

# Literature and Sustainable Ecosystem: An Investigation of Selected African Literary Texts

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## Abstract

The fact that African literary works have gained considerable patronage in scholarly writings and debates. Most previous studies concern themselves with writers' styles and themes whereas inadequate attention has been paid to the ecological functionality of the texts. This study, therefore, interrogates the issue of climate change and its effects on human race around the world. Adopting eco-criticism as theoretical framework, a close reading of five purposively selected African literary texts was carried out, with content analysis applied as our methodology. The study reveals that there is a break away from the old tradition of praise songs for Africa, as a continent, and a blind attack on the colonial imperialists. In the selected texts, the writers demonstrate the environmental realities of the modern society by depicting the indices of climate change and its adverse effects on man. It is observed that climate is the topmost factor which affects agriculture (crop and livestock production). Drought, flooding and desertification often cause displacement of people and other living organisms and only a safe environment can guarantee a sustainable national development. The study concludes that the world needs to come together in the fight against environmental degradation for sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Literature, Sustainable Ecosystem, African Literary Texts, Climate Change, Development.

## Introduction

Interestingly, African writers have started to shake off the nostalgia occasioned by the Negritude ideology, which blamed the woes of the Black race mainly on the high handedness of their colonial lords. A new generation of more committed African creative writers has made social realities of the modern society the main focus in their artistic creativities. For an illustration, this study sets its search light on Ramonu Sanusi's novel, *A negro raped a blonde in Dallas*, Niyi Osundare's poem, *They Too Are the Earth*, David Rubadiri's poem, *African Thundersorm* and Ahmed Yerima's play, *Ipomu*. The novelist, Ramonu Sanusi, the two poets; Niyi Osundare and David

Rubadiri and the playwright, Ahmed Yerima are purposively selected for this study because of these authors' inclination towards ecological issues, with a view to making people pay considerable attention to the subject-matter.

Climate change is capable of slowing down development. Food security and well-being of the human race also depend on the issues relating to climate change. Certain factors such as anthropogenic activities and increased greenhouse gases are responsible for high temperature, flooding, biodiversity loss, shortage of water, loss of soil nutrients and even diseases around the world. Gameda & Sima (2015: p.256) remark that:

‘It is predicted that the temperature in the African continent will rise by 2 to 6 0 C over the next 100 years. In terms of economy, the sub-Saharan Africa will lose a total of US\$26 million by 2060 due to climate change.’

In recent times, global temperature and precipitation have increased because of the greenhouse effect and the destruction of the ozone layer. For instance, burning of fossil fuels such as petroleum, coal, natural gases and bush burning, especially in Africa has caused deforestation. Human beings, in particular, have seriously influenced the vegetation types one can find anywhere in the world. In Africa for instance, the environment is negatively influenced by the activities of man. Trees are cut down without replacement and bushes are burnt recklessly. Hence, the nitrogen cycle is adversely affected and life becomes difficult for both plants and animals including man, the “higher animal”. The exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide between man and nature has turned out to be inadequate because of the nonchalant attitude of the former, which has been mentioned earlier.

High level of dependence on agriculture, extraction of solid minerals, poor technology and inadequate financial potential as well as institutional incapacity among others things make countries in Africa to be the most negatively affected by climate change. The continent is characterized by acute land degradation and wide range of desertification (Nordhaus, 2006; Hummel, 2015; Rose, 2015).

Eco-criticism is derived from two words; namely ecology and criticism. According to Hornby (2000) ecology is “the relation of plants and living creatures to each other and to their environment, the (scientific) study of this.” The same authority in *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* says criticism is “the work or activity of making fair, careful judgments about the good and bad qualities of something/somebody, especially books, music, etc.”

