



The Creative Launcher

An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

DOI: [10.53032/tcl.2016.1.2.06](https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2016.1.2.06)

Ecology in African Literatures

Aswin Prasanth

III Sem M.A

Sree Sankaracharya

University of Sanskrit,

Kalady, Kerala

Abstract

Ecological concerns have been the content of literature since the beginning of man's creativity. Ecology deals with the relations between nature and the natural. In literature, ecology illustrates the relation between nature and human nature. In ecological writing, nature has been granted the status of the great Mother by indigenous communities. Literature and nature are interlinked; nature is the outer world often portrayed in literature. Therefore it is obvious that literature and ecology are interrelated. Nature writing is self reflexive. It reveals at once the complexities of nature as well as the creative psyche. Eco factors are rarely practiced consciously in African literatures. African writers are in a "state of nature," in perfect harmony with environment. Their literature has therefore a rural orientation on the one hand and a despise of urban background on the other. There is an inherent longing for lost rustic serenity in African literatures. In African literatures, the celebration of nature and wildness is more dynamic than in any other literatures. This celebration is part of community life. African communities have close relationship with nature and conservation ecology is part of everyday practice. Writers like Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, Alan Panton, Ben Okri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, Ama Ata Aidoo and J.M. Coetzee have attempted to demonstrate these facts through their works.

Keywords: Ecology, Supernatural, Interdisciplinary, Nigerian literature

Ecology is a record of interaction between man and nature, man and man, and man and the supernatural. Ecology defines environment which is the totality of physical surroundings, living conditions and emotional situations affected by human activity. But ecology emerged as a significant field of interdisciplinary studies only in the 1960s. In contemporary critical and creative discourses ecology has come under scrutiny in such meticulous and subtle ways that the macro-status of nature gets replaced by the micro-state of environment. Today there



The Creative Launcher

An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

is an upsurge in environmental literature or ecological writing which is a substitute for the conventional nature writing. This upsurge is the consequence of ecological movements like Conservation Ecology and Romantic Ecology. Ecology has been an abiding insight for humanity on account of man's attachment to territory or landscape. Even the Biblical story of Fall and man's subsequent ouster from the Eden is a metaphor for man's alienation from nature and God.

In ecological writing nature has been granted the status of great Mother in indigenous communities. In the article "Nature Alias Ecology as Topos of English Literature," Manyclal Bhanja considers nature as "the whole of universe and every created, not man made things" (Chandra 603). He means that nature stands for the universe and everything naturally created. The word nature comes from the Latin word "natura" which means conditions of birth, quality, character, natural order, world and so on. In Eastern and Western philosophies human life is related to elements of nature. The psychological realm of man evolves from the physical realm he inhabits. This means that there is an ontological positioning of ecology in human life.

Ecology is highly relevant to the present and future of the world we live in. The word "ecology" is a combination of two Greek words "eco" and "ology" which means "nature" and "study" respectively. Hence ecology is the study of nature. As an indigenous science, ecology was adopted by several disciplines to read, interpret and narrate land history in the past. Ecologists often wrote regional land use records linking biography, sociology and agriculture. Thus early ecology was a means to examine natural and cultural interactions. As a discipline ecology deals with the interlaminating relationship of environment, its change and conservation. Ecology marks a paradigm shift in man's perspective of nature and his relationship with nature. The perspective changes from anthropocentric to ecocentric or geocentric. In this perspective humanity is only a part of the ecosystem. In ecological study environment is a material at the disposal of man's management. It is didactic in the sense that ecology reasons man how to live appropriately in a place and time preserving, contributing and recycling the ecosystem. Ecological writing is a narrative which explains this didactic.

The most remarkable problem that many ecologists encounter is to find the ways of preventing the human community from recklessly destroying the natural community. This is the principle of conservation. The destruction and depletion of nature is suicidal; it ultimately leads to the destruction of humanity. Ecology is therefore directed towards harnessing the conceptual and practical problem of discovering the ground on which the human and the natural can coexist, cooperate and flourish in the biosphere. Ecological visions are radical thoughts and they attempt to subvert the developmental economy which threatens nature and dominates the developing nations. An ecologically visioned economy aims at sustainable development of the country. The first and foremost law of ecology is: "everything is



The Creative Launcher

An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

connected to everything else.” As a radical view ecology subverts and resists dominating ideologies like capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism.

