literature to collectively lend their teachings to nurture nature. Glofelty in her introduction to this masterpiece on Ecocriticism raises profound question thus: “How then, can we contribute to environmental restoration, not just in our spare time, but from within our capacity as professors of literature?” (xxi)

Umberto Eco is another prominent pioneer of Eco-criticism. His 1986 essay entitled “Travels in Hyperreality” makes forays into the hijacking of natural habitats and landscapes by science and entertainment to create a manufactured or invented nature. Eco marvels over how modern society engages in scientific and decorative manipulation through imitation to confer reality on the unreal. This conscious addition of scientific and entertainment paraphernalia to nature by the modern man to make the environment more beautiful than it appears is what Umberto Eco refers to as “hyperreality.” (49). Eco uses the man-made landscaping of San Diego Parks and Museum popularly known as the shrine of nature and the entertaining value of nature therein for tourists to buttress his notion of hyperreality. In the thinking of Eco, amidst this hyperreal condition, man’s attempt to grasp and ascertain where the truth of ecology lies becomes a futile attempt.

Tenets of Ecocriticism: A Concise Exposition.

We begin this section of the essay with Lawrence Buell’s definition of Ecocriticism. Buell’s definition is crucial to our unraveling of the tenets of Ecocriticism because his definition seems to aptly provide a common centering claim on the discourse of Ecocriticism by Eco-Critics. According to this author “ ‘Ecocriticism’ might succinctly be defined as a study of the relationship between literature and environment conducted in the spirit of commitment to environmental praxis.” (14). This implies that an Ecocritical critique of any creative work of literature will demand that the critic should;

- (1) Study the relationship between literature and environment.
- (2) Study the interconnectedness between literature, culture and environment.
- (3) Examine environmental crises across flora and fauna.
- (4) Reveal how man’s activities and actions can make or mar the environment.
- (5) Assess Ecocritical works across the genres of literature from the Marxist and Feminist methods of activism.

The very last point on the tenets of Ecocriticism finds truth in Jay Parini’s essay where he explained the thrust of Ecocriticism by suggesting that “It

marks a return to activism and social responsibility.” (B2). This reveals that Ecocriticism as a literary theory engages in environmental activism. The essence is to remind man of his social responsibility to his environment. Through this medium of social responsibility, Ecocriticism educates man and restores him to his existential essence which is to harness culture and nature to achieve environmental peace and not environmental crises.

African Literary Artist, Poetry and Environment

A good readership of Onyekachi Peter Onuoha’s *Drops of Fascination and other Poems* will agree that Onuoha has truly created a niche for himself in the hall of young but vibrant voices in African literature. It is a strong indication that Onuoha is not oblivious of the social injunction of art. According to Ogoanah Felix: “I believe in the social status of Art... it must be used to advance the cause of humanity... A work of art is not a technical jargon...As concerned and committed artists, the basis of all art is justice” (5). The way Onuoha uses literature to remind man of his social responsibility defines him as a committed writer who stirs his art across the genres of literature.

Within the framework of poetry, in a way, we can liken Onuoha to Niyi Osundare on grounds of the ease, speed and consistency with which the former writes which is similar to the latter. This is evident in the number of literary works which both have written and the similar theme that both pursue with the latter possessing creative edge and expertise at the moment due to experience and age. In another way, we observe that these two literary personalities are different in their communicative style with regards to their poetic composition. While Osundare on one hand employs diction that appeals to the understanding of the common people, Onuoha on the other hand, uses sophisticated language often mixed with obscure and complex lines. However, since the thrust of this paper is not to compare and contrast the stylistic and communicative personalities of these writers, we will proceed within the delimitation of this essay as clearly captured in the title of our paper.

