

TIV ORAL POETRY AND THE ENVIRONMENT: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF SELECTED TIV BUSH BURNING SONGS

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which poetry explores the problematic interaction between man and environment at a period when ecological problems pose a threat to the word ecology. The selected songs illustrate the degradation of the environment by bush burning impact on the vulnerability of the Nigerian bionetwork and also on the livelihood of Tiv communities. The theoretical framework used in the paper is ecocriticism. It addresses the representations of nature, discusses specific issues relating to the ecology and analyses the treatment of nature expressed in the selected Tiv bush burning songs. It also tries to link nature to the plot and other elements in the selected Tiv bush burning songs. Furthermore, it attempts an ecocritical examinations of environmental exploitation, as well as the destruction of human and non-human habitats. The research findings reveal that environmental degradation and the consequent impoverishment of the lot of rural communities in Nigeria have inhibited Nigerian natural environment from enhancing its socio-economic development and the survival of the Tiv people. The paper contributes to knowledge by preserving the Tiv tradition with attention on selected Tiv bush burning songs which otherwise are endangered by the negative influence of western civilization. The paper has also contributes to knowledge by showing that Tiv oral Poetry is also a fitting discursive medium used to contribute to the ongoing debate about ecological issues in Nigeria.

Keywords: Tiv Poetry, Bush Burning Songs, Ecosystem and Environment

Introduction

As a medium of expressing views about man and his social existence, Literature in general and Tiv oral Poetry in particular, is concerned with the survival of mankind and the planet (earth). In this light, Literature focuses on discourses about the ecology and the fate of man in a modern, integrated world in which natural resources are central to existence. According to Bhagwati and Mittleman, postulations on ecological matters and literary discourses have emphasised that nature is endangered and the exploitation of natural resources for the free market globally contributes to the destruction of the natural world, especially of periphery nations (847). This generates anxiety over increased inequality, exploitation, under-development, as well as ecological degradation such as, loss of biodiversity, erosion, global warming, desertification, flooding, waste, and loss of marine life.

Poetry in general and Tiv poetry in particular encapsulates the consequences of the interface between nature and man's activities in an epoch of environmental crises. To Glolfelty, in recent times, natural disasters have not only compelled human societies to reappraise the significance of nature for human survival but also led to the realisation that any harmful human action against nature will yield destructive consequences for humanity (xix). The growing concern with the dysfunction of the ecology in Tiv society necessitates the deployment of literary works to evaluate environmental concern, thus giving literature a new area of focus. This is to raise awareness on the need for sustainable relationship between man and his environment. It is in this regard, that this paper utilises a contemporary literary theory called Ecocriticism which links literary criticism with ecological issues to evaluate the selected Tiv bush burning songs.

Ecological and literary discourses have emphasised that nature is endangered and the exploitation of natural resources for the free market globally contributes to the destruction of the natural world of periphery nations. This paper is premised on the argument

that as a medium of expressing views about man and his social existence, Literature in general and Tiv bush burning songs in particular, are concerned with the survival of mankind and the planet (earth). Through this approach, the study expands existing knowledge on the selected Tiv bush burning songs which is limited to the evaluation of the songs as oral performances, and as advocacies for radical change.

The aim of the study is to do an ecocritical study of selected Tiv bush burning songs. The study circumscribed by the affinity between literature and society in an era of massive exploitation of natural and human resources for economic purposes in the process threatening the planet's basic life support systems. In view of this, the objectives of this paper are to: show that Poetry is a fitting discursive medium employed by poets to enunciate their discontent with the status quo and contribute to the debate about ecological issues in Nigeria.

The significance of this study is the deployment of insights from Ecocriticism to the evaluation of the concerns of selected Tiv bush burning songs with environmental degradation. This approach illustrates that the selected Tiv bush burning songs are keenly aware of the relationship among man, animals, plants and the exploitation of Nigeria's unnatural and natural resources.

Conceptual Review: Environment and Ecosystem

Environment refers to surroundings in which living beings live and non-living things exist. Environment belongs to all living beings. It plays a major role in the healthy living of human beings. Since environment is a combination of physical and biological factors, it contains both living and non-living components. Everyone may be affected by environmental issues like global warming, ozone layer depletion, energy resources, acid rain, nuclear accidents and loss of global biodiversity.

Ecosystem is a part of natural environment consisting of a community of living beings and the physical environment. It is the

interaction between the living community (plants, animals, and organisms) and the non-living community (soil, air, and water).

