

## Interconnectedness Between Culture and Nature: Eco-poetics in Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*

Sunday Michael OYELEKE

Department of English and Literary Studies, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Email: sundaymichaeloyeleke@gmail.com

### Abstract

In the spate of global warming that is causing toxic climate changes as a result of the industrial revolution and urbanization that have influenced man's culture (lifestyle), many scholars and ecologists have invigorated the need to preserve nature via scientific books, journals/articles, movies, novels, etc. However owing to the widely believed complexities in poetry, many do not still realize that poets all over the world (and Nigeria to be specific) have also responded to ecological issues by using poetry to create ecological consciousness. It is on this basis that this paper explores the poetic opus of Niyi Osundare, *The Eye of the Earth*, as it regurgitates the eco-poetic principle of interconnectedness between man and nature. The study aims to add to the existing knowledge of literary discourses in general. The study adopts a qualitative methodology by collecting data from books, journals, articles in libraries, and cyberspace. The study finds that the collection largely amplifies the degradational state of the earth, precisely in the Southwestern region of Nigeria. It also discovers that the collection shows the interconnectedness between humanity as a microcosm and nature as a macrocosm.

### 1. Introduction

This paper attempts a critical study of Niyi Osundare's collection of poems titled *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), concerning eco-poetics or ecological consciousness. It selects excerpts from some poems, structured into three movements in the collection that challenge its readers to environmental action and promote changes in the ways humans with their lifestyle treat nature. It also describes the local images used in the collections to show the interconnectedness of culture (microcosm) with nature (macrocosm), and how they both affect each other.

The term "Nigerian Poetry" defies a precise definition. However, this paper circumscribes Nigerian poetry as poetic verses about Nigerian societies with Nigerian tropes or thematic concerns, by a Nigerian poet and largely for the Nigerian people irrespective of the choice of diction. In other words, this description of Nigerian poetry includes poetry largely written in the English language as the country's lingua franca. It is on that basis that this paper considers the selected collection under the wider umbrella term of Nigerian Poetry.

Niyi Osundare is often classified to be among the second generation of Nigerian poets that emerged during and after the Nigerian civil war (1966-'70). This generational classification does not have a clear-cut demarcation as a poet like Wole Soyinka may be found within all three generational poetic forms and ideologies. Similarly, some of Niyi Osundare's works may be described to have transcended the second generation of Nigerian poets to the third generation or contemporary Nigerian poets –sometimes referred to as the Rising Voices. Nonetheless, Osundare is widely considered to be among the classification usually referred to as "the second generation of Nigerian poets" who are also sometimes described as the Alter-Native poets. The second-generation Nigerian poets provided an alternative or opposition to the first-generation's Eurocentric poetic forms by presenting a "Native" form that the common Nigerian people can identify with and comprehend.

Niyi Osundare is born in 1947 in Ikere-Ekiti, Ondo State where he had his early education. He obtained a degree in English at the University of Ibadan, in 1972. He had his M.A from Leeds University in 1974, and his Ph.D. in 1979 from York University, Toronto. He has published other collections of poetry which include: *Songs of the Marketplace* (1983), *Village Voices* (1984), *A Nib in the Pond* (1986), *Songs of the Season, Waiting Laughters* (1990), *Tender Moments* (2006), etc. *The Eye of the Earth* has, since publication in 1986, been awarded the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Prize for poetry, and the Commonwealth Poetry Prize.

The collection was published at a time when there was a flourishing ecological movement with various groups showing a general global concern over the poor state of the earth in which the modern human lifestyle or their poor treatment of nature (through industrial pollution, deforestation, desertification, etc.) is highly regarded as the causal factor to the poor state of the environment. Osundare buttresses the inspiration for the collection in the preface he wrote for the collection this way:

The vision which provokes this question is, in the main, not very distant from that which has fired The Green Peace, The Women of Greenham Common, Operation Stop the Desert, The Save the Amazon Committee, and the millions of human beings who frequently troop out in European and American cities, urging that we give the human race priority over the arms race. Waters are dying, forests are falling. A desert epidemic stalks a world where the rich and ruthless squander earth's wealth

on the invention of increasingly accomplished weapons of death, while millions of people perish daily from avoidable hunger. Tomorrow bids us tread softly, wisely, justly, lest we trample the eye of the EARTH. (Osundare 1986).

This study hereby briefly discusses Eco-poetics, also known as Ecocriticism or Green Studies to further foreground the interconnectedness between culture and nature that is echoed in the selected collection of poems.