Literature according to Amitta Chidi, is “...a refraction of social experience through the prism of human imagination, the ontological essence of literature is to be located in terms of the extent to which it recycles social experience and transforms it into aesthetic proposition” (38-39). Onuoha’s poems under study fulfill chidi’s injunction above. Reasonable pages in the third poetry collection of Onuoha – *Drops of Fascination and other Poems*

centre on the concern for the environment which is fast devaluing due to the irrational activities of man. In “Drops of Fascinations” – the title poem, Onuoha confers on earth a motherhood status and presents us with the pitiable sight of this mother weeping profusely for the barrage of rage and injustice that humanity has done to her and her children. By children we mean earth’s property like aquatic life, wild life, trees, amphibians, land etc. the poet persona as earth’s spokesman reports this injustice with emotional tone as seen below:

You keep weeping for the rape done to you
You keep drumming in anger of change to
generations
They raped in ripping away your genes
The supposed posterity of your procreation
(2)

In the above extract, the word “gene” (2) refers to earthly property that are believed to be the proofs of mother earth’s “procreation”(2) which man tears into shred. Human beings whom the earth sees as “tenants” (3) that she generously feeds, clothes and houses in turn, rapes her “in drive for wealth... and technological advancement” (2). The poet persona truly acknowledges the destruction that man (himself inclusive) unleashes on mother earth when he confesses that:

We all know
That the tenants of generations after
Generation
Raped your sons and daughters in succession
(3)

He accepts that “in true of truth” (3), that the earth is “angry” (3) and that the earth is now “wiping mortals out of existence” (3). This implies that man’s negligence of his environment is one of the factors responsible for the excess flood that ravages humanity and puts “fear of the unknown” (3) on mankind.

In “earth Echoes,” Onuoha expresses same concern for nature. In this poem, the poet persona presents to the readers a more fierce vision of a boiling mother earth angrily flooding away the empires of men erected by wealth that accrues from her exploitation which is making her to gradually lose her beauty, curves, fertility and freshness. The poet persona put it this way:

The boiling mother boils away
The product of past generations in present
Realities
Who had no regard for the verges of
existence (4)

The above is what the poet envisions that man stands to face when his over concentration on wealth creation pushes him to exploiting the earth beyond limit by devaluing earth's properties only to substitute it with things that will temporarily better his interest. The modern man is too biased as he gives little or no attention to ecological preservation. He suckles the earth and makes money from the environment yet does nothing to preserve the environment. He exploits; sometimes beyond his limit thus over exploiting which results to environmental hazards.

We must come to the realization that what makes man modern is not his acquisition of skills for purpose of creating wealth and or enhancing knowledge through the devaluation of his environment. What makes a modern man modern is resident in his ability to harness his power of will and power of knowledge for wealth creation amidst sublime consciousness of ecological preservation. Our world today is too daring, forgetting that there are limitations to which the earth can be explored. Many countries of the world have been building houses on the ocean using the technological mechanism of land filling ocean areas. The Lagos state government in Nigeria for example has earmarked a particular large space covered by the ocean and has already commenced building houses on waters using the land filling strategy. Our position in this paper is not anathema to industrialization and technological strides but it is risky to over stretch the earth. Nature must be given her space

In "The Hunter", Onuoha skillfully wheels the readers into the trajectory of excellent memories as he reminiscences about the old good days when mother earth walks, sits and sleeps in bliss of nature. He makes the readers mind travel on the environmental conscious spot of the past (by time; not by people) so as to put man in a better position of showing the sharp contrast of the past with the present. Onuoha is not implying that the people who lived in the past are exonerated from ecological negligence after all, environmental pollution started from the people of old. But what he is saying is that the past by time and not from the perspective of human composition, witnesses a flourishing ecology in comparison to the present judging from

prevalent realities. On a whole, it cannot be disputed that residents of the past and the present all share in this table of indictment because these farmers, hunters and fishermen through their struggle for survival, engage in extreme bush burning, animal hunting and fishing. Whether we accept it or not, the truth remains that the activities above have direct hazards on the ozone layer, jungles and aquatic life respectively.

