

**CRITICISM, LITERATURE, THE ENVIRONMENT AND
POLICY MAKING IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

African literary texts, especially Nigerian literary texts have been mirrors in which we see our environment and what is going on in it. They have helped us to raise awareness about the deplorable state of our environment. With them we can also raise policy issues that will help policy makers and executors to re-engineer our environment for a harmonious relationship between her and us. Essentially, the aim of this study was to show how man has been the architect of his environmental woes, through his actions, directly or indirectly and the need to sensitize ourselves on healthy environmental practices. The study was guided by eco-criticism, which is a theoretical concept that demonstrated that it was possible to understand the environment by studying how it was represented in texts. And the selected texts examined for their reflection of environmental conditions are Amah Akwei's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*, Humphery Dibia's *A Drop of Mercy* and Wale Okediran's *After the Flood*. The method of approach to this paper was qualitative, while quantitative data was provided as evidence of the state of the environment some of the literary texts used in the paper mirrored. The study found that harmful environmental practices like improper waste disposal, building on water paths and lack of proper drainage system, are associated with recklessness and lack of enlightenment on the part of the people and government negligence in providing basic amenities such as pipe borne water, proper waste disposal system and corruption. In conclusion, the study insisted that identifying nature as an extension of us would help us to create a decent environment which is part of the essence of being human; that it was necessary to engrave into our psyche and body politic that cleanliness was next to godliness; that poverty did not necessarily translate to sub-humanity; that existing in a developing country did not mean accepting as normal, living in bits and pieces.

Keywords: Environment, Nature, Discourse Situation and Subhuman Conditions

Introduction

Nature is the physical world and everything in it. It is also the essence of a person or thing, Nature is our environment and in fact, it is a reflection of God and man. For the Romantics and the Transcendentalists, nature is the manifestation of God. They see God in nature – in trees, on hills and valleys, in water, land, etc. They believe that God reveals Himself in nature – As Ralph Waldo Emerson puts it, “Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE”(Emerson in Baym ed., 1073). Furthermore, he states that “nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us” (Emerson in Baym ed., 1090). Therefore, if nature is one with humankind then a degraded environment is a manifestation of a degraded human spirit. In other words, the environment is a reflection of man's state of development and so we get in return whatever we put into our environment hundred times over.

Ours is an ecosystem community “of both living (biotic) and non-living (abiotic –soil, mud, water, sunlight, air, cloud) things interacting with each other and their larger physical environment ...”(Khan, 24). The interest of this study is to understand by examining “the possible connections made in a text among the notions of place, people, self, society and certainly, the physical natural system, including the geographical and geological aspects of the earth”(Khan, 25). Any study of this nature is classified within eco-criticism, which as Jonathan Culler believes to be, “the study of literary representations of nature and the environment and the changing values associated with them, especially evocations of nature that might inspire changes in attitude and behavior” (146). Environmental activism before the emergence of eco-criticism focuses on deforestation, desertification and the depleting of the ozone layer through human activities. But with the emergence of eco-criticism in the 70s it became obvious that protecting the environment goes beyond the afore-mentioned. We have to first understand nature all around us before we can be properly positioned to appreciate the effect of the depleting ozone layer. But this seems not to be the case in Nigeria. Again, because we seem to take things around us for granted, especially our environment, we have to let art or literature teach us –for that is indeed what art or literature does –to understand or comprehend, for the first time, what we have hitherto overlooked or taken for granted; for “with art or literature experiences are evoked in us which we would not otherwise have had” (Beck, ed. 21); and it also enables us, out of the fullness of experience, to become conscious of that which had always been there, but which we have never been conscious of. And once we have become conscious of our environment, criticism helps us make sense of it all in terms of how to apply the knowledge so far gained from being conscious.