Ogundokun (2013: pp.22-23) has explained that Eco-criticism is the study of representations of nature in literary compositions or any art for that matter and of the relationship between literature and its milieu. In other words, adopting ecological philosophy and concepts to a study of this kind is an eco-criticism. Ogundokun (2013) further adds that the term “*géocritique*” is used by the French scholars to refer to the concept of eco-criticism.

The root of eco-criticism studies was dated back to the late 1970s when the term was applied by William Rueckert in *Literature and Ecology*. In the words of Cheryll Glotfelty, eco-criticism implies “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (see Cronon, 1996; Glotfelty, 1996; Garrard, 2008 and Ogundokun, 2013). Drawing inspiration from Huggan and Helen Tiffin, Ben Bunting (2015: p.1) observes:

‘Today, ecocritics not only study the ways in which literature and the environment interact and have interacted, they have also cultivated an interdisciplinary interest, extending the scope of their work into the fields of environmental philosophy and bioethics as well as the environmental sciences, especially ecology.’

Aktas et al. (2018) are of the opinion that all attempts to eliminate or at least reduce ecological impact with regard to mobility of people and even the supply chains globally are the concerns of green logistics. On their part, Zarbakhshnia et al. have maintained that the protection of environment is the fundamental aim of green logistics which this study attempts to underscore because of human sustainability. More importantly as Shamimul Islam et al. (2020) have affirmed that the sustainability of the planet called earth is in danger as a result of the increase in environmental degradation. It is also unfortunate that the people of this generation have stolen and spent part of the future generation. According to Nanny Sri Lestari (2018), “The people who at this time are people who borrow the natural environment from future generations.” This study is therefore, an attempt to contribute to the debate on how to solve ecological crisis in order to protect the planet earth for our sake and that of the generations unborn.

In an attempt to reshape human thinking and eventual actions towards his environment, many African writers have taken the battle to the pages of their literary texts. This discovery shall be presented and analyzed in this write-up with a view to contributing to the fight against the dangers posed by the dreaded world climate change. Ramonu Sanusi, in his novel, *A negro raped a blonde in Dallas* raises the issue of climate change, which has become a global challenge.

The world leaders are advised not to make the conference on climate change in France, tagged Paris 2015 a matter of just drinking coffee morning, afternoon and night. The deadly impact of climate change on agricultural produce such as reduction in rainfall, soil infertility, and drop in food production (crops, animal husbandry and poultry) needs adequate attention. The author notes the impact of climate change on human health. According to him, pollution is the root cause of life threatening diseases like cancer and asthma. He equally points out that children die prematurely and women too lose their pregnancies as a result of certain ecological factors. For fear of uncertainty, desertification is forcing many inhabitants to abandon their homes. As people flee their areas and migrate to other areas, there is an increased pressure on natural resources of the area (s) they run to. This alone can lead to another internal crisis or inter-ethnic conflicts like the issue of Fulani herdsmen and crop farmers in Nigeria at present. No doubt, the impact of climatic change on agriculture and human health will eventually paralyse meaningful socio-economic and political development. In his novel, *A negro raped a blonde in Dallas*, Sanusi writes thus:

‘I saw many Presidents and Prime Ministers from all over the globe. I heard the white man say on the television that it was meant to be a conference on climate change. There were one hundred and ninety countries in attendance. It was meant for mere talk and discussion. It was supposed to find lasting solution to these incessant climate changes. It was to drink coffee too: morning, afternoon, night.

I used to believe that it was only armed robbers, drug barons, warlords all around the world and, especially, in black Africa that threatened nature, but today the white man had made me know better. Climatic Change is dangerous. So dangerous. We should fight against it. It is cancerous. If at this time we declined the clarion call to our responsibilities; if we folded our arms; if we just kept gazing at it like sheep, without preventing the danger, we would not have foods to eat in the future. We would lack water to drink in the future. And by then, all would be worse.

Why? Because there would be flooding and erosion. There could be oil spillage which might contaminate water and mastermind the death of aquatic beings. The lands would die. It’s worthy to note that the smoky pollutions released from industrial activities in France, China, and the United States, everywhere in the world were going to change the climate and destroy all nature.