However, it is important to understand that Onuoha pursues this environmental theme not with the intention of making man die of guilt but he does this with the ultimate aim of making man live in the understanding of when and where he toes away from nature's path in search of bizarre dreams. This will create environmental literacy which will make man grieve for his present state of environmental crisis and most importantly, effect change that will consolidate the preservation of the forests, waters, jungles and lands. In the words of the poet persona:

Long ago!
Yes! Many years ago
We all went aglow in smiles within miles
Seeing the content of nature
As the roam our homestead in gladness
In gladness as each behold the espy of
Each other (6)

"Content of nature" (6) as it has been used in the quotation above, refers to the rich jungle of old, when animals of varying species abound in large quantities in the then human communities.

Going further, the poet persona reveals that there had been a paradigm shift which has inculcated in man an anti -nature attitude. Man shifts from nature to craving after things that pose danger to nature and humanity when the poet persona avers that:

Until the heartbeat of mortals
Invented pluck portals of fire
In hunting away life from the wildlife (6)

The poet persona indicts the hunters of old and present who contributed in the destruction of wildlife and receive praises from their communities. Till date, some communities in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, celebrate and confer titles on hunters for their hunting prowess. Among the

Igala tribe of Kogi state for example, a core Igala hunter outside his gun and cutlass goes to the forest with a specially made charm called 'Ijele.' 'Ijele' makes an animal to maintain a still posture as at that time the hunter sees the animal and utters his magical short sayings which goes thus "Ijelekife mu" which literally means "be still or be motionless". This charm which is potent on a hunter's tongue honours every decree that the hunter makes to any animal.

According to Leopold Aldo, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the [the fauna and flora] community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." (262). It cannot be disputed that this practice of hunting and the valorization of great hunters are aspects of our culture but, these habits must shift base. This is because as cultural beings, we must learn to refine aspects of culture that are not in tandem with nature or that poses threat to the natural environment, since man cannot exist outside nature. This is because nature at risk implies man at risk but, culture at risk, does not necessarily mean man at risk especially when such cultural practice is barbaric and irrational. More so, modern time shares in greater ecological destruction because of the vast role that uncontrolled technology, urbanization, industrialization, mad craze for wealth creation, greed, oil exploration despite their temporal benefits to humanity play in the destruction of our environment. Most importantly, the blinding notion that man attaches to what is modern is in true sense not modern.

According to Orwell,Griffin:

We have learned that we must take control of our environment to survive. We believe that is a cultural order, the order we have willed, and natural order the order of which we are part, that makes us safe. Thus if the discoveries of modern science have given us the means to manipulate nature they have also terrified us. (11)

Modernity and technological advancement can never be defined outside the realm of the rationality of humanizing our environment. Our conception of a global economy of modern man is useless if such does not guarantee environmental balance and ecological preservation a place of recognition. If man fails to understand that the environment is as important as him, then, his boast of a modern man is gross tragic absurdity. This is because a sick

house also means a sick occupant. No rational man goes to sleep in a homestead ravaged by fire and thinks himself modern. Nature has always complemented humanity; humanity in turn must learn to complement nature. It is for this purpose that our world operates in units or web system where each unit or web irrespective of its component and status, naturally complements another. It is also in this complementary reflection that wholeness can be appreciated.

The above brings to mind Innocent Asouzu's notion of complementary perspective. In his welcome address at the 19th Annual International Conference on African Literature and The English Language where he avers that "within a complementary frame work, units in their insufficiency stands to benefit from each other naturally, since they operate under the realization that to be is to be in mutual complementary relationship" (2). This mutual interrelatedness or what in Igbo language, Asouzu describes as "Ibuanyidandaness" (2), in the view of this paper, should not only be achieved only within the spectrum of our kind. It has to be extended to the way we relate with our natural environment because nature is life without which there is no life hence; the need for man to humanize his environment.

Man and the environment can only strike a balance if culture and nature can hit a mutually interdependent existence. This brings to mind Joseph Meeker's eco-philosophical belief that environmental hazards are directly engineered by the tradition that separates culture from nature and valorizes the former to moral control. This human created tradition must be discontinued if we must strike a balance. Our environment and our earthly creatures inclusive teach us many good things about life that we would not have known. By classification, ants and bees are tiny and lower creatures, yet, they are symbols of moral values and formidable leadership to the human race. Even the Christian's Holy book in Prov: 6:6-8 enjoins man to learn from the political leadership, wisdom and productivity of the ants.