Criticism, Literature and the Environment in Nigeria

Let us take a practical tour of conscience down the lane of our environment: let us consider Dr Adetunji’s take on the environment in Chukwuemeka Ike’s book, *Toads Forever*:

The Child’s cry is seen as its spontaneous protest against the un-conducive environment into which it has been ejected, as compared with the warm, heavenly environment of the womb! All through life, we live in an environment un-conducive in some respects and conducive in others our entire life on earth sees us battling with our environment in an effort to make it as conducive to each of us as possible (127).

The quotation above aligns with Kent ryden’s position which “demands that we listen to the stories that people tell about the land, that we examine how they shape and have shaped the land ...”(n.p); besides by looking closely at environmental texts, we see that they point out to us the things that bring about great harm to society and they even show us how we can be healed from these maladies. In the developed countries on the one hand, we see the maladies in the green-house effects resulting from industrial pollutions, which deplete the ozone layer and expose many on earth to health hazards; on the other hand, the story is the same from Nigeria to South Africa, Ghana to Cameroon. In these African countries nature is looked upon as the other instead of being looked at as part and parcel of our being. It seems, therefore, that the state of our environment is a reflection of our level of cultural consciousness and development.

Furthermore, let us look at how a comparison was made between the developed societies in Europe and the not-so-developed ones in Africa by the narrator in Wale Okediran's *After the Flood*:

River Ogunpa, the principal river in the city of Ibadan runs across the city. The river is to Ibadan what River Seine is to Paris and the Thames to London. However, this is where the comparisons end. For unlike the Thames or Seine, River Ogunpa gable and apart from one segment of the river that is dammed for fishing purposes, it really serves no other useful purpose whereas the Seine and the Thames are about six hundred and three hundred long respectively, the Ogunpa is not more than thirty-two kilometers long. However, the inhabitants of the poorly planned city have found the river useful for refuse disposal. During periods of scarcity of portable water, the river becomes a source of water supply (62).

The graphic picture painted here shows one the level at which our environment has been the reflection of our state of development. What the work wants to achieve is to give us the opportunity of understanding our situation in comparative terms, so that we would begin to ask the right questions, as in: Why would a human being dump refuse in the river? Why is the relationship between River Seine and the French man very cordial so much so that the River reflects the values of France as country? Again why would a human being resort to a polluted river for drinking water? Is it that he or she does not know the health risks involved in such act? Or would the inability of government to provide clean water to the people push them to live like gutter creatures? Any attempt to answer these questions would reveal the source of the problems and as well as the solutions. Therefore the dismal state of the nature of our environment could be as a result of many factors ranging from lack of knowledge on the part of the people, corruption among public office holders saddled with the responsibility of caring for our environment as well as collusion of the people with government to abuse not only the environment but also the people who are part of the environment.

In *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*, Ayi Akwei Armah captures the Ghanaian situation which is not different from Nigeria: what you find obtainable in Nigeria, you also find in Ghana as can be seen from the novel. One sees that in spite of the effort of the Ministry of Health to provide containers for waste matter at strategic points all over the city to enhance its cleanliness –note that the budget for that was also over-bloated –“people used them well, so that it took no time at all for them to get full. People used them and they overflowed with banana peels and mango seeds and thoroughly sucked-out oranges and chaff of sugarcane and most of all the thick brown wrapping from a hundred balls of kenkey”(8). In fact, “people did not have to go up to the boxes anymore. From a distance they aimed their rubbish at the growing heap, and a good amount of juicy offal hit the face and sides of the box before finding a resting place upon the heap” (8). See picture 1 (Google image) below:



This is an androcentric mindset by the people who assume that nature is there for whatever interest she serves them. They can afford to dump their refuse wherever they want and they take it for granted that this is abuse directed at self. It is only literature that will defamiliarize in order to re-familiarize the people again with that which they have become too familiar and therefore take it for granted that their actions towards the environment are abusive. Another interesting thing about literature is that one does not need to be in Lagos to obtain information on the state of the environment there: an American leaving in New York gets a clear picture of the Lagos environment without necessarily being there by simply reading *A Drop of Mercy* by Humphery Dibia. Therefore, the one committed to improving one's environment, upon reading *A Drop of Mercy*, is immediately sensitized by that knowledge. Let us observe how the narrator in the work of Dibia Humphery entitled *A Drop of Mercy*, articulates the state of the environment in an area in Lagos as mirrored in it:

Much of Lagos was a slum where millions of people lived like gutter creatures. But Bariga was something else. It was a place so bestial, so filthy, so congested, so empty of light or health or comfort. The marshy flooded alleys and driveways were so littered with garbage and excrement that it reeked of sickening squalor. The breath of it could send anyone retching for days on end (19)

Now compare what is described here with the picture below. See picture 2 (Google image) below:



Furthermore, there is also something very remarkable about how the environment is portrayed in this book: the narrator does not fail to inform the reader that the problem with the environment in that Lagos area is not only the despicable state of it but also the fact that people who live there do not seem to be aware of the filth all around them:

It was in this unsightly hell-hole, in a house of easy virtue, that Miki went to prove his manhood. He may have taken notice of the

environment, but he didn't mind. Why should he, having lived at Malu Road most of his life (19-20).

The question that immediately comes to mind on reading the above citation is: why do slum dwellers not know that they live in subhuman conditions? It will be difficult to believe that human beings could be gutter creatures. Something terrible must have killed what makes them human beings. What then could that be? Compare the statement above with the picture below. See picture 3 (Google image) below:



Nigeria is a country where many things are taken for granted; here people live in nature and seem unable to identify it as an extension of themselves; at every major road, one sees open jagged spaces reflective of a degraded environment; here people seem to live at the mercy of a blind force propelling them against their will to degrade their environment or maybe they are so depraved spiritually that they simply live as gutter creatures as described in Dibia Humphery's *A Drop of Mercy*; for one sees that once there is rainfall the macadam is covered with sand and open gutters throw their contents on the roads; one sees that at every corner of the cities are slums with smelly, rotten and dead things all around as well as sewage water coursing in different directions; one sees an environment that has become breeding ground for diseases and we seem to take it for granted; one encounters taxis blocking every major road as they stop to pick passengers and we accept it as normal; one sees a general state of anarchy, degradation and filth and still we take them for granted: we refuse to see the filth here and there and one wonders why it is so. One might be tempted to attribute this state of affairs to poverty; but is poverty enough to make people become gutter creatures? It could be argued that people who are poor will likely live in slums because those are the places they could find affordable accommodation. Attributing dirtiness to poverty cannot really hold water as an argument because there are poor people who detest filth. Could it be then a lack of culture? Probably yes, because in the context of being cultured culture means a quest for the ideal; a desire to get rid of ignorance and narrow-mindedness. According to Eagleton, one of the original meanings of culture is "husbandry or the tending of natural growth" (1). Eagleton argues that by associating culture with husbandry, "it suggests both regulation and spontaneous growth" (4). In other words, "the cultural is what we can change, but the stuff to be altered has its own autonomous existence, which then lends it something of the recalcitrance of nature. But culture is also a matter of following rules, and this too involves an interplay of the regulated and unregulated" (4). As he puts it, "the very word 'culture' contains a tension between making and being made, rationality and spontaneity, which upbraids the disembodied intellect of the enlightenment as much as it defies the cultural

reductionism of so much contemporary thought”(5). All the same, this state of mind in the evolution of a people is a state of mind a nation’s body politic should assume. It is such state of mind that will make the leaders of any nation aspire for the best for their country –be it economically, politically, culturally, socially and even environmentally. When a nation’s body politic assumes such a state of mind, policies are formulated to actualize the dream and laws are enacted to execute the plans to realize the dream. For example, a nation approaches the ideal by understanding the need to have both pedestrian walk and bicycle paths while constructing roads for cars. This will ensure that the lives of the citizens are not endangered by sharing the macadam with cars and other vehicles.

