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Research Article



Nature as a Device in Tanure Ojaide's *The Tales of the Harmattan* and Flora Nwapa's *Cassava Song and Rice Song*

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Abstract

This paper examines nature as a device in Tanure Ojaide's *The Tale of the Harmattan* and Flora Nwapa's *Cassava Song and Rice Song*. It proceeds on the assumption that there is a relationship between nature and literature beyond the interest of the Romantics and Ecocriticism and that this relationship is often demonstrated aesthetically and thematically to express the human condition. With emphasis on the metaphorization of the components that make up nature, this paper deploys Peter Steiner's Machine model of Formalism which sees literary criticism as a

sort of mechanics and the text as a heap of devices. In this regard, Formalism is here deployed as a means of exploring the extent to which nature functions as a device in *The Tale of the Harmattan* and *Cassava Song and Rice Song*. It emphasizes the figurative use of nature to estrange the ordinary. This paper finds that the figurative use of nature helps to establish the aesthetic grounds that justifies the literariness of the poem. The paper also finds that the presence of nature in the poems heighten the aesthetic quality of the poems because nature readily finds expression in patterns or attributes common to all its components. Thus, the metaphorization of nature components as a means of portraying the human condition.

Keywords: Metaphorization, Human condition, Environment, Cultural materialism, Romanticization, Aesthetics, Ecocriticism

This paper examines the relationship between literature and environment, with emphasis on how several components of nature are deployed in poetry for aesthetics and mimetic purposes. Right from the classical times literature has always been defined by its mimetic functions. This is why the boundaries of literary reflectivity often find expression in virtually all aspect of human history. Ngugi observes that “a writer responds with his total personality, to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers, with varying degree of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his ever-changing society”. Beyond the social environment, is also the physical environment and its inhabitants; plants, animals and man which are constantly deployed by writers to establish setting, illustrate the connection between nature and the human sensibilities and to spice up a writing figuratively. According to Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber (2011: 417):

Since prehistory, literature and the arts have been drawn to portrayals of physical environments and human-environment interactions. The modern environmentalist movement as it emerged first in the late nineteenth century and, in its more recent incarnation, in the 1960s, gave rise to a rich array of fictional and nonfictional writings concerned with humans’ changing relationship to the natural world.

This implies that the physical environment has often served an aesthetic and mimetic purpose as far as the representational space is concerned. It has also established the relationship between man and his environment by examining how man negotiates and responds to the wealth of natural resources around him. Helmut J. Schneider (2008:92) explains that “during the Romantic period, nature in its physical appearance emerged as the privileged material for expressing a human subject emancipated from the traditional restrictions of religion and society and experiencing the unfathomable depth of the soul”. Lawrence Buell puts this in perspective when he avers that the nonhuman environment is present in literature not merely as a framing device, but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. He further argues that “human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation” (1995: 7–8). This implies that there is a strong connection between man and his environment and that as a matter of ethical function, it is necessary for a text to account for human attitude to environment.

The connection between man and nature is often expressed in literature through metaphors. Metaphors have always served as a means of establishing relationships between things, ideas, concepts, etc., they function as ramps for establishing a more concrete comparison between actions, things, ideas or concepts. Poets and writers in general always deploy metaphors to achieve stylistic and thematic effects. Aristotle, in the *Poetics* (330 BC), set the precedence when he states that “The greatest thing by far, is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblance”. As an expression of this Aristotelian notion, poets have continued to express their art and poetic vision through metaphors and all the variables they make available. *The Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research* argues that, “In its most basic form, metaphor is a rhetorical trope, or figure of speech” (509). This means that metaphors embody ideas and even essence through direct comparison; it therefore offers examples by naming one thing by another or describing one thing with the features of another.

In view of the forgoing, this paper examines selected poems in Flora Nwapa’s *Cassava Song and Rice Song* and Tanure Ojaide’s *The Tale of the Harmattan* beyond the poets’ romanticization of nature, more importantly the focus here is to explore the representation of nature as a potent means of negotiating and portraying the human condition. The argument is that nature is vital in the mimetic delivery of poetry because of its capacity to embody and signify experiences and perceptions of reality. Nature therefore provides living markers that stand as evidence of human relations with the nostalgia of the past, the reality of the present and the expectations of the future. To negotiate the figurative use nature in poetry, this paper deploys Formalism as theoretical framework for exploring the collections under study.