The Tiv People and Tiv Oral Poetry

According to Bohannan Paul and Laura Bohannan, the Tiv people form the largest ethnic group in Central Nigeria and are the major ethnic group in Benue State. At present, they account for more than half the population of the State. They live on both banks of the River Benue about 150 miles from its confluence with the Niger River (9). He maintains that they are not found only in Benue State but are spread to neighbouring states like Nasarawa, Taraba, Plateau, Adamawa, Cross River States and the Republic of Cameroon. And the people are mostly farmers. The language spoken by the Tiv people is called Tiv language. According to Yina Godwin, the language is of Bantu origin and belongs to the Benue- Congo group of languages.

Tiv oral poetry is a dynamic art form like the poetry of most African ethnic groups. It could be sung, chanted or intoned and the performance is usually accompanied by music and dancing. Most of what is referred to as Tiv oral poetry is in song form. This does not however mean that the poetry lacks poetic qualities. The language used, the structure and the syntactical arrangement in Tiv songs are poetic and qualify them to be seen as poetry.

Tiv oral poetry reflects a multiple of complex themes that cover every facet of their life. The Tiv have praise songs, war songs, protest songs, nuptial songs, religious songs, abusive songs and bush burning songs which is the focus of this study. Tiv poets do not necessarily undergo years of training under experts to become professionals as is the case with other ethnic groups in Africa. Among the Tiv, according to Adeiyongo, the poet – “*Ordughun amo*” is said to have been given medicine ground from a tree (jiagba) known to facilitate memory as an induction into the art. Others may be given some forms of protection against evil spirit and enemies in form of charms or cow or buffalo tails, which they

wave in the air while singing (18). Generally, the Tiv value songs so much that there is hardly any occasion in Tiv land that does not call for singing and dancing – war, marriage, promotions, politics, hunting, death and baby-sitting among others.

Empirical Review

William Rueckert in his essay, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, illuminates “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature (107). This is because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world”. In this enterprise, the relationship between literature and nature are scrutinised in terms of ecological concepts. Art and ecology, thus, attempt to find common ground between humankind and nature, to show how they can coexist in various ways, because environmental issues have become integral parts of man’s existence. This is one challenge that Ecocriticism addresses in its efforts to find a more environmentally conscious position in literary studies.

Also, Betty Roszak and Theodore Roszak in “Deep Form in Art and Nature”, articulate a pattern for artistic ecology in which interconnectedness comes from “the truth of the imagination” where “the artist, like a tree, drinks up nourishment from the depths and from the heights, from the roots and from the air, to bring forth a crown of leaves...” (223-26). In view of this, Literature focuses on discourses about the environment and the fate of man in a modern integrated world to which natural resources are central to existence.

African mythology also portrays ecological awareness in riddles, proverbs, epics, songs, rituals, and myths. For Owomyela Oyekan “Myths” explain the “interrelationships of all things that exist and provide for the group and its members a necessary sense of their place in relations to their environment and the forces that

order events on earth” (2). Thus, African ethos are materially and spiritually incorporated with the environment.

The environment has always played a vital role in African existence thus African literary works reveal opinions which can assist mankind live in synchronisation with the ecosystem. As Buell notes in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, “our present day interest in Ecocriticism is at least partly the product of a longer history predating both modern and Romantic contexts. If environmental criticism today is still an emergent discourse it is one with very ancient roots...” (2). This undertaking shows that since prehistory, literature and the environment have always shared a close correlation – a continuum as evident in the Medieval period, the Renaissance, the Romantics and African mythology over time in the furtherance of environmental concerns. The study therefore revealed that, environmental degradation and the consequent impoverishment of the lot of rural communities in Nigeria have inhibited Nigerian natural environment from enhancing its socio-economic development and the survival of the people.

Theoretical Framework

The environmental crises of the 21st Century have given rise to a literature that signifies the fragility of the interrelatedness of all life forms thus underpinning the frailty of the ecosystem. This development necessitated the emergence of Ecocriticism – a new approach which forms the increasing presence of discourses on the tension between environment, power, and consumerism in the postmodern world.

According to Slaymaker, for some African critics, “Ecocriticism... appears as another hegemonic discourse from the Metropolitan West...”. The suspicion that environmentalism in all its various shades of green is a “white” thing borne out by the explosive growth of research and participation by white scholars in and outside Africa (684) has contributed to the low visibility of ecocriticism in recent African writing. To this end, a pioneer of

Ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell postulates four principles in appraising any literary composition ecocritically. These are: the environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history (33).