Pollution is a great danger because it could cause cancer, asthma and so many deadly diseases. That was why children usually died prematurely. It's the same reason pregnant women lost their pregnancies. No wonder, it didn't rain. That was why Africa was plagued with desertification. Not only that, there was *landcide* – killing of land. That's the reason for the death of herbs and trees. It's the same reason animal husbandry deteriorated. When all became desert, cows died. The big bullocks lost their lives, even poultry.

When it all got to that, people would flee their territories for fear of dying like cows. They couldn't just wait to die like dogs. When people were displaced from their countries, it would become humanitarian crisis. Of course, that, on its own would be another misery. A very serious one to be precise! There would be need to call upon the Red Cross and non-governmental organisations to save such people. Walahi, all these were too much to bear (*A negro raped a blonde in Dallas*, pp.82-84).'

From the excerpt, it is understood that the adverse effect of climate change is more dangerous than the calamities which could be recorded from the activities of armed bandits, drug pushers, terrorists and wicked warlords. It is as dangerous as cancer. Apart from pollution that causes asthma and other deadly diseases; there is erosion, which accounts for the washing away of the essential soil nutrients and the eventual poor farm yields. Simply put, climate change will affect food production and food security. Flooding and drought are caused by climate change, and they have negative influence on agriculture. Decline in food production and supply is capable of bringing food insecurity as well as malnutrition. In other words, flooding and drought will bring about scarcity of food and this will force prices to go up. High in prices of basic necessities of life will make things difficult, especially for the masses, who are mainly the low-income earners. The level of poverty will undoubtedly increase. The fall out of this ugly trend is an economic slowdown. In any economic recession, there is no possibility of sustainable national development because per capital income as well as the national foreign reserves are below expectations.

Desertification will lead to displacement of people and dangerous migration, which can bring about land grabbing syndrome.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in 2011 observed that Africa is the most susceptible continent to climate change related health issues because of the existing poverty and weak institutions to cope with health problems caused by climate change. The presence or absence of vector and water borne pathogens is

often determined by the amount of rainfall recorded at a particular time. Gameda & Sima (p.259) affirm that:

‘Climate change can affect the well-being of human beings either directly or indirectly. For instance, changing in the quality of air, water and food can disturb human health indirectly. Climate change will likely discomfort the environmental and social conditions which might lead to social and economic disruptions.’

Again, it is therefore not surprising, when Sanusi in another novel, *Le bistouri des larmes* lashes out at his people; the Nigerians and the Africans in general, that rather than continuing with the destruction of the eco-system and the promotion of primitive cultural practices, they should think of fixing the economy and preventing it from total collapse as well as providing solutions to the environmental degradation; especially in the crude oil producing areas. As it were, the economic slowdown was as a result of bad governance, repressive policies, corruption and docile followership. African countries are heavily indebted, even with cuts in government spending like the purported removal of subsidies on basic daily commodities and upward increase in taxes Nigerian economy is still in a mess (see Ogundokun, 2013 & 2014).

In addition, contributing to the fight against climate change through literary composition, one cannot ignore the genuine clarion call of Niyi Osundare in his poem entitled “*They Too Are the Earth.*” A close reading of the excerpt from the said poem will meet the quest for this study.

... They too are the earth  
 The distant groans of thousands buried alive  
**in hard, unfathomable mines**  
 ... They too are the earth  
 The old dying distant deaths  
**in narrow abandoned hamlets**  
 ... 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?

Among other things, with this phrase; “in hard, unfathomable mines”, the poet draws his readers’ attention to the unacceptable method of mining by which natural resources are being extracted. Besides destroying the earth, many lives are equally perished in the process: “The distant groans of thousands buried alive.”