In the poem "Why", the poet persona begins with a pressing questions that concerns the environment. He asked man thus:

Why carry the saw machines into the
Forest
For the mad dance of pulling down (10)

Today, our world is experiencing severe tree extinction as some tree species are nowhere to be found. Trees are fell and in most cases, no arrangement is

made for the re-planting of the specie that is fell. More so, buildings are fast taking the spot of trees in the name of urbanization. Urbanization does not necessarily mean the falling of trees neither does it mean building skyscraper without allowing trees within the surrounding to add their numbers. Basic knowledge in biological studies tells us that man breathes out carbon IV oxide and takes in oxygen. This implies that man takes in oxygen only to release gas into the air thus making him an environmental pollutant. But these trees man fell indiscriminately without replanting measures are what absorb the carbon IV oxide – the gas that causes global warming.

In addition, trees break or trap wind and that means that their absence would have caused severe damage to man and his inheritance. Trees also beautify the environment. It is so worrisome to know that in spite of these already stated importance of trees, man still remains adamant due to the temporal financial value he gets from deforestation. Going further, the poet personal expresses his dissatisfaction with the entire processes of oil exploration. He describes this oil as “black gold” (10) and he describes the harmful substances that are released into the air during oil exploration as “black gas” (10). He questions the rationality of the above exploration thus:

Why the eternal spray of black gas to the Sky
In the name of refining black gold? (10)

To Gregg Garrad, “nature undisturbed is balance and harmonious” (7). Due to these countless barrage of rape that earth is experiencing in the hands of man, the earth by way of natural response; responses to these thus turning a peaceful earth into a violent and destructive one.

Today, our forest is speedily disappearing and desert is fast encroaching in some part of our world. It is a worrisome fact that our jungle is almost becoming empty in our environment due to the war man wages on the jungle and wildlife. The implication for this man-induced miscarriage of mother earth is that man’s existence and the continuity of our forest and wildlife have a futurity of bleak reality. This spells out doom for man. Should these earth miscarriages continue, the earth’s womb will dry up and there will be nothing good for the earth to birth other than environmental hazards. All these are the accounts of facts that are hidden which breathe across the length and breadth of Onyekachi Peter Onuoha’s nature poems as collected in *Drops of Fascination and other Poems*. However, it is a good thing that the theoretical enterprise of eco-criticism has provided the masses with such literacy.

Conclusion

By implementing intending reforms of writers of environmental praxis on the side of nature, our earth, forest and jungle surely will experience robust life again. But if through writers, society fails to humanize her environment, then, this phase of ecological extinction will be complete and desasterou. When this happens, the future will point accusing fingers at our modern age for her brutality against mother earth and shaming our art for its failure to create the requisite impact. It is to prevent the above from happening that the essay implores humanity and recommend that while the government is making practical intervention on environmental preservation through its literacy programmes, the philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, educationalists etc all have roles to play in the preservation of the environment but not as much more as the literary writer. This is because a literary writer unlike others is the surest seer of his time and his commitment to his art lies in the deep vision of his sublime creativity and how this creates awareness on the challenges of our existence and powers change. The personality of a literary artist is accompanied by a social function. This brings to mind the position that Ogoanah holds on art vis-à-vis the status and social impetus of a literary artist.

By literary writers, we mean poets, novelists, dramatists, literary critics, and short story writers. Consequently, these group of persons must raise the cry from mountain tops to valleys, from forests to jungles, from skyscrapers to caves. They must destroy the trends destroying land, humanize our environment by nurturing it to bloom and grieve for the countless miscarriages we have caused mother earth. It is only by making this ecological piety that our world can boast of a humble, rational and shared humanity. Investing in our environment by way of ecological preservation will mean to give where our greed, ignorance, mad drive for wealth and sometimes our extreme quest for knowledge in the past and even in the present, have made us to blindly take from.

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