Ecocriticism has much to offer “the applications and theory that Ecocriticism develops... broadens understandings of how modern cultural assumptions about the environment have developed” (31). Addressing the representations of nature focuses on specific issues relating to the ecology and analyses the treatment of nature expressed in the selected Tiv bush burning songs. It also tries to link nature to the plot and other elements in the selected Tiv bush burning songs. It finds out whether the values represented in the selected Tiv bush burning songs are consonant with “green” thinking and if literary metaphors for land have an impact on how humankind deals with the land.

An Ecocritical Analysis of Selected Tiv Bush Burning Songs

The origin of ecological crisis is crucial for comprehending the ecocritical study of the selected Tiv bush burning songs. There is no doubt that the present dimensions of ecological crisis in the society extends to the economic, political, cultural and social levels. The crisis is circumscribed by the upsetting of ecological systems, the threat to renewable resources, the running out of non-renewable resources, the rapid downgrading of the environment and the quality of life. This can be seen in the song entitled “Mgbejime” (Down Fall) :

Tyô yam toho nanden ne yange
U va a mgbejime
Uya kpishi gba usu hia bee.
Iyia hia vindi vindi

My kinsmen, this bush burning has
 Brought down fall
 Many homes were burnt, many other
 The land has damage completely

In the above poem, houses are burnt, affecting the land. It has been established that the ecological crisis, the greenhouse effect as well as the

consequent climate change – which is the most important manifestation of this crisis degenerates rapidly. In essence, however, ecological crises are fundamentally created by the systematic orientation towards regarding the natural environment as means of production in modern and post modern thinking and there is landmark in the development of this orientation as outlined in the Classical Greek humanism. The Classical Greek humanism emphasises the inherent superiority of humans over other species and nature and defines man as a rational animal. The Greeks held that humans in virtue of their rational capacities have greater value than any non-rational being including nature. “Rationality is the key to human superiority over animals as noticed in this song entitled “Toho Nanden Ka Kwagh Dedoo Ga” (Bush Burning Is Not A Good Thing) :

<i>Ityô yam Tiv ooo</i>	My kinsmen Tiv ooo
<i>Me kaa ne zege kwagh u</i>	I shall tell you a great thing that
<i>toho nanden u va amin ken tar Tiv ne</i>	Bush burning has brought
<i>Toho nanden ka kwagh dedoo ga</i>	Bush burning is not a good thing
<i>Yange genev la tsôô akoo kôr</i>	One day, children craved for meat
<i>Mbayev tso ve nande toho or ve</i>	So they set bush ablaze so as to catch games
<i>Toho yughul kpa ishôso I ve soo la</i>	Bush burned but the games they desired
<i>Lu ker ga Kpa or nande vindi vindi</i>	Were not there. But they burnt completely

In the above poem, the children focus more on what to eat and neglect the consequences of this bush burning on the environment. Therefore, having strong interest for human welfare alone and downplaying the importance of the non-human permits the despoliation of nature.

Bush burning not only poses health hazard to man alone but also affects the environment in general via the emission of the various pollutants. This is shown in this song entitled “Dooshima Hingir Awambe” (Love Turns To Blood):

<i>Tyo yam Tiv ooo</i>	My kinsmen Tiv ooo
<i>Toho nanden doo ga cii.</i>	Bush burning is not good at all.
<i>Dooshima u toho, iyia, man ior</i>	The love between bush, land and human
<i>gba awambe mlyam gedee.</i>	Has turn to blood

<i>Anongu Iordye ooo</i>	Weeping everywhere
<i>Dooshima gba awambe</i>	Anongu Iordye ooo
<i>Kwagh u eren kpa lu ga.</i>	Love has turn to blood
<i>Usu ndiar vindi vindi</i>	There was nothing to do
<i>Awambe awambe</i>	Fire licked everything, Blood blood

To Stern, the major air pollutants that are emitted during bush fire are carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, oxides of nitrogen, oxides of sulphur, particulates and some hydrocarbon which result due to incomplete combustion of cellulose materials (47). The ability of air pollutants, especially particulates, to reduce visibility is well known. The visibility reduction results from light scattering other than obstruction of light. From the data above, it is glaring that particulates, carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, oxides of nitrogen a negligible percentage of oxides of sulphur are the major pollutants of bush burning and they all have various effects on man and his environment, like reduction of visibility by particulate matters, especially during periods of air stagnation and causing some respiratory diseases. That is why in this song, entitled “Dooshima Hingir Awambe” (Love Turns To Blood), the poet explains thus:

<i>Usu usu jen jen</i>	Fire, fire, hunger, hunger,
<i>Inya i yange i doo iyiagh</i>	The land that was once fertile for plants
<i>kpa hingir daang mmm</i>	Became infertile mmm

Apart from the soil destruction and desert encroachment caused by bush burning. Judges insists that, it has also had a marked increase in global warming due to the emission of gases which have tremendous effect on the ozone layer and also formation of acid rain which deteriorate plant life, damage calcium containing soils and also increase the acidity of surrounding lakes and rivers (28).