Formalism as Theoretical Framework

Formalism repudiates the traditional practice of building on existing literary traditions or finding meaning outside the text. It advocates a scientific approach to literary studies. For the likes of Roman Jakobson “the object of literary science is not literature but literary “literariness” (*A Glossary of literary Terms*, p.139). Formalists generally argue that, great literature is “universal.” A universal message is a message that transcends time and culture while also revealing great truth about the human condition or nature. Such a message in a work of art is best understood by paying attention to “artistic immanence” rather than “real-life motivation”. The story becomes a material for filling in the plot which is a construction arrived at through a procedure that accounts for the “literariness” of a text. Key proponents of formalism include; Victor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Victor Erlich - *Russian Formalism: History - Doctrine*, 1955, Yuri Tynyanov, John Crowe Ransom, I.A. Richards, William Empson, T.S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, etc.

This paper however proceeds on the argument of Peter Steiner (1984) in *A Readers’ Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (2005: 30). He argues “against a monolithic view of Russian Formalism, and discriminates between formalisms in highlighting three metaphors which act as generative models for three phases in its history. The model of the ‘machine’ governs the first phase, which sees literary criticism as a sort of mechanics and the text as a heap of devices. The second is an ‘organic’ phase which sees literary texts as fully functioning

‘organisms’ of interrelated parts. The third phase adopts the metaphor of ‘system’ and tries to understand literary texts as the products of the entire literary system and even of the meta-system of interacting literary and non-literary systems. This paper, however, adopts the machine model which sees a text as a heap of devices. *A Readers’ Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Fifth edition) explains that:

the first Russian Formalists considered that human ‘content’ (emotions, ideas and ‘reality’ in general) possessed no literary significance in itself, but merely provided a context for the functioning of literary ‘devices’... They aimed rather to outline models and hypotheses (in a scientific spirit) to explain how aesthetic effects are produced by literary devices, and how the ‘literary’ is distinguished from and related to the ‘extra-literary’ (pp.29-30).

This implies that devices are essential building blocks that enhance the “extra-literary” and overall aesthetic effect that a literary work expresses. In view of this, this paper examines Nwapa’s *Cassava Song and Rice Song* and Ojaide’s *The Tale of the Harmattan* as largely imbued with the trope of nature which serves not just a thematic purpose but also an aesthetic one.

Nature as device in Nwapa’s *Cassava Song and Rice Song* and Ojaide’s *The Tale of the Harmattan*

Literature has always engaged nature as a potent means of portraying the human condition. In this regard, nature serves as device; not an end in itself but as a means to an end. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* describes device as “an all-purpose term used to describe any literary technique deliberately employed to achieve a specific effect” (p, 64). This paper pays attention to the metaphoric effect created in the selected poems through nature. The aesthetic deployment of nature, for instance, is noticeable right from the title of the collections. The title “*The Tale of the Harmattan*” signals nature as the subject matter of interest in the collection. “Harmattan as a manifestation of one of the elements of nature invokes a number of images especially with regards to setting, as confirmed in the dedication page of the collection is dedicated to Hyeladzira Balami for the wonderful days in Maiduguri. Beyond this, it functions as a useful device that conveys possible images that the word *Harmattan* provokes. On the other hand, Nwapa’s *Cassava Song and Rice Song* deploys food as metaphor to express the human condition. Both collections are imbued with elements of nature which are figuratively deployed to achieve certain aesthetic and thematic effects.

In Nwapa’s *Cassava Song and Rice Song*, we see a metaphorical projection of Women in the poem “Cassava Song”. Here, cassava, being a common food crop mostly cultivated by women and children, becomes a signifier of the condition of women and children. Cassava is therefore projected in the poem as an expression femininity and childhood realities especially because it is considered second to yam in the tuber family. Thus, in celebrating cassava, the poem also celebrates the woman and children as important figures in the cultural hierarchy of being within a patriarchal setup. Through contrast, the poem compares cassava with yam which is considered as king of all crops. Womanhood is therefore elevated through the designation and celebration of the qualities of cassava in the food crop chain. The representation of cassava

as a nature device establishes a contrast between crops. Thus, the value of cassava to yam is juxtaposed with the placement of women and men within a patriarchal setup. The first part of the poem, “Cassava song” is an expression of gratitude to God for cassava:

We thank the almighty God
 For giving us cassava
 We hail the cassava
 The great cassava.