As though that was not enough, from the expression; “The old dying distant deaths/in narrow abandoned hamlets”, it can be claimed that desertification, drought or

flooding made indigenes/inhabitants to flee their villages leaving the old to die a miserable death because of poverty in the land. The youths who can manage to survive the hardship unfortunately abandon their homes to look for greener pastures.

The last stanza of the poem, Niyi Osundare's "*They Too Are the Earth*" captures the poet's mood. It expresses his bitterness towards those who make the mother earth uninhabitable. His lamentation is enveloped in a set of rhetorical questions packed in a run-on-line technique (enjambment). It reads 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 poet is indeed unhappy because people destroy the earth. He, therefore, uses his art to warn against the wickedness and the thoughtlessness of those unscrupulous elements that destroy the eco-system because of their selfish interests.

In another poem, "*Ours to plough, Not to plunder*", Osundare preaches for orderliness and carefulness on how human beings treat nature and the resources there-in. He is of the view that earth, which represents nature, needs to be handled with care and respect. The earth provides man's food, water, shelter, wears and other useful things.

The first part of the poem reflects on the theme of agriculture. We "plough and plant". With the hoe, the land is tilled and crops are planted for man to get his food. The second stanza shows the time of harvest. Farm implements like "mattocks", "machetes", "calabash trays" and "Rocking baskets" indicate that it is a season to enjoy the fruits of one's labour. "Heavy heaps" and "earth root" demonstrate that the resources from mother earth are inexhaustible.

In the third stanza, the poet advocates for obedience in following the natural course of events: "let wheat fields raise their bread-some hands/to the ripening sun/let legumes clothe the naked bosom/of shivering mounds/let the pawpaw swell and swing its head ward breasts".

The fourth and the fifth stanzas continue the poet's line of thought that earth is capable of providing man with all he needs for a happy living: "Let water spring from earth's unfathomed foundation/let gold rush/from her deep unseen-able mines/hitch up a ladder to the dodging sky/let's put a sun in every night". The expression "let's put a sun in every night" connotes that the poet is calling for technological advancement, which will translate to progress and sustainable

development. The poet believes that there are still resources yet untapped from the earth. He says: “Our earth is an unopened grain house”.

In the last stanza, the poet re-echoes that earth remains the most veritable and inexhaustible asset for mankind. Hence, man must not destroy it. Man only needs to “plough” the earth but “not to plunder” it. In a mildly sharp tone but hopeful mood, Osundare calls for caution in the way and manner we carry out certain activities on earth, with an advice that earth must be respected and preserved if our future is to be guaranteed.

In a nutshell, Osundare’s major concern is the ecological issue. Tyokumbur (p.7) explains ecology thus:

‘Ecology is the biological study of the interrelationships between living things and their environment. It includes understanding the effects of man and his activities on the living and non-living components of his surroundings. Human activities that have both positive and negative impacts on man himself and his environment include agricultural, industrial, urban development and a plethora of other land uses. Other human activities include wildlife exploitation for genetic, meat and food resources, holiday camping, transportation, waste disposal and water management.’

From the foregoing, it is obvious that there is an undoubted relationship between man and his environment. Poets like other practitioners of the arts reflect on matters of their environment to provide important information for a happy living. The bottom line is that universal man must treat earth with care.

By and large, David Rubadiri, an African poet from Malawi, reflects on climatic condition in his poem titled “*African Thunderstorm*.” A careful reading of the said poem provides a picturesque detail of what an unusual climate situation can cause both plants and animals including man.