Literature and nature are interlinked; nature is the outer world often portrayed in literature. Therefore it is obvious that literature and ecology are interrelated. Nature writing has a productive past, a vibrant present and a promising future. Thomas J. Lyon., in his essay “A Taxonomy of Nature Writing,” states that nature writing is not orderly. According to him nature writing has three main dimensions: information of natural history, personal response to nature and philosophical interpretation of nature (Goltfelty and Fromm 276). The interplay of these three aspects determines all permutations and categories in nature writing.

Nature writing is self reflexive. It reveals at once the complexities of nature as well as the creative psyche. In *Writing Nature*, Sharon Cameron observes: “...to write about nature is to write about how the mind sees nature, and sometimes about how the mind sees itself” (44). Nature writers consistently examine, traumatize and stimulate their minds as well as those of their readers. Nature writing is not only a quest of consciousness but also an understanding of the quest or the consciousness. Nature permeates literature in varying ways. Writers emphasize the significance of nature in their writing. The awareness programme organized by environmentalists has led to the emergence of nascent literary canons on the one hand and the reprinting of classical texts on ecological concerns in new paperbacks on the other.

The most notable aspect of nature writing is the concern for non-humans in literature. Many postmodern texts are implicit lessons on ecological awareness and activism. The earth and its myriad forms of life remains a puzzle, still mystifying writers and philosophers. Nature is gifted with adaptive strategies far more complex than any human being can imagine. The greatest challenge of ecological writing is to examine the complexity of human life in the context of the complexity of nature. This means that nature writing consists of expressing human feelings in terms of the elements of nature.

Eco factors are rarely practiced consciously in African literatures. African writers are in a “state of nature,” in perfect harmony with environment. Their literature has therefore a rural orientation on the one hand and a despise of urban background on the other. There is an inherent longing for lost rustic serenity in African literatures. In African literature the celebration of nature and wildness is more dynamic than in any other literatures. This celebration is part of community life. African communities have close relationship with nature and conservation ecology is part of everyday practice. Writers like Amos Tutuola, Camera Lay, Mongo Bette, Ferdinand Oyono, Cyprian Ekwensi, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, Alan Panton, Ben Okri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, Ama Ata Aidoo and J.M. Coetzee have attempted to demonstrate these facts through their works. Land and soil are considered the core of economy for African communities. So they insist that no generation should lose contact with nature or surrender nature to foreigners. They believe that it is their primary duty to protect and conserve nature as a



The Creative Launcher

An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

source of present life and future progress. The struggle for possession and protection of land and soil is a constant concern in the writings of Achebe, Ngugi and Soyinka. Ngugi's *Weep Not Child*, *The River Between* and *The Petals of Blood* narrate the natives' struggle to retrieve their land, the site where their ancestors rest. In Ngugi's works landscape is a site of resistance: he expresses resistance in terms of landscapes, grains, harvests, domestic animals and so on. Ngugi's novels also portray the changing landscape in the context of urbanization and neocolonialism accelerated by the octopus grip of global capital.

The role of religion in the protection of nature is also portrayed in various genres of African literatures. Even the most mundane African literature represents an interaction between literary imagination and natural world. Wild lands, hills, scattered farms, coconut palms, mangroves, oil palms and bushes are the major eco factors found in the works of Abdul Razak Gurnah. In his work *Navigation of A Rain Maker* Jamal Mahjoub presents human life threatened by natural forces. Desert is also a dominant eco factor in this novel. In her writings Zimbabwean Krishna Rungano invokes environment in the form of grass, trees, butterflies and weather. Her verses are loaded with images of life giving powers of nature. The poetry of Okot P'Bitek and Jonathan Kariara are rich in ecological imagery. They express the complex beauty of nature to underline the nature as a regenerative force. Tropical forests also form a major eco factor in African Literatures. Many writers have attempted to valorize the forests as possible sites of development in their works. But African literature never blindly celebrates forests. Forests are also used as a source of death and impotence in some works.