You grow in poor soils
 You grow in rich soils
 You grow in gardens
 You grow in farms

This lines also embodies the qualities of a woman. Thus, cassava in the first four lines above can be substituted with “women”. While the next four lines expresses the capacity of the African woman to adapt and survive within a culture that relegates them. The next stanza further enforces the connection between cassava, women and children.

You are easy to grow
 Children can plant you
 Women can plant you
 Everybody can plant you (p.1)

This also indicates the reality of women and children as a category that always subscribe to culture and have almost no right or privilege to ownership but are often considered answerable to husband, father, parents, guardian, etc. Children for example are considered as belonging to the entire community, just as a woman is considered a wife to the entirety of their husband’s family. In the fourth stanza the poet personae extensively and figuratively describe the tuber as “the great mother cassava” “a giver of life”. Inscribed within this encomium is also the celebration of the woman as a source of life.

In the second part of *Cassava Song and Rice Song*, “Rice song” deploys cassava as a metaphor of the influence of western dominance over postcolonial Africa. The poem is presented in a prosaic form, it narrates the story of colonialism and the invasion and dominance of the African culture by the west as captured in the first stanza

In the days gone by
 To colonize our country
 Before they impose their
 Strange government on us
 Who South of the Niger
 Heard about rice (p. 15)

This stanza points to the intrusion of the west into Nigeria and the evidence of this intrusion which is expressed in the arrival and domineering interest in rice. Rice, therefore, stands as a metaphor whose influence represents the idea of the clash of culture and the domination of the Africans culture by the western world. The poet satires rice and describes it

as “bird-like food” which cannot be compared to what //our mothers prepared//in the good old days// the poet explains that:

Cassava, yam, Maize, Fufu
With Okra and Ogbono Soups
With soups made with
Fresh and dried fish
Our mother cooked (p. 52)

Our mothers cooked
Yam and cocoyam in different ways.
They were garnished with bitterleaf
With uziza, aruru and utazi,
And many different kinds of herbs
And our fathers enjoyed their food
Washing it down with palm wine
Brought fresh from the tree
Every morning. (p.52)

These delicacies are an expression of the African culture, and like the African culture, they were more appreciated before the coming of the colonial masters and the emergence of the interest in rice which signifies the western culture and subsequently a common ground of interest in both cultures. The poet explains that:

But rice was not their staple food
Neither was it ours
Yet in no time rice was elevated
Rice became the food of the rich
It becomes food of the rich

The quick elevation of status of rice as expressed in the lines above, applies largely to all other items, ideas, concepts and practices that were dear to the whites. Thus, by way of solidarity –and more appropriately “mimicry” –to the whites Nigerian were being carried away by alien lifestyles at the expense of their culture. Rice eventually, becomes a mark of status and the most celebrated, even above yam which is supposed to be the “king” of all crops. Hence, the saying: “poor man does not eat rice”. Since rice stands out as a strong metaphor of domination and oppression. The poet uses it to explore the attitude of the European towards African culture.

The coming of rice is a metaphor in the poem and it signifies the exploitation that white merchants imported their culture into Nigeria. And even long after colonialism the value of rice as their culture still remains solid and the young are now groomed in the rice way such that they look down on their local delicacies. This manipulation and psychological re-orientation stand out as one of the strongest effect of colonialism. This is why the poet is able to portray the predicament in the society through rice. The portrayal of the introduction of rice to the African space was a deliberate action that redefined our traditional sense of taste. Beyond this,

rice soon becomes an object of social and even political interest and soon //Rice is being hoarded// in ware houses. This makes rice more important and mostly sought even more than any other product. It also becomes a steady means of exploiting the riches of the country. The poet therefore, appeals to the politicians and military rulers to ban the importation of rice. Rather than “use rice as a guise to bleed our country to death” (p. 16). The poet addresses the soldiers thus:

Ban imported rice, with immediate effect
 And let the farmers concentrate
 On planting rice, and maize and cassava and
 Yam.
 Cassava alone can sustain us
 Cassava is a merciful crop
 It is a crop that tolerates (69)

This is a call to look inward and establish the nation, rather than give in to western imperialism or the economic exploitation of the west. The poet suggests the cultivation of cassava as a replacement for rice because it has the capacity to sustain and it “is a merciful crop”. Prior to the invasion of British fatal policy on the land of African society, ‘rice’ is not known to be an inherited crop like potatoes, yam, plantain and Cocoyam. ‘Rice’ which is regarded as a foreign food, in the poem encourages cultural and ethnic disunity against the original African communal living. Most of the African delicacies are rooted in cultures and traditions to promote unity, progress and development. The values oriented attached to the African way of life has been submerged drastically due to the importation of “rice” into the land of Africans. The narrator undoubtedly sees “rice” as alien which is capable of destroying and relegating original food crops widely and render people subjugated and oppressed.