In fact, Rubadiri’s poem, “*African Thunderstorm*” is a demonstration of havoc, which climate change can inflict on man. The poet paints an atmosphere of commotion and confusion to recreate and explain an African experience of a thunderstorm. The poem depicts a total panic, discomfort and uncertainty caused by the climatic condition called thunderstorm. In the words of the poet, the thunderstorm “Turning”/ “Sharply”/ “Here and there” and this situation is compared to the plague of locusts, which is equally destructive. As a means of warning, the poet designs a clear imagery of nature and how human beings can be affected by a given climatic situation. The expressions: “In the village”/ “Screams of delighted

children”/ “Toss and turn”/ “In the din of whirling wind” also, “Women with their babies clinging on their backs” pictures the unpleasant situation human beings found themselves. The thunderstorm destroys trees and clothes as the poet captures it in;

‘The wind whistles by  
Whilst trees bend to let it pass.  
Clothes wave like tattered flags  
Flying off  
To expose dangling breasts’

Whether directly or indirectly, man’s carefree attitude, towards his environment, could have been responsible for the destructive thunder storm, which ravaged the African community as presented in the poem.

Although the preoccupation of Ahmed Yerima in his play, *Ipomu* is socio-political consciousness in the Niger Delta Area of Nigeria, the playwright does not fail to extend his discussion to the ecosystem of the said region. He identifies environmental degradation, illiteracy, poverty, hostility such as blocking of oil wells, pipe line vandalism, arms running and proliferation, as well as kidnapping as the major social challenges in the Niger Delta.

*Ipomu*, Yerima’s hero in the play, *Ipomu*, thus:

‘We walked in the oily stained river; the oil river mixed with shreds, carcasses of dead fish...and burnt crayfish half fried with the river oil and the basking heat from the sun. Oh! the sickening smell (p.121).’

From the foregoing excerpt, the unhealthy environmental condition in the Niger Delta is vividly captured. For instance, “the oily stained river” illustrates that the fish farming activity, which is the major occupation of the Ijaws and other ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta is no longer possible. This has added to the problem of joblessness and shortage of essential food. There is, therefore, malnutrition and traces of kwashiorkor. The phrase, “basking heat from the sun” shows a proof of the destruction of the ozone layer while the expression, “the sickening smell” indicates pollution, which eventually brings about dreaded ailments like cancer, asthma, and other air or water borne diseases.

In all of these, Yerima attempts to warn all the concerned authorities to urgently do the needful in order to control the negative effects of oil exploration in the Niger Delta areas. The issues of oil spillages and gas flaring should be tackled squarely by

the government and the multinational oil companies to ensure continue existence of people and other living things in that part of the world.

Principally, in their artistic compositions, the four purposively selected literary writers have proved it beyond doubt that climate change can lead to people's displacement, suffering and death.

## **Conclusion**

The study has established that it is not only the activities of armed bandits, drug traffickers, warlords and terrorists that are dangerous. Illegal mining and climate change are potential threats to human existence on earth. Using eco-critic perspective, this paper has identified major adverse effects of climatic change on agricultural produce, human health and socio-economic development of a given nation. The writers of the texts examined demonstrate that literary works are also capable of debating ecological issues with a view to suggesting constructive solutions to challenges which are associated with climatic plague. They believe that human activities on earth must be guided and the earth must be treated with care so as to ensure human sustainability and development within his ecosystem. The study submits that all hope is not lost in coping with ecological challenges if the whole world can exercise utmost mutual co-operation.

The essence of a good research is to provide workable solution(s) to human problems so as to bring global advancement. This study, therefore, recommends the following solutions to curb the menace of climatic change in the world:

- There is a need for adequate information sharing and dissemination on issues relating to climate change and how to adapt/acclimatise to the changes. Awareness on ecological education must be created. The media; both the electronic and the print, as agents of socialisation and mobilisation should carry out their social responsibilities in this regard. Governments at various levels, private sectors/companies as well as non-governmental organisations should take matters that concern the ecosystem very seriously by sponsoring programmes, seminars, workshops and events that will provide information on environmental education and measures to reduce the adverse effects of climate change.

- Construction of dams, development of river basin and irrigation farming should be encouraged to downsize the effects of drought which can cause shortage of food items.
- Mining activities should be done in line with the best practices around the world. Illegal mining and vandalism