

**THE DYNAMICS OF PLAYING EARTH IN GREG
MBAJIORGU'S *WAKE UP EVERYONE***

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Abstract

Greg Mbajiorgu is a leading exponent of ecological theatre and his play, *Wake up Everyone*, captures and contextualizes the eco-discourse as it pertains to Africa. The objective of this study is to X-ray the underlying issues in Africa's quest to contend with and re-navigate its course within the chequered global matrix of the planetary crisis. Mbajiorgu's play provides a homegrown approach and engagement with issues of the environment as well as excavate the philosophical and social contestations within the climate debate. The paper, among other things, recommends that arts and indeed the humanities need to further engage with contemporaneous matters, especially the ecological crisis affecting all facets of human existence across the world.

Keywords: Eco-drama, Climate change, Ecology, Eco-humanities, Environment.

Introduction

Global warming and climate change issues basically hinge on the need to rescue the environment from an impending ecological crisis. Over the years, changes in climate conditions have intensified to a near desperate quest to salvage humanity from eco-degradation (Igomu 15). The irony, however, is that these changes are largely orchestrated by human activities. This study investigates the preoccupation of drama and the dramatic text in Nigeria with a view to unpacking its relevance to the eco-challenges of sub-Saharan Africa. The thematic thrust of this work is to excavate the eco-engagement of a play written by Greg Mbajiorgu and how his dramatic voyage overtime has brought the scientific phenomenon of ecology to connect with arts. The eco-humanism theory forms the bedrock of this study. This theory concerns itself with ideas and practices of environmental preservation and conservation, especially those

that stir up the consciousness of the human race to the role it plays in eco-degradation and what it can do to create an eco-friendlier and more sustainable world.

The study interrogates the discourse in the field of ecology for which a dramatist can engage and reinvigorate the needed awareness on the plight of humanity in the face of a fast-eroding environment. Drama has a lot of significance in educating humanity and creating the needed awareness on how human beings should relate with their environment. This paper engages the problem of conflict and its relationship with the dwindling natural resources in Nigeria. The hatred and seeming genocide that is being experienced in parts of the country is perceived as having an ecological twist. Therefore, the paper is aimed at finding out the ways in which literary drama has interrogated or is interrogating the eco-crisis and environmental degradation in Nigeria. It also seeks to establish areas of critical engagement and the intersection between drama and ecology and to further engender academic discourse for Nigeria's participation in sustainable development using drama as a tool. The research is a textual analysis of *Wake up Everyone* and the purpose is to seek out its relevance to the eco-discourse that has taken centre stage in contemporary literary criticism.

Drama and the Discourse of Eco-humanism

One of the most interesting discoveries of the 21st century is the intersections between the arts and sciences (Omoera, Ojoniyi and Ihidero xviii). Recent studies have given credence to the fact that the arts constitute the means through which science finds expression. One of such scenarios is the field now known as eco-humanism. Vikka sees the connection between ecology and humanity as an imperative which emphasizes values of humanity and at the same time ecological values (107). The ecological imperative is in the naturocentric language which states thus: "act in such a way that you always treat nature, whether in your own life or in the life of any other, never simply as means but always at the same time as an end" (Vikka 107). The point being made by the proponents of this theory is that human species should as a matter of requirement have an attitude of respect for animals, and nature by ascribing anthropogenic intrinsic value to them.

Pinn in his description of eco-humanism, hinges this concept on the recognition that human beings principally identify as inhabitants of a coherent though fragile and interdependent ecosystem known as planet earth. "It is the planet that sustains us, rather than some supernaturalist abstraction. This means that homosapiens need to be understood in the context of being members of the system of nature" (Pinn 311). The discourse of the eco-humanist, therefore, lies in the interactions of human beings and other eco-elements in the global life-world. However, eco-humanism is a highly dynamic and fluid concept. As novel as this theory may seem, it has been reviewed in various fields other than just being straitjacketed within the space of mainstream ecology. Cocks in his study took a different trajectory stating that eco-humanism offers the individual the existential challenge of being responsible for their own morality. Viewed as a moral philosophy, eco-humanism suggests that quality survival as an overarching goal for global society and, hence, as broad criterion for guiding social and individual choices (Cocks 371).