Stern maintains that, bush burning is one of the major air pollutants that is emitted during bushfire and these include carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, oxides of nitrogen, oxides of Sulphur, particulates and hydrocarbon as a result of incomplete combustion of cellulose materials (47). These do not only pose health hazards to man alone but also affect the environment in general. Apart from soil

destruction and desert encroachment caused by the effect of bush burning. It also has a marked increase in global warming due to the emission of gases which have tremendous effect on the ozone layer. Judges insists that, there is also the formation of acid rain which deteriorates plants, damages calcium in soils and also increases acidity of the surrounding lakes, rivers and soils (47). Edwin, observed that rampant bushfires cause significant damage in all the ecological zones, and is most pronounced where the savannah vegetation predominates and the incidence also remains the highest (15). This is reflected in the poem entitled “Dooshima Hingir Awambe” (Love Turns To Blood):

<i>Akor a yange lu air a inyamkyume</i>	Forest that were hiding places for wild
<i>Yelen kpa hia bee purututu.</i>	Animals were completely burnt.
<i>Pe yelem Kpa kera ngu ga</i>	Where to refuge is no more.
<i>Toho nanden ve ooo</i>	Bush has burn ooo

The changes brought in by physical environmental process on the earth’s surface occur in such a way that equilibrium is maintained through negative feed-back mechanism if man does not interfere with the natural state of physical environmental process. Now man has emerged as a very important geomorphic agent and is capable of changing the earth’s surface at a much faster rate than many of the natural processes. Thus it is important to study the role of man in changing the environmental processes because these processes affect the energy system, hydrological cycle, chemical element cycle, and sediment cycle which in turn maintain unity of biosphere ecosystem. The external environmental processes originate from the atmosphere and are basically related to solar energy which affects the basic elements of atmospheric processes. Man, by affecting solar radiation and thus the heat energy, may affect the processes of precipitation and air circulation which in turn would affect the environmental processes (Bhatia, 2002).

An environment is said to be ecologically sustainable when it conserves biological diversity and the life supporting systems for the

use of present generation without compromising its use by the future generations. Desertification has resulted in alteration of the eco-systems in the arid and semi-arid zones, which affects the habitat, habitat composition, abundance, distribution and relationships in the communities of living organisms.

In the light of the above, the selected Tiv bush burning songs show the horror unfolding between humans and nature, as societies become increasingly detached from their rural roots and traditions.

Research Findings

This study demonstrates that the concern with Nature over time is different from the contemporary concerns of literature with environment - degradation and exploitation of natural resources designates a deliberate degradation of nature and space for the specific purposes of exploitation. On this backdrop, the selected Tiv bush burning songs examine the poets' opposition to environmental destruction and the exploitation of the Nigerian ecosystem along with the desire for a sustainable relationship between man and his physical habitat. Through these songs, it revealed that environmental degradation and the consequent impoverishment of the lot of rural communities in Nigeria have inhibited Nigerian natural environment from enhancing its socio-economic development and the survival of the Tiv people.

Conclusion

Poetry and environment have shared a close relationship as evident in the works of artists down the ages. Literary critics examine how the connection between environment and society is textualised in literary works. In this regard, increasing environmental devastation in the twenty-first Century and the popularity of postmodernism agitate eco-critics who see postmodern dismissal of the "real" as complicit in the destruction of nature. Eco-critics maintain that "postmodernism re-creates the world as text, thereby destroying

the world in the process". In this context, the human drive to assert superiority over the physical environment has manifested in myriad of contexts. These have evolved from the will to survive or the desire to have access to natural resources, to the rise of empires and the excessive equation of land. In this regard, the paper acquiesces that the "move from the preservation of nature to malignant global capitalism, highlights that, capitalism has turned everything into a commodity with a hitherto unimaginable increase in production and productivity and mankind's insatiable pursuit of growth and profit has perpetrated damage on nature on a massive scale.

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