



## Nature and environmentalism: Post-colonial eco critical rereading of selected Nigerian poems

Divya MS

Assistant Professor, Department of English, SCMS School of Engineering and Technology, Ernakulam, Kerala, India

### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to discuss about ecology and environmentalism in the selected poems of Nigerian poets Wole Soyinka, Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare in a Post-colonial Eco critical review. In literature, ecocriticism is a mode of aesthetics that deals with the nature of relation between literature and the natural environment. Its adherents investigate human attitudes towards the world as reflected in writing about nature. It is a diverse genre known by many names, including green cultural studies, eco poetics and literary analysis of the environmental. The study seeks to explore selected poems in Nigerian literature from an Eco critical perspective. The relationship between man, the environment and nature is documented in literature. Eco-critical insights are studied in the poetry of Wole Soyinka, Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare. Literature resides where creation exists, and where nature exists, life exists. Literature is an imperative tool for having a historical understanding of the relationship between man and also for determining the way man treats nature in future. In the 1990's, ecocriticism gained significant prominence in the Western academia as a domain of literary research. This does not, however, indicate that the literature of earlier periods ignored ecologically conscious concerns. Similarly, ecological scepticism seeks to explain how nature is expressed in literature and how the meaning of nature and the relationship between man and nature have changed over time as they are perceived in literature. In recent decades, the natural environment has progressively become threatened by man's activities. The chosen poems are full of varied environmental details. The poets responded to their plight in distinctive perspectives through their poetry. Extreme ecological issues such as global warming, increased pollution levels, recurrent coastal flooding, tsunami and cyclones, earthquakes and floods have culminated from the incessant cutting of trees for human use and deforestation, the use of weapons and arms, radioactive elements in nuclear power plants, industrial pollution and many more. Not only has this disruption to nature caused a catastrophic change in the atmospheric conditions around the world, but the ozone layer, our earth's defensive shield, has also been destructive. And now there is a growing and crucial need to conserve our environment and make our earth a better place to live. In Nigerian Literature, the study provides a more detailed introduction to the Eco theory from its beginnings to the present. It will also address the relationship between nature and culture, the gradual progression of ecocriticism, and its related concepts.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, eco psychology, eco poetics, ecological issues

### Introduction

Ecocriticism is literature is an analytical method that examines the importance of the relationship between literature and the natural environment. With several names, green cultural studies, eco poetics and environmental literary criticism, it is a diverse genre. Ecocriticism began to gain prominence in Western academia in the 1990s as a sphere of literary research. Ecological criticism seeks to analyse how nature is presented in literature and how, as seen in literature, both the interpretation of nature and the relationship between man and nature have grown over time. British colonial rulers formed a chain of command in many British colonies, such as Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Nigeria, in which colonial officials ruled over indigenous African leaders, who then governed the majority of the African indigenous population. Colonialism in Africa is primarily responsible for the continent's lack of cultural, social, and political development. The so-called empirical scrutiny of agricultural practices imposed in northern Nigerian communities by successive British colonial era authorities is an example of a European influenced paradigm pursued by African elites. Irrigation, forest

management, and extensive use of chemical fertilizers were emphasized by the colonial scientific scrutiny system. The system provided very little benefit for the region from economic development and disrupted the traditional farming practices that for centuries had sustained the local population. Researchers and academic investigators have largely overlooked the effects of postcolonial Nigeria's economic growth. The colonization process resulted in the realignment of power, with European trading companies imposed by the colonial authority replacing the hitherto domestic Nigerian authority centers such as Opobo's Ja Ja, Oguta's Kalabari and Ibadan's Ijebu.