Nigerian literature is the most productive of African literature. In order to explain the influence of ecology in Nigerian literature, it is significant to understand the climatic and geographical conditions in Nigeria. Nigeria is one of the largest and most populous countries of West Africa. It stretches from the forests and swamps of the coast in the south to the edge of the Sahara in the north. It is a nation which extends throughout a wide range of latitudes. These circumstances confer a great variety in landscapes. Nigeria is bordered on the east by Cameroon and Chad, on the north by Niger, on the west by Benil and faces Atlantic to the south. Nigeria has a long coastline. Plains extend across the north in Nigeria. In the interior of the country is the Joss plateau. The highlands are bounded by steep clips and cut into by deep gorges on the southern and eastern slots. Rivers branch out radially in all directions throughout the plateau. South of the Niger, the Nigerian plateau falls away and it is marked by numerous rivers flowing into the Atlantic. This results in the formation of a broad alluvial coastal plain that includes the extensive Niger delta. With its many lagoons and marshes, the delta is a difficult environment for human beings to use. To the east of Niger, the Nigerian territory is marked by a complex spine of Cameroon mountains. The northeastern part of Nigeria, drained by Komadugu basin, slopes away towards the lake Chad.



The Creative Launcher

An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

The climatic conditions in Nigeria are highly diverse. In summer, warm, wet air masses from the sea are pulled in by a low pressure area that forms in the Sahara. In winter, dry wind blows from the Sahara. In Nigeria there are three general climatic regions. On the coast and in the Niger valleys, the prevalent climate is tropical with monsoon features and minimal temperature changes. Precipitation is extremely abundant along the Niger delta. The influence of monsoon weakens in the north central regions. This causes a high pressure in the Sahara region. In Nigeria there are two identifiable rainy seasons. This is a tropical Savannah climate. Seasonal changes in temperature are very high in Nigeria.

Mangrove communities are common in the Niger delta and coastal lagoons. The Southern plains are covered with rain forests containing many tall trees like mahogany, abura and rubber. The forest reaches farther north along the rivers, creating the “fringing forest” with its characteristic mahogany, kapok, raffia and wild coffee. On the inland plateaus is a densely wooded wet Savannah. Even the farther north, this becomes more open with occasional baobabs, thinning out into the Sahelian steppe. The dense forests of Nigeria contain a great variety of woods and two palms- oil palm and bamboo palm not found in the Savannah region.

The ecology of Nigeria has influenced its life and literature to a great extent. The oil palm has great significance in Nigerian literature. Amos Tutuola’s novel *The Palm Wine Drinkard* is the first novel to portray oil palms. Ever since oil palms form a constant presence in all works of Nigerian writers. They play significant role in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Soyinka’s *The Road* and *A Dance of the Forests*. Rural setting is another characteristic of Nigerian writing. It is no accident that the most widely read African novel, *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe, is set in the village of Umuofia, which means “children of the forests” in Igbo language. Again Achebe’s second novel *Arrow of God* has its setting in the Ibo village of Umuaro. Ntiyoung Udo Akapan’s *The Wooden Gang* is a narrative of life in a village called Ibibioland. Works by Nigerian writer Timothy Mofolorunso Alerko like *One Man, One Wife* and *Krisman and Foreman* are set in Yoruba village. The rural setting of Yoruba is found in the plays of Soyinka. Yoruba landscape dominates action in his play *The Lion and the Jewel*. In this play Soyinka presents two contrasting landscapes: the mountain and the railroad. The former represents tradition and the latter symbolizes modernity. The conflict between tradition and modernity is expressed in the contrast between the two landscapes and also that between the old chieftain Baroka and the young school teacher Lakunle who loves Sidi. Soyinka is the best example of the writer who landscapes resistance in his plays. Soyinka also portrays culturally alienated African subjects like Lakunle in his plays. Soyinka has a concept of an authentic African. In his view the wily and polygamous Baroka is different from the pretentious and ineffective Lakunle who considers himself an advocate of progress. Soyinka says that Lakunle suffers from “externally induced fantasies of redemptive transformation in the image of alien masters...a victim of the doctrine of self negation” (*Myth* xii). Lakunle



The Creative Launcher

An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

blames Baroka of having foiled the public works to build a railway but Baroka fears that progress is a unifying, homogenizing agent: “I do not hate progress, only its nature/Which makes all roofs and faces look the same” (*The Lion* 47). Baroka’s reaction to progress is kind of conservation. Soyinks brings forth his anticolonialist ideologies in *The Lion and the Jewel*, reflecting his politics of conservation of culture. It is also found in the novels of James Ene Henshaw and John Munonye. Eastern Nigerian villages form the setting of Elecchi Amadi’s novels. Henshaw writes in Efile language and his novel *The Jewels of the Shrine* tells a village folk tale in terms of rural elements. Thus many Nigerian works typify African village life and its variety and richness as self sustaining forces.