In the poem rice is depicted as a metaphor that stands in comparison with every idea, concept, practice or belief that seeks to dominate that which is tradition and indigenous to Africa. The poet submits to the foreign culture (rice) and suggest that;

Yes, if we must eat rice
 For goodness sake
 Let’s grow rice in quantum
 We have rich soil
 We have acres and acres
 Of basin where rice can thrive
 What are all these for? (p. 71)

While rice could be accepted, is a mistake of colonialism, it must not be allowed to proceed as a neo-colonial mistake. Thus, if it must be celebrated it should be indigenously produced and perhaps exported. This submission is a call to assert the African identity, expressed in the metaphor rice. It is a call to celebrate that which is ours and drop the excess baggage handed to us by the colonial experience.

In Ojaide’s *The Tale of the Harmattan*; The poem titled “the Goat Song” has an allegorical connotation, as it is certainly not a song for goats. The nature component in the title

“goat” yields itself figuratively by virtue of its rebellious nature and its relentless quest to survive. The poem in relation with the title is in fact a human lament as expressed in the glossary of the collection (p.65). The poem is imbued with components of the elements of nature as a means of highlighting the damage against environment. “Mountain”, in line 4 functions figuratively to indicate status, in line 8 the use of “thunder” establishes the connection between nature and the divine acts that guard against the excesses of men. Similarly, in line 39 the poem reads //the wind laments, its fan are burning out//, //the trees have been shaved of their coiffures//. “Wind” and “trees” are here personified in a manner that illustrates the possibilities that abound in the use nature for aesthetic and thematic purposes. In line 15 the earth is personified as a means of expressing the exploitation it is subjected to. It reads //and started to tap the earth’s underbelly//. Belly is a part of the human body that houses the food that facilitates human survival. Describing the earth, which is an element of nature, in a similar light, contradicts reality or at least our sense of it but it also feed the “extra-literary” and aesthetic demands of poetry. Other elements or components of nature deployed in the poem include; “water” (line 19), “wind” (line 39), “tree” (line 40), snakes (line 41), Iroko (line 43). These elements of nature are not merely an appreciation but they function as striking pointers that help to convey the extent to which nature responds to the crisis of human existence as captured in the poem. The use of nature in this poem transcends the treatment of nature as a thematic concern, it also establishes the emphasis on nature as a stylistic representation or description of experiences within the boundaries of nature-related figurative expressions.

In the poem “Dots within the circle” the use of nature helps to contextualise the random treatment of issues or the “dots” that dominate the “circle”. In line 1 “crocodiles” functions as an extension of the victimhood suffered by “depressed fishermen”. Rain as used in lines 5 also echoes the ultimate value of rain as an alternative natural resource in the absence a healthy river. “Parrots” in line 6, sun in line 7, “water” in line 8 and “birds” in line 9 all function figuratively to drive home the thematic interest of the poem. Thus, they function as devices used in expressing and accentuating what constitute the “dots” within the “circle”.

In the poem titled “womb-wrapped” the use of the elements of nature is again obvious all through the poem. Beginning from stanza 2, the poem reads:

In the forest birdsong after birdsong leads
The minstrel into the muse’s ample bosom.

The reference to “forest” as an expression of nature creates an imaginative framework or platform that situates the thematic concern in the poem within the context of an accessible reality. The nature-images become markers that facilitates comparison either directly or indirectly. For example:

The storm picked the sea’s spirit to litter here
In her bed of coral, mami wata smiles to herself.

As much as the storm and the sea are not human to “pick” or to have a “spirit”, they are here deployed to convey the depth of connection between nature and man to create certain aesthetic effects that “literariness” demands. In other words, the use of nature-images establishes a quick

connection between the actual subject and object of description and their figurative equivalent, since they are tangible and definitive enough.