See picture 4 below:



Literature and Policy Making

It has been argued above that the one committed to improving one’s environment, upon reading texts as *A Drop of Mercy*, *After the Flood* and *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, etc, for example, is immediately sensitized by that knowledge. Getting sensitized is the first crucial step. The next step will be to make the issue a public discourse. Bringing the issue on the public platform is a practical step at applying the knowledge so far gained. Getting people who are responsible for formulating policies is also very important; getting legislators to get a bill in that direction passed is equally important. Then, of course, attention has to be paid to the two possible methods of solving the problems that our environment presents:

- Infrastructural/Technological Solution
- Socio/Cultural Solution

The Infrastructural Solution

Sometimes one hears of cry of unjust treatment and neglect whenever slum dwellers’ abodes are destroyed or reclaimed or even relocated by Government. Sometimes we hear of flood disasters because drainages are blocked with plastic bags and sundry recyclable materials. The questions that come to mind are: has government done enough to provide good and sealed drainages to prevent flooding, especially in slums? Have town and urban planning laws been properly enforced in slum areas? Why can’t slum-areas be properly planned so that the environment could be clean in spite of the poverty of the dwellers? Do we need slums? Fact is that there will always be poor people; but being poor does not mean living in dirty environment or in subhuman conditions.

Socio/Cultural Solution

We are also able to solve our environmental problem by pressing for the ideal in relation to our environment. Pressing for the ideal at all times is also a quest for culture. In the 21st century the definition of culture should go beyond mere beliefs, customs, traditions etc.

However, if societies are driven by their traditions, cultures and customs, why then do our values, beliefs, ideas and customs not stop us from hate, evil, prejudices, discrimination based on ethnicity, corrupt practices, religious and racial differences? Why do they make us enemies of our own environment so much so that we will dump refuse on the streets, defecate where ever we see, block up our drainages through our unfriendly relations to our environment? May be because there is something inherently specific and limiting about our values, our customs, or beliefs, our ideas that make them unable to build us into fully evolved human beings, there is a cankerworm of ignorance imbedded in value specificity, custom specificity, and belief specificity, etc. Therefore, there must be a point where our values, beliefs, traditions, customs, etc meet for the BEING in us to begin a journey to being fully evolved, to lose its specificity; and that point where they ought to meet is the point where we begin to re-evaluate tradition, custom, etc and begin to trust more on common sense or reason; it is the point where we must begin to re-engineer our values and evolve a third culture, a meta-culture of sorts. This type of culture aspires for the ideal: it understands that cleanliness is next to Godliness. This type of culture aligns itself with the prayer the biblical Jesus taught his disciples: Thy Kingdom come ...Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. With the evolution of such a culture, we will begin to strive to develop a harmonious relationship with our environment. We will begin to aspire to attain beauty in our nature and let it radiate through our environment.

Conclusion and Recommendation

There is no doubt that art or literature reawakens our interest in things we have become too familiar with through defamiliarization. Therefore, art and literature can play very crucial roles in making us become responsive to our environmental situation. They can actually be used to provide policy guidelines on how not to relate to the environment. They could help policy makers see the need for slums to be opened up if where they are located belongs to the initial master plan of a given city or town in Nigeria. They could help policy makers see the need why urban and town planning laws should be strictly enforced; they could help policy makers see why good roads with sealed drainage systems are important in creating a healthy environment. This is possible because in the three primary texts examined, nature or the natural environment was properly represented to aid our appreciation of how we degrade our environment through our harmful practices. Although the texts have multiple categories of significations, yet attention was concentrated on its representation of our natural environment in order to make its knowledge tangible. There is no doubt that the texts have the potentialities to humanize us and make us better persons in relations to our environment. When we have been humanized, we tend to change our value systems, we tend to become civilized and it reflects even in our environment.

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