"Ecocriticism speaks for the earth by rendering an account of the indebtedness of culture to nature while acknowledging the role of language in shaping the view of the world"

(Campbell 5)

Thus Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of creativity and the research there of will make a major contribution to the understanding of environmental issues and the various types of eco-degradation affecting planet Earth today. Global warming, which triggers rapid climate change

as a result of unequal human interactions with nature, is a real concern that marked the end of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Ecological issues are caused by climate change and have become an important concern for interdisciplinary / multidisciplinary studies. Under the concept of ecocriticism, multiple literature disciplines have embraced this style of work, centred on ecological issues. The ambivalent relationships between man and nature are old and either require or need to overcome and master human romantic devotion to nature. In the foreseeable future, climate change has arisen from these anthropocentric relationships. The reality of climate change is threatening every corner of the world. Yet he believes that lethal silence is a big impediment to resolving and mitigating climate change problems. Wangari Maathai is unveiling the true global warming issues that would have dramatic consequences on Africa. At the global stage, the query is answered as:

“Africa is the continent that will hit hardest by the climate change. Unpredictable rains and floods, prolonged droughts, subsequent crop failures and rapid desertification, among other signs of global warming, have in fact already begun to change the face of Africa.”

(as cited by Toulmin, 2008, p. 1).

In environmental concerns and philosophies, there are several expressions that share similar denominators in the objective of environmental conservation. For Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffan:

“Postcolonial ecocriticism and Ecocriticism are hedged about with seemingly insurmountable problems. The two fields are notoriously difficult to define not least by their own practitioners.... Thus, internal divisions...e.g. the commitment to social and environmental justice or differences... and large scale distinctions based on the attractive view that postcolonial studies and eco/environmental studies offer mutual correctives to each other turn out to... be perilous” (3). Postcolonial ecocriticism, on the other hand, is a plurality of ecocriticism that discusses: “concerns with conquest, colonisation, racism, sexism along with its investments in theories of indigeneity and diaspora and the relations between native and invader, societies and cultures” (Huggan and Tiffan 6) to explicate Eco critical modes of feminist ecocriticism, romantic ecocriticism and postcolonial Ecocriticism “need to be understood as particular ways of reading” (Huggan and Tiffan 13). Regardless of the numerous discourses on ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism, this research indicates that postcolonial ecocriticism cannot be evaluated without delving into environmental problems, and ecocriticism or eco-environmental studies cannot be discussed without discussing postcolonial concerns alongside imperialism, a metaphor that examines ideologies of supremacy and socio-history.

It is in this regard that am going to analyse some ecological problems in Wole Soyinka's poem “*Dedication for Moremi 1963*” with a post-colonial perspective. The concept of the poem is about the natural order of things, and also about bringing a child into the world. It begins with the consummation of the child, and then the birth of the child into the universe of this child, a miracle created by love. It's almost like a prayer to the Earth, and a dedication to the child. It

speaks of our human life as a whole, and also of our journey back to earth. He makes use of many poetic devices in the poem, including metaphors and a lot of imagery. The line in which he says, “your tongue arch / to scorpion tail.” is one instance that stands out as a good metaphor. A pretty metaphor compares a crying baby's tongue at birth to a scorpion tail when it flicks in terror when feeling threatened. It gives us this impression of the child being born with a venomous tongue, which later brings trouble to the parents- as well as presenting this picture of a baby's squirming tongue as it clears its lungs and wails in fear of being so unexpectedly brought into this world. There are plenty of imagery examples, including the moment where he says, “Earth's honeyed milk, wine of the only rib / Now roll your tongue into honey until your cheeks are / Swarming honeycombs — your world needs sweetening kids. Through this, we get this image of taste and touch and sight all in one, the very thought makes my mouth water. The poem is full of deep inner meanings that invoke a radiant feeling, make us wonder what it means, see these peculiar literal images that attack our senses, and give us the emotions that the poet wants us to experience. The tone of this poem is joy and wonder at the birth of a child, and all those involved can feel the spiritual journey. He relates this miracle of life to the earth, as a woman bears a child, and her fruits are brought forth by it. The sound is gentle and ties us to the earth, as if every part of this birth was nature, just like every part of any animal or plant birth. In many of his words, like baobab, roots, rain, plumb her deep for life, season, fruits, and embrace, he creates the earthy and joyful sound. They all give us the feeling of a warm earth coming together to bring this happy occasion to life. In the midst of the independence of Nigeria, Soyinka recalls the many events that took place throughout his life, such as the birth of his daughter and the opening of the first National Park in Nigeria. Soyinka writes through many frames that the poem can be read through, one being a nourishing tone for his daughter, as well as one that protects the earth and its resources. The earth can be seen as a symbol of the daughter and the daughter can be seen as a symbol of the earth. Poet gives an insight to his daughter regarding the endless parallels and metaphors about the world, and how it functions. He says, “my child- your tongue arch to scorpion tail, spit straight and return to danger's threats yet coo with the brown pigeon, tendril dew between your lips.” This is the example of Soyinka asking his daughter to be as sharp and dangerous as a scorpion but also to be caring, gentle and kind as a pigeon. He clearly shows the paternal qualities he imparts to his daughter in a manner similar to the way he tells the people of Nigeria to protect their new park. He wraps up the poem with the idea that we too must let the world depend on us in the same way we rely so heavily on the sun. We have to give earth back in the way it gives us. Soyinka evokes the past not as a dead past, but as a living one whose positive or negative results catch the present and influence the future, not historical but archetypal any more. Either to condemn those suicidal attitudes or to laud the current resistant wilderness, he evokes pastoral imagery, recalls the less anthropocentric past as a less troubled model, and projects a green future as a common dream. As the only way to face fundamental and sustainable growth, Soyinka urges readers