The poem titled “Oil Remedies” celebrates oil as a “produce of the blessed palmtree”. Nature is here deployed as a source of the production of oil which by extension confers wealth. Beyond the appreciation of nature therefore, nature function as a source of life in the poem. Its cosmetic and medicinal value facilitates human existence as captured in the poem. In line 11, the produce of the blessed palm tree is described thus:

A decongestant relieving patients of acute cough,
Priceless oil the ointment that heals wounds

The figurative implication of this is that nature is life itself, this further expressed metaphorically thus: // this oil bleeding from the earth flowers light// the bleeding of the earth and its capacity to flower light is a direct comparison that bestows nature and its elements with aesthetic colourations that violates the demands of simple language. Nature thus function as simple devices unburdened with the task of facilitating or conveying the thematic concerns of the poem in a manner that meets the stylistic demands of a poem.

In the poem titled; “Tale of the Harmattan” the is expressed as a phenomenon that marks a season in nature, it is described against the background of the several features that characterise it, as a manifestation of nature it holds a lot of memory for the poetic personae in the poem; it is described as a season “like no other in the minstrel’s memory”. However, //The rubber tapper are frustrated with anaemic trees//suffering hardship and baldness from a neighbouring// business that devours whatever stands before it//. Beyond being a natural phenomenon, harmattan is here represented as an agent of destruction as much as it is a source of appreciable memories. The figurative implication of this lies in the dual representation of harmattan as an expression of nature’s elements. On one hand, it becomes instrumental as a means of telling a tale of the woes that confronts the personae’s homeland. Nature is deployed not as an end in itself but as a means to an end. The thematic interest of the poem is therefore expressed via the device of nature which establishes the narrative of the poetic personae as a projection of the reality of the personae’s homeland. Thus, within the “tale of the Harmattan” are other tales that are an expression of nostalgia and lament.

In the poem “Warri has never really been a beauty” the poem examines the deteriorating state of “Warri”. This is achieved by emphasising the damage inflicted on the flora and fauna that constitute nature. The implication of this is that nature serves as a means of measuring the beauty, woe, sanity and normalcy of human existence. In lines 29 and 30 the personae explain that // Warri has never really been a beauty// this defaced figure is not my love//. Nature is largely used in achieving this position through deliberate emphasis on the flora and fauna. The figurative uses of nature elements contribute largely to the “literariness” of the poem, the personae explains that; It is not right for birds to lose their voices at dawn;// it is not customary to rifle feathers for grenades//. These lines are a figurative expression of issues that go beyond the “birds” or “feathers”, to “losing a voice”. “Losing a voice” is a strong metaphor that suggests oppression. Thus, beyond the emphasis on the silence of bird song is the individual or collective silence which is equally as uncustomary as rifling feathers for grenades.

In the poem “without the trees” the emphasis of nature creates a picture and a sense of the threat that confronts humanity. The figurative use of nature engages the imagination and punctuates the poem with certain aesthetic appeal. In line 1 and 2 the expressions //without the trees//the wind no longer gestures playfully to me// personifies the “wind” as an element of nature with an expressive capacity. The interaction between “the tree” and “the wind” is an imaginative possibility that justifies the literariness of the poem. The poem largely, adopts contrast to justify an absence, it achieves this through the figurative use of the elements of nature. The contrast is seen in the following lines:

Without the currents

The flying-fish no longer makes sorties into my soup pot

Without the shrubs (already devoured by fire)

The dew no longer delivers to me the message of dawn

The contrasts here emphasize on the absence of an interaction which ought to define the relationship between nature and the poet personae. The question however, is whether the interaction is or ought to be deliberate in the first place. Nature here function as a literary device in expressing the literariness of the poem especially in relation with the thematic concern of the poem.

The aesthetic demand that any work of poetry is expected to meet is essentially achieved through the use of poetic devices. Poetic devices are varied and are instrumental in meeting the formalist demands of “literariness”. This paper has examined nature, not just as a theme but a device used severally to facilitate the thematic interests of the poems here studied. In other words, nature as deployed in the poems is not just an end in itself but a means to an end. The figurative use of nature in the poems calculatedly displays the aesthetic possibilities that nature provides. Within the context of the poems analyzed in this paper, nature is constantly personified to express qualities that define human existence. It aligns with the Formalists idea “that human ‘content’ (emotions, ideas and ‘reality’ in general) possessed no literary significance in itself, but merely provided a context for the functioning of literary ‘devices’”. Nature in this regard, functions as a device used to heighten the aesthetic quality of the poems.

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