“Eco-humanism is an adaptive doctrine, not rigid. It is built around a revelatory and ever-richer story of an evolving cosmos. In the spirit of science, all its ‘truths’ are provisional and open to question” (Cocks 371). The concern, therefore, is that eco-humanists are interested in the greater ideal of a world where both the flora and fauna interrelate in all fairness and respect for one another. Nature’s good is only possible when it is accorded a sense of greater value not just for its continued existence but also for all that depends on it for survival. Dunbar corroborates this position that eco-humanists consider nature’s value as dependent on its usefulness to humans and that despite pursuing sustainable environmental relations, eco-humanists support hierarchical structures and grant human superiority when the common good or interests of species come in conflict (116). These have formed the primary concerns of eco-drama.

Even though scholars like Loschnigg and Braunecker still believe that drama has done very little in this regard holding a further view that scholarly work on dramatic depictions of environmental issues are relatively small, however, they agree that eco-drama itself has gathered momentum in the new millennium, in particular with regard to theatrical engagements with change concerns (29). Ecology and environmental issues in the last four decades have caught the prying eye of drama and dramatists are beginning to use their craft to interrogate ecological and climate change issues. One of such artists is Mbajiorgu who has consistently used his craft to engage on a global scale problem associated to the environment. His plays which can largely be classified as one of many inroads into the sphere of science stages what Arons and May call the reciprocal connection between humans and the more-than-human world (23). Speaking further on what eco-drama is, they describe it as that which encompasses not only works that take environmental issues as their topic, hoping to raise consciousness or press for change, “but also work that explores the relation of a ‘sense of place’ to identity and community” (23). No doubt the earth lies under peril and the urgency of climate change awareness is indubitable. This urgency and its associated effects for Woynarski have created an ecological imperative for all fields to address. “Theatre and performance can offer something distinctive in their engagement with ecology. They can upend reductive narratives and images, embodying and performing contradiction, erasures and imaginative possibilities” (2).

Greg Mbajiorgu’s *Wake up Everyone*

This three-act play written in simple language brings to its audience the reality of climate change and several adaptive measures that can be employed to ameliorate its effect. In the play, we have Professor Aladinma, Desmond, a PhD student from the UK and the Professor’s Green Theatre Troupe – an assemblage of fresh graduates brought together to dramatize the message of global warming. On the other hand, we have peasant farmers who dwell and depend on the land for survival and there is also the political class as typified by the Hon. Ochonkeya, the Local Government Council chairman.

Professor Aladinma, armed with enough information on climate change and the pending danger it poses to Ndoliland, goes to the Hon. Ochonkeya, with a proposal

on how to arrest this looming catastrophe. The chairman pretentiously accepts to look into the proposal with the promise to present it before the legislative council, only to cast it aside soon after the professor leaves his office. Meanwhile, Professor Aladinma returns to his rehearsal studio and with the arrival of Desmond, continues with the sensitization of local farmers. The farmers in the characters of Odukwe, Okosisi, Nnadozie and others are to be taught local ways of adapting to climate change by planting drought resistant crops and other modern methods of agro-practice that take into cognizance the reality and unpredictability of a changing climate. However, a bigger disaster lies in wait for the land.

This is further aggravated by the refusal of Hon. Ochonkeya, the chairman to attend to the professor's proposal which would see the government and other international agencies working together to arrest the coming flood. Ndoliland lies in the coastal plains and has been under severe threat of eco-degradation owing to years of exploitation by oil companies. The topography of the land also makes it susceptible to flooding. The play ends with the flood submerging the farmlands as predicted by the professor. The farmers are enraged by this development and in the full knowledge of the nonchalant attitude of the council chairman; they decided to go for their 'pound of flesh' at his residence.

Thematic Concerns of the Play

One of the clear messages we get from Mbajiorgu's *Wake up Everyone* is that natural disasters are a direct consequence of human insensitivity to the plight of the environment. Professor Aladinma in Act One, Scene One says that:

What we are witnessing now is nothing else but planetary reactions to man's mindless activities, period. Our soil and rivers have become unproductive because of chemicals and oil spillages. The floods and erosions we experience are caused by our senseless attempts to reclaim wetlands. What about the carbon monoxides from power generators and poorly maintained automobiles, and the unfriendly substances flared up into the air by oil companies on daily basis? The problems of our world today are caused by us and yet we are reluctant to find solutions to them. (Mbajiorgu 2)

Natural disasters as natural as they seem do not just occur. They are triggered by humanity's actions and inactions. What the world faces now in the name of global warming, ecological degradation or climate change are nothing but offshoots of what humans do or fail to do. Quite typical of this is the level of corruption in oil politics at the expense of the land and the people who depend on it for survival. The play brings this dimension to the fore and raises questions about the so-called amnesty programme for Niger Delta militants. The disarmament of the youths to a reasonable extent calmed the frayed nerves in the region but the continued plundering and mindless destruction of the environment has continued unabatedly and the creeks smell of the filthy continuous oil spillage. The chairman, Hon. Ochonkeya in this same scene dialogues with his long-time friend and partner saying:

Chairman: I saw the oil spillage incident a grand opportunity to get back at the multinational oil companies. When the event occurred, I got a fiery lawyer that has

been at the vanguard of environmental issues to institute a legal action against the oil companies. When they perceived the legal consequences and the attendant damages, they resolved to invite me, as the plaintiff, for alternative dispute resolution.

Jango: Choi!! Na lie – o – o, how the mata come take disappear nah?

Chairman: Through my lawyer, of course. We agreed that they pay three hundred million naira. (Mbajiorgu 11)

This situation chronicles the hypocrisy and approach to the agitations and so-called environmental activism that has been the lot of the Niger Delta for many years. The level of damage done to the ecosystem in this region ends up in compensations that are largely unaccounted for and virtually nothing is done to commit the oil companies to clean the filth and make the land safe once more for human habitation. The impact of climate change on agriculture is another matter of topicality in the play. Dimkpa, one of the farmers in the play draws attention to the deteriorating farms saying that: —Go there and see for yourself. My farmland is dry and barren, with nothing at all to justify all my efforts during the planting season (Mbajiorgu 16).

We also see in the play that the reality of a changing climate especially in Nigeria calls for an urgent response in the area of education and empowerment. There is a great need to educate the masses and rural dwellers whose mainstay is farming on the new strategies of combating or adapting to the effect of global warming (Omoera and Guanah 1-3). Ugodiya, another farmer responds to Dimkpa's dilemma blaming him for his loss saying: You have nobody to blame but yourself. We had series of meetings with the Professor on what species of seed yam to plant and how to plant in this difficult time of change in climate. We were also introduced to different crop varieties and animal species (Mbajiorgu 16; Nwanya 1). This shows that climate adaptation remains one of the remedies for Africa and Nigeria in particular. When people cannot change the reality of a warming planet, they have to adapt and the mode of adaptation remains the greatest challenge in a continent where literacy and access to information remains elusive.

The question of sustainable development is another issue of thematic concern in the play. In Act Two, Scene One, Obioma recounts 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 (Mbajiorgu 28). To mortgage the survival of an economy on one resource – oil, is not only suicidal but smacks of a notion that the country is not thinking ahead. What will become of the fate of the next generation fifty years from now when oil may no longer be what powers the world's industrial, political, economic and locomotive machinery? This is the question sustainable development is asking. Today we are seeing the effects of an industry-driven economy sparked off by the age of modernity. Emission of greenhouse gases, deforestation, and loss of natural landscape and subsequent extinction of the lifeworld are just a few possibilities that stare all in the face.

The intellectual discourse between the Professor Aladinma and Desmond in Act Two, Scene Two reveals a dimension to this trend that is increasingly becoming a reality in modern day Nigeria. Here we see in vivid pictures that the pursuit of modernity has further aggravated humanity's crisis with the environment. The impact

of climate change and its causative factors are staring all in the face even in the rural areas of Nigeria. Desmond blames it on the quest for so-called development fuelled by Western-style civilization and modernity saying: —That’s why we are discharging all kinds of poisonous substances into the atmosphere in the name of industrialization and modern technological supra-efficient machines (Mbajiorgu 37). The play also brings to light the causes and effects of climate change. Act Two, Scene Three sees Professor Aladinma using his Green Theatre Troupe to narrate the story of climate change. With his cast working in his studio, they use various dramatic techniques as a tool for raising the consciousness of the local farmers on the possible causes of climate change and the resultant effect of this crisis on human habitation. The scene of the rehearsal shows the current reality of global warming and where the world stands today. Obioma, Adaora, Ekene and Nweke engage in this dialogue:

Obioma: What have you done? Biodiversity minimization and emission of harmful and dangerous substances into the atmosphere and you know the adverse effects?

Adaora, Ekene & Nweke: We don’t.

Obioma: They are numerous, where do I even start, (counting with her fingers as she lists them). Increase in global atmospheric temperature, melting of polar ice, rising sea temperatures, sea level rise, appearance of radiation-related concerns, change in the pattern of precipitation, change in agricultural yield, proliferation of a thousand other diseases and health problems.... (Mbajiorgu 39)

This shows that the eco-crisis as it is today is the making of changing climate. This eco-catastrophe is felt in every part of the globe and more and more on African shores. Changes in rainfall patterns across Nigeria have gravely affected food supply and the rise in the cost of foodstuff in recent times is a testament to growing effect of climate change. Nigeria’s response to these ecological challenges over the years has been that of silencing the voices that dare to speak out either by military might or by monetary inducement in the name of paying compensations. Nweke reminds us in this same scene that the nation has not responded with the right antidote to arrest this situation. She states:

Look at those men carrying heavy weapons. Look at them, all around us, murdering our heroes for daring to stop the spillage of oil and flaring of gas. And there is the mighty rig, the monstrous equipment that rapes and pollutes our waters. (*Stares in the distance*). What am I seeing? (*Pause*). What are they doing? (*Runs to the imaginary scene*). Hei! Stop! Leave those little boys alone, they are too young, too young to handle that heavy military equipment. Take your fetish amulets off their necks! Can ‘t go find something better to do than turning this whole land into corpses and coffins? All you know is how to shoot and maim (Mbajiorgu 40).

The Ken Saro Wiwa saga and how he and his fellow activists were summarily executed by the then military junta comes to mind as one ponders on the scene above. The resultant militancy that grew soon afterwards, the merchants of death armed by oil thieves ferrying off stolen oil overseas is also captured by Nweke’s statement. We also see the effects of hunger precipitated by poisoned sea life. Nweke further illustrates

this, saying: Here in Ndoli, our source of living has gone forever, our fishermen have exhausted what is left of our sacred waters, carting home tender fingerlings that hold the secret of future harvest (Mbajiorgu 41).

This explains the current spate of importation of sea life. Nigeria 's waters lie empty due to the prolonged and desperate quest to harvest whatever is left from a once rich and abundant sea life. Fishermen now grovel through the filth of the waters in search of fish that no longer exist. Even the famous preserved and conserved waters that once served as an international tourist destination such as the Argungu Fishing Festival has gone with the winds because the giant fishes that were the attraction of this festival can no longer be found. The ineptitude, nonchalance and indifference of the nation 's political leadership to the reality of climate change is another subject matter in the play. In Act Three, Scene Three, Professor Aladinma captures this message in this dialogue with Desmond saying:

Look, Desmond, this country is asleep. Great leaders in other parts of the world are busy, embracing serious ideas like how to produce alternative energy sources that will replace fossil fuel. Here, our leaders are busy sharing oil wells and buying fuel tankers. (Mbajiorgu 50)

Desmond's response to this statement brings to light another dimension to the eco-discourse by exposing the nation 's lack of will to adapt to the realities of climate change. He states thus: It is despicable, most of the cities in this country are stuffed with hotels, filling stations, shopping malls, exotic mansions, and no breathing space at all; no trees, no flowers, no parks, no forest reserves and no pedestrian walk-ways. In every corner, you will find one structure or another without adequate waste disposal system, unfriendly buildings facing and suffocating one another. Yet more people are procuring cement and moulding blocks in these already congested cities (Mbajiorgu 50). A look at cities across Nigeria today reflects this reality. The slums are swelling daily as more people migrate from the hinterlands in search of a better life. As the cities grow in population, nearly non-existent infrastructure is over-stretched and this also impacts greatly on the environment.

Conclusion

One of the plays that prides as Nigeria's play on climate change is Greg Mbajiorgu's *Wake Up Everyone*. William Heim says the play has a purpose: to support impoverished farmers, to educate, to build resilience against the effects of climate change in rural Nigeria. The information on climate change is familiar, too, the belief and disbelief, the sometimes-awkward juncture of different kinds of experience, the social power implicit in different kinds of knowledge (122). The playwright in the preface to the play states that his effort was quite taxing as the subject of climate change is scientific and hence not easily adaptable to the stage (6). Mbajiorgu said he was quite surprised that despite the frightening effect of climate change, only a few plays have been produced on it globally. With climate change encroaching on us and the global future looking bleak, our world is in dire need of a paradigm shift with regards to how we relate to our planet. To guarantee the future of our world, drama is one of those

salient strategies we can employ. This is the time for action, let's join hands and bring about the needed change (Mbajiorgu 3).

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