Ben Okri, the Nigerian novelist won the Booker Prize for his novel *The Famished Road*. Though it is a typical postcolonial novel, the novel can also be interpreted from the perspective of ecology. From the ecological perspective, the narrator-protagonist Azaro deconstructs the borders separating human beings and spirits. Azaro is an abiku. Abiku is a spirit child. An abiku is born when a child dies early and haunts its mother compelling her to enable it to be reborn. In Okri’s novel Azaro refuses to leave this world and remains in the liminal space between the earth and the world of spirit. Thus Okri’s locale is a multidimensional universe comprising of terrestrial and spiritual world. *The Famished Road* is a metaphor for both the roads and hunger of Nigeria. Nigeria is infamous for its dilapidated roads and unabated hunger. Okri narrates the story of Azaro in the liminal world in terms of landscape and hunger. In fact he has made an attempt to landscape hunger and construct a hybrid postcolonial identity through the spirit child Azaro.

. The tropical forests of Nigeria with its tall trees have influenced many authors. The forests play a major role in some works of Nigerian writers. At times, they grow from a silhouette to a central character in some works. The Nigerian rainfall also has an impact on Nigerian poetry. For example, John Pepper Clark’s poem “Night Rain” recalls a typical stormy night of the riverine areas of Nigeria. The poetry of Osundare, Onwudinjo and Enekwe is preoccupied with space, environment and natural conditions. The poems of Chin Ce, Joe Ushie and Adewale also have dominant presence of nature. The Nigerian swamps find a dominant place in Soyinka’s *The Swam Dwellers*. Nigerian ecology dominates the works of Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi and Elechi Amadi. In Ekwensi’s *Burning Grass*, eco factors like grasslands, plains, cattle and river Niger play major roles. Dance is yet another feature of Nigerian works. It is through dance that the authors bring into their works the rhythm and music of nature. The music in nature is internalized by the writers and brought out through their works.

The naturals in Nigeria constitute very dominant motifs for its literature. Nigeria is a land of extremities, either in the case of geographical structures or climatic conditions. These extremities in eco conditions in reflected in its literature too. In Nigerian literature we find the use of extreme thoughts and emotions. These are often expressed with the help of extreme



The Creative Launcher

An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

ecological features. Nigeria's leading dramatist Soyinka explores this extremity in terms of land and climate in his plays. He has shown that there is an intimate and symbiotic relationship between the natural and the physical environment.

South Africa is the largest nation in the African continent. J.M. Coetzee is a prolific writer influenced by the African wilderness and African landscape. Coetzee's *Disgrace* for example, deals with the alienation he as well as his protagonist faces on the land he lives in. The protagonist David Lurie and his daughter Lucy have diametrically opposite views of the land. Lurie wishes that Lucy's longing to have a life there to be a passing one: "Poor land, poor soil, he thinks. Exhausted. Good only for goats" (64). The soil and land are exhausted and fit only for animals. The land and the life of the country bore him and he doubts the decision of Lucy to stay on the land: "She had fallen in love with the place, she said. She wanted to farm it properly" (60). Every site of the land and its people brought only a feeling of disgust in Lurie. Though Lucy is enthusiastic about the land, she knows that the land provides her "no higher life. This is the only life there. Which we share with animals" (74). A life shared with animals is the disgrace of a human being. Identification with exhausted and disgusting land and subhuman species leads to alienation.

The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to the predicament of man in a threatened natural world. Though ecological literature was ignored and denigrated in modern criticism, it flourished on a widely shared sense of threat outside the ivory tower of literary establishment. Ecological literature underlines the fact that contemporary ideology which separates human beings from their environment is demonstrably and dangerously reductionist. It is true that the natural world is real, beautiful and significant. Nature writing has therefore emerged as a "literature of hope" in its assumption that the elevation of consciousness definitely leads to wholesome political change.

Works Cited

- Bhanja, Manyclal. "Nature Alias Ecology as Topos of English Literature." *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Theory and Practice*. Ed. N. D. R. Chandra. New Delhi: Authors' Press, 2005. Print.
- Cameron, Sharon. *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal*. Oxford: OUP, 1985. Print.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1999. Print.
- Dathorne, O. R. *African Literature in Twentieth Century*. London: Arnold Heinemann, 1979. Print.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.
- Lyon, Thomas J. "A Taxonomy of Nature Writing." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in*



The Creative Launcher

An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

Literary Ecology. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.

Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1991. Print.

Soyinka, Wole. *The Lion and the Jewel*. London: OUP, 1962. Print.

- - -, *Myth, Literature and the African World*. London: CUP, 1976. Print.