## 2. Hermeneutical Framework: Ecocriticism

In the words of Charles Bressler (2011), “Dating from the late 1980s, ecocriticism is the latest emerging field in literary studies that directly relates who we are as human beings to the environment”. Bressler explains ecocriticism is an eclectic group of writers, critics, and theorists who emphasize the place, nature, and the physical world, attesting to the interconnectedness between humans (their culture) and nature.

Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm are unarguably notable proponents of the theory that takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. However, it was in 1993 that ecocriticism gained a strong presence in literary criticism through the enormous contribution of Glotfelty. In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1995), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, a succinct definition is given thus, “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” Glotfelty herself acknowledges that she did not coin the term and that honor goes to William H. Rueckert in whose article, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978) the word first appeared.

Another leading ecocritic is Lawrence Buell (1995), who declares that ecocriticism is a study of the relationship between literature “and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment” to environmental praxis. According to Bressler (2011), through examining texts that highlight the natural environment, ecocritics entreat people to participate in practices that will change their environment and their material world, encouraging them to become guardians of their planet, not only for themselves but also for posterity or future generations.

Historically, great writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, William Wordsworth, and many others have written about nature and used pastoral imagery. Long before these writers, from antiquity, writers have shown the relationship between man and nature, raising environmental concerns (Nwagbara, 2013). This notion makes Bressler conclude that “‘nature literature’ is as old as Western literature itself.” The interconnectedness between culture and nature is as old as man’s existence, by extension.

There is no precise set of assumptions for Ecocriticism, just like many other modern literary theories. However, some of the key tenets of ecocriticism that guide the analysis of this study are:

- The emphasis on the interconnectedness of all things – including nature and culture.
- The advocacy for a literal “saving” of planet Earth, not only for present generations but also for generations to come
- The belief that human culture is connected to the physical world; that is, humanity, the microcosm, directly affects and is affected by the physical world, the macrocosm. (Bressler 2011)

By using the above ecocritical principles (Oguntuase, 2019), this paper attempts to assess human lifestyles or cultural interconnectedness to the earth’s living organisms (plants and animals) and their environment. It keenly observes the selected collection’s Nigerian environment and how the poet-persona seeks to demonstrate how man’s culture affects nature.

## 3. Ecological Consciousness in Niyi Osundare’s *The Eye of the Earth*

### 3.1. *Interconnectedness and Exaltation of Nature Over Culture*

The opening poem to the collection, “Earth” describes the earth and its nexus to humans. Apart from this introductory poem that appears to define the ecosphere of the planet earth, other poems in the collection are structured into three movements subtitled: “back to earth”, “rain songs”, and “home call”.

In weaving the natural image of the poem “Earth”, the poet vividly shows the connection between the earth as nature and humanity with all its lifestyle or culture. The opening lines of this poem suggest the relation of the earth to humans this way, “Temporary basement/and lasting roof”. These lines suggest the earth is only a “temporary basement” as humans are on it temporarily but after death, the earth becomes their “permanent roof” when buried or covered with the earth. The poem further describes the earth paradoxically as a “breadbasket/and compost bed” (lines 5-6). The foregoing lines also show the interconnectedness of nature with humans. The same earth that provides the “breadbasket” – foods that humans need for survival, also provides the graveyards where humans decay to nourish the earth that has fed them. The poem then describes some natural compositions or features on the planet earth, such as “rocks and rivers”, “muds and mountains”, the sea, moon, and the sky. These help to vividly create the natural image of the earth. The poem “Earth” concludes as the poet-persona exalts nature with a native diction that stands as a monometer thus “*Ogeere amokoyeri*” which translates as “the one that

shaves his head with the hoe”. There seems to be a conscious advocacy for simple agricultural tools that do not cause havoc on the planet. The poet-persona recommends such simple traditional farm tools as the “hoe”, in opposition to the use of heavy tractors or modern mechanization used in agriculture.

The first movement of the collection “back to earth” has three poems titled “Forest Echoes”, “The rocks rose to meet me”, and “harvest call”.