and listeners to take on the soil. As an expression of inextricable human ties with it, this communion with one's land at every level includes mind-set, commitment, love, and respect for oneself and all of its inhabitants. As a result of technical and scientific developments, the African holistic world view that imperialists saw as "savage" has become the global solution to the danger that climate change presents today. It's not too religious to ask "who was wild and who was civilized" if the "savage" incriminated African world view has since become a "worldwide genius" response to the climate change problem.

Tanure Ojaide is a significant Literary voice of Nigerian post-war poetry, distinguished by his recourse to the orator of his birthplace. Ojaide takes oratory as a locus of an esthetic that is conscious of rural people's arts and politics, particularly in the face of a viperous, modernity-driven establishment. The focus of his poetry on orality implies its rootedness in nature. But the point that nature in Ojaide's poetry is not merely evoked as an esthetic technique, an embellishment of what many have regarded in his poetry as an overwhelming political theme, is much more crucial to this paper. Nature is also addressed as home (the natural world, biodiversity, flora and fauna), now a forgotten home in the face of modernity and global petrodollar capitalism. In the sense of postcolonial ecocriticism, I try to point out from a reading of his poetry that the nature (environment) of the Niger Delta area from which the poet comes from is a victim of exploitation and injustice caused by large-scale oil extraction in the region, just like the people living in it; and it is no longer the pristine home it used to be. Tanure Ojaide's fifteenth poetry book, "The Tale of the Harmattan" (2007), offers poetry readers and those familiar with his work a critical insight into the Niger Delta region's bleak socio-political and economic circumstances. The plurality of the poet's concerns are oil extraction and its negative environmental and human family effects. The poems differ in style and form; however, what makes the collection a publication of substance is the poet's ability to discuss contemporary problems with a spectator's eyes, and the sincerity of an empathically inspired one. This compilation illustrates the degradation of the biodiversity and climate of the Niger Delta as a result of the extraction of oil and the marginalization of the ethnic minority in whose territories the oil is mined. In one poetry collection divided into three parts with a glossary that familiarizes the reader with the landscape, politics, Urhobo mythology, and various historical and mythical figures of Nigeria, the prolific Nigerian scholar-poet Tanure Ojaide uses bold rhetoric and a variety of techniques to claim the person of the poet as an eyewitness to historical events, especially the destruction of the destruction of the Niger Delta's ecosystem and environment as a result of oil exploitation and the marginalization of the ethnic minority people in whose land oil is exploited. He shows concern for the underprivileged and oppressed in society, whose fight for equality, fairness and justice he supports, in the course of this poetic story. Conscious of the postcolonial situation in Nigeria, his native nation, he condemns the rampant corruption that drains the country's enormous wealth. Affirming humanity, he condemns the perpetrators of genocide, as in the Darfur region of Sudan, in the strongest

possible words. The fact that what happens in Nigeria's troubled oil-rich yet poor Niger Delta region affects the worldwide price of oil demonstrates the degree of local and global connectivity, what is now described as 'glocal.' The Harmattan Tale (2007) argues that his research on the indigenous peoples (especially women) of Nigeria's Niger Delta offers an important way to revise our understanding of postcolonial theory in order to step beyond the outdated notion of colonial nations to colonialist power as sitting in multinational corporations that transcend national origin. My research combines elements from environmental, political, and socio-cultural images to analyze how Ojaide's work exposes the relationship between environmental problems and government collusion with multinational corporations, while calling for a vision of environmental justice to be accomplished by the movement of the Delta people. Ojaide's definition of historic environmental destruction and devastating oil contamination caused by multinational oil firms in the Niger Delta region is part of an interdisciplinary and multi-theoretical view of neo-colonial literature. The dialogic development of a variety of discourses is part of his complex literary style; his work involves feminist discourse and eco-critical interpretation of environmental issues, as well as post-colonial discourse that has become a defining feature of contemporary African literature. Ojaide's earlier-generation poetry and establishes him in post-colonial African poetry as a significant voice. The poems in *The Harmattan Tale* share Ojaide's love for exploring ancient African folklore with readers. In these poems, Ojaide's concerns owe much of their connection to his sensibilities and affinities towards his homeland. He does not surrender his creative inclinations or call for a Marxist agenda for political sloganeering or writing poetry, as one can admit, unaware of the genius of his imaginary complexity.

The fourth collection of poetry "The Eye of the Earth" by Niyi Ariyoosu Osundare (1986) <sup>[10]</sup>, Nigerian ecology is celebrated in this work and focus is given to the common man where it portrays one of the fiercest indictments of the people and alien destructive powers of modern economic culture. *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) by Osundare is divided into three sections: back to earth, eye-ful glances of rain songs and home call with eighteen poems. This study investigates ecological implications in such poems as "forest echoes", "The Rocks Rose to meet me", "harvest call", "Let the earth's pain Be Soothed", "First rain", "Rain-coming", "Rain drum", "farmer-born", "They too Are the Earth", "Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder" and "Our Earth Will Not Die". *The Eye of the Earth* poetry is divided into poems of varying lengths that lament the harm to the Nigerian climate for economic reasons and technological development. The poet's memories and impressions are captured by a series of confessional and lyrical poetry. The environmental views of Osundare are drawn precisely from the Yoruba world view of traditional values taken from African culture. He claims that nature promotes a coherent equilibrium between microscopic species, insects, plants and humans and calls for the protection of the environment in Nigeria from the destruction of modern civilizations. It takes a pictorial account of man-and-earth violence. In other words, in the quest for better leadership by

alternative order, *Eye of the Earth* (1986) is dedicated to reclaiming the earth that has been forced to prostrate by capitalist processes. The poetry of Osundare is based on a vigorous, sustained concern for one of the oldest producers in the world: the peasants, those who till the land, and their quasi-mythical links to the earth. His goal is to immerse the realities and multiple lineaments of Africa's underdevelopment and poet laments on the ecological collapse and future which threatens the Nigerian landscape showing the increasing level of environmental degradation by the world's mining industries. The poet's concern for the pathetic condition of the Nigerian environment and the propensity of the Nigerian ruling class to safeguard and exploit land, power and income resources at the cost of ecological balance and the well-being of the oppressed people is self-evident in this volume of poetry. The poet is concerned with both fact and the relationship between the individual and his environment. Therefore, it is not surprising that the whole volume is dedicated to poems about man engaging with nature's physical aspects. Really, the opening poem 'Forest Echoes' is a harbinger of what's to come. The poet saunters into the Ubo Abusoro forest in the poem, from where he allows his sea of memory to flood unimpeded. The first thing that strikes the poet when he enters the forest is the destruction by timber traders of the land and the trees referred to as *agbegilodo* in the poem. From this position, the poet laments the fact that, as a consequence of exploitation, these economic trees were reduced to mere stumps. There is the palm-wine tree which is described as conqueror of rainless seasons/mother of nuts and kernels/bearer of wine and life. In 'Forest Echoes,' Osundare portrays man, the ground, animals, plants (actually all of nature) interacting and celebrating at this period of universal productivity in one festive mood. It's set in the past but it's meant to reinforce our current understanding. The second poem in the collection '*The Rocks Rose to Meet Me*' is an encounter with the rocks – another aspect of physical nature. Before the rock of Olosunta, the poet is standing and waiting like Christopher Okigbo at heavens gate. And the Olosunta rock began to address the poet in the following words:

“You have been long, very long, and far  
Unwearying wayfarer,  
Your feet wear the mud of distant waters  
Your hems gather the bur  
Of farthest forests;  
I can see the west most sun  
In the mirror of your wandering eyes”  
(Osundare the Eye of the Earth, 13).

In these lines, Osundare is doing some kind of homecoming. He is a renegade and is now trying to establish vital links with the past. As he put it:

‘The Rocks Rose to Meet Me’ is a homecoming of a Kind, a journey back (and forth) into a receding past Which still has a right to live. The rocks celebrated in This section... occupy a central place in the cosmic Consciousness of Ikere people; they are worshipped and frequently appeased with rare gifts, thunderous

Drumming and dancing  
(Osundare the Eye of The Earth ‘Preface’ xiii).

The truth is that Osundare honors the rocks of Olosunta in Ikere cosmology, since they are both an aspect of physical existence and have a supernatural dimension. It is mother earth and natural laws require that the resources of nature should be used to advance society. Osundare also revolves around the cosmology of Ikere individuals in 'Harvest Call'. The rocks that rose in the previous poem to meet the poet are also named guardians of the spirit of harvest in Ikere's worldview. Thus, in this portion of the collection, all the poems speak of crops, harvest and bounty. The assumption is that the earth is a source of development and growth. Fertile and generous, it is. It will create food and resources for the good of mankind. In fact, the earth means abundance and abundance. The Earth is seen as the centre of wealth and life. Yet the rain acts as an agent or regulator between man and Earth. In his poetry, Osundare explores and praises these two facets of nature through introspection and nostalgia. Osundare also makes the suggestion in his celebration of the theme of nature that the dispossession of the world by some powers in society is capable and can actually threaten the full life of man as a human being.

#### References

1. Abdu, Saleh. *The Peoples Republic: Reading the Poetry of Niyi Osundare*. Kano: Benchmark Publishers, 2003.
2. Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Canada: Wadson Cengage Learning, 2009.
3. Ascroft B, Gareth G, Helen T. *Postcolonial Studies: The key Concepts*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
4. Byron, Lord George ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’ Ed. Frank Kermonde and John Hollander. *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 2. London: Oxford University Press, 1973, 2.
5. Barret, Lindsay. “The Niger Delta Conundrum” *New African* 483, 2009. Print. Betty Roszak and Theodore Roszak, „Deep Form in Art and Nature”. *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. Laurence Coupe (ed) New York: Routledge, 2000.
6. Bodunde, Charles. “Niyi Osundare and the Materialist Vision: A Study of the Eye of the Earth.” *Ufahamu Journal of the African Activist*, 1997; 5:81.
7. Charles E. “The Possibilities of Hope: Africa in Niyi Osundare’s Poetry”. *Lagos Papers in English* 2, 2007, 62-63
8. Chiwenzu. *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature Vol.1*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980.
9. Edward. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1993.
10. Osundare, Niyi. *The Eye of the Earth*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1986.
11. Ruecket, William. “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Glotfelty Cheryl and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia P, 1996.
12. Russell S. Sanders. “Speaking a Word for Nature”. *The*

- Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (ed). Athens: University of Georgia P, 1986.
13. Walunywa, Joseph. Postcolonial African Theory and Practice: Wole Soyinka. PhD Dissertation. Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1997.