### 3.2. *Yearning for the things of the Past*

The poem “Forest” is mainly “shades and shadows of a remembered landscape” (Osundare 1986, xii). In the preface of the collection, Osundare himself reveals that the poem, “Forest” shows nostalgia – a longing for the beauty and serenity of the environment in the past. The poet reveals that the poem “echoes of an Eden long departed when the rain forest was terrifying green though each tree, each vine, each herb, each beast, each insect, had its name in the baffling baptism of Nature.” The poem laments that the beauty of the forest has been reduced to only remembrance in the concluding stanza of the poem thus, “And now/Memory,/loud whisper of yester-voices/confluence of unbroken rivers/ lower your horse of remembrance” (lines 278-282). Most of the trees so vivaciously native to this forest have met a rapid death in the hands of timber merchants whose exploitative culture or lifestyle is symbolized in the poem as *agbegilodo* (timber lorry). The poem shows interconnectedness that reveals man’s degradation of the forest is indirectly the depletion of human’s natural beings thus, “wounded by wanton matchets,/bled by the curing cutlass of the *babalawo*/the homing sun closes your weeping wounds/even as your doctor juice simmers/in the portion at dusk” (lines 92-96). The poem creates a nostalgic mood as the persona recalls wonderful nature images of some of the forest’s compositions. It describes the component of the forest as “to this forest of a thousand wonders” (line 3). The poem describes the rich green nature of the forest with lots of wild animals such as the “elulu” –a kind of bird that chirps beautifully at regular hours of the day, serving as “the clock” for the rural dwellers. However such beautiful and functional existence of the Elulu bird was before urbanization, in which the modern man’s lifestyle through tree cutting and urbanization begin to affect forestation. Other animals such as the chameleon, weaverbird, praying mantis, millipede, and wonderful plants such as the *patonmo* (a plant with small leaves which fold up when touched: also called “touch-me-not”), etc. are succinctly picturized in the poem to show the modern man’s lifestyle has resulted to the scarcity of these species of nature, especially in urban areas.

Similarly, the poem “the rocks rose to meet me” describes the natural images of some of the rocks in the persona’s rural environment. Famous names of rocks in Osundare’s hometown in Ikere-Ekiti, Ondo State are used to create natural imagery of the rocks that have stood for ages. Such names of rocks as the Olosunta and the Oroole are reasserted in the poem. Olosunta for instance, as a huge rock in Ikere that is worshiped yearly during the famous Olosunta festival and is now reputed to be a repository of gold, is highly eulogized in the poem. The poet-persona in this poem recalls the miraging experience of the rocks rising to meet it whenever it journeys home. The rocks rose to welcome the prodigal persona thus, “Unwearying wayfarer/your feet wear the mud of distant waters/your hems gather the bur/of farthest forests;” (lines 17-20). However, the effect of modern man’s lifestyle on nature is described in this poem with the case of Olosunta. The rock, Olosunta is personified to be complaining because of the gold miners who degrade it through their digging or gold mining. The persona laments, “Olosunta spoke/his belly still battleground of god and gold”. These lines suggest that modern man has polluted the sacred place of the rock by exploiting it of its natural deposit –gold, and show man’s unhealthy relationship with nature. The latter line shows the vicinity of the rock as “belly”, which is solely used for religious purposes in the past, in contestation. The premise has now become an area where both worshippers and gold miners contend for space –a battle for the rock between people who stay true to their ancestral religious worship and the miners interested in material possessions. Thus, the love for gold or material possession is a kind of new religion introduced by modern man. The persona thus questions man’s gold mining culture rhetorically this way, “But how dig the gold/without breaking the rock?”. The persona further espouses Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution in its description of how the rock is formed thus, “older than God/hieroglyphed when earth was molten pap/sculpted into stone by the busy hands/of wind and water”. This is a notion from positivism that asserts nature such as the rocks naturally evolved from stages as opposed to any religious myth of creation. The devastating effect of man’s lifestyle on nature or the rock to be precise is portrayed in the concluding lines of the poem thus, “with such defiant brows/with such unfurrowed faces/Just what have the rains been doing?”

Nonetheless, the significance of nature to man is elaborated in the poem “Harvestcall”. The earth provides the foods needed for man’s survival. However, despite nature’s inevitable relevance to mankind, the persona laments man’s poor response to equally treating nature well. The concluding lines reinstate the ecological awareness of global warming this way, “with our earth so warm/How can our heart be so cold?” These lines thus suggest the conflicting situation between man and nature –the earth is described as “so warm” but man’s “hearth” –a symbol of man’s home that is described to be opposingly cold due to man’s poor relation with nature.

Other poems in *The Eye of the Earth* that capture ecological concerns and advocacy are “Let the Earth’s Pain be Soothed”, “First Rain”, “Rain-Coming”, “Raindrum”, “Who says that drought was here?”, “Meet me at Okeruku”, “Farmer-Born”, “Dawn call” etc.

### 3.3. *Man’s Degradation of Nature*

Desertification is one of the negative effects of human activities on the environment. The precluding poem, “Eyeful Glances” of the second movement in the collection reinstates the ecological consciousness against desertification due to human activities or lifestyles. The change in the climatic conditions of the postmodern world is depicted in the poem. “Eyeful Glances” opens with the issue of desertification thus, “The desert caller/comes on a camel/of clouds”. The harsh weather is described in the poem as “whispers urgent tidings/in the ears of my skin”. The persona hyperbolizes the lack of rainfall as “a few teasing drops/on earth’s gaping lips/vanishing like droplets/on a steel plate/hot with the forge’s red rage”. The lack of rainfall is further emphasized in the poem thus, “a timid rain peeps behind the clouds/then recoils/abandoning the world”. The absence of rain is personified as timid and peeping behind the clouds without falling due to man’s manhandling of the earth.

In addition, the poem “Ours to Plow, Not to Plunder”, which is arguably the most widely analyzed piece in the collection, raises ecological consciousness. The poem opens with advocacy for man to protect the earth from the use of modern huge agricultural mechanization and supports the use of simple traditional farm tools such as “hoe”, “mattocks and matchets” during planting and “calabash trays and rocking baskets” for harvesting and carrying farm produces. The stanzas following three stanzas in the poem then reinstate the results of using simple farm tools as bountiful harvests and a flourishing state of the earth. The persona in these stanzas appeals to man to desist from his mechanized treatment (poor treatment) of his environment and allow nature to follow its natural cause this way, “let wheatfields raise their breadsome hands”, “Let water spring” by using simple farm tools that do not harm the earth in any way, instead they beautify it in the metaphor that “the hoe is her barber”. The persona in the concluding stanza of the poem reminds humans of their duties to the planet that determines their survival thus, “This earth is/ours to work not waste/ours to man not to maim/This earth is ours to plow, not to plunder.”

### 3.4. *Protecting Extinction of Other Species/Regaining Nature*

The poem, “They too are the earth” advocates for the protection of other species whose gradual extinction is caused by man’s domineering activities. The persona defends other species by asserting, “they too are the earth.” This suggests the earth does not belong to humans alone, so humans should coexist with nature. In the first quintet, the persona suggests the death of animals whose skins or hide are being used by man to make modern wears such as shoes as well as the death of some plants such as the rubber tree used by man to make tires used by modern vehicles –“They are the earth/under snakeskin shoes and Mercedes tires”. It uses the analogy of “beggars” to compare man’s interrelated significance to nature as man’s accomplishments are “swansongs” –a farewell performance, especially before retirement.

The persona also defends nature by speaking against deforestation as well as the sand filling or displacement of water in naturally riverine areas thus, “They too are the earth/the sweat and grime of/millions hewing wood and hurling water”. However, the poem concludes by wondering with rhetorical questions if humans are part of the earth because they keep destroying that (nature) they know they cannot survive without. The persona rounds off this notion thus, “Are they of this earth/who fritter the forest and harry the hills/Are they of this earth/Who live that earth may die/Are they”. The fact that modern lifestyles or culture is the basis upon which man lives, even though these lifestyles affect nature, man is being cautioned to consider the interconnectedness between himself and nature because it is impossible for man to live while the earth dies.

The aforementioned poems in the collection are in the form of free verse with most of the lines presented as run-on-line or enjambment which helps their ecological content to flow and be graspable, even for an average reader of poetry. As an Alter-Native poet, Osundare successfully uses local flavors in poetic diction such as “*Ogeere Amokoyeri*”, “*Olosunta*”, and others already shown above. All the above-mentioned poems from *The Eye of the Earth* are also rich with figurative expressions and literary aesthetics that are, but are not limited to, the use of nature imagery, metaphor, personification, and rhetorical question, just to highlight a few as already described above.

## 4. Conclusion

Having explored some ecocritical praxes in the collection of poems titled *The Eye of the Earth*, this paper wraps up that Nigerian poetry has contributed to ecological discourses. Poetry, in general, remains a viable and potent genre that can be used to disseminate information in disciplines beyond those in the Arts and Humanities. Osundare’s delineation of the confluence between human culture and nature, using the poetry genre, shows Nigerian poetry also responds to its environmental issues and tries to curb them through ecological consciousness-raising.

### References

- Bressler, C. E. (2011). *Literary criticism: an introduction to theory and practice*. 5th ed. Boston: Longman.
- Buell, L. (1995). *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture*. Harvard University Press.
- Glotfelty, C., & Harold, F. (1995) *The ecocritical reader: landmarks in literary ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Nwagbara, U. (2013) Nature in balance: the commodification of the environment in Niyi Osundare's *The eye of the earth*. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 22(3) pp. 196- 212.
- Oguntuase, A. A. (2019) An ecocritical reading of *The eye of the earth* by Niyi Osundare. *Research Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, Vol 5. No. 2
- Osundare, N. (1986) *The eye of the earth*. Ibadan. Heinemann Educational Books.
- William, R. (1978). Literature and ecology: An experiment in ecocriticism. *Iowa Review*, 9(1).

This article is open-access, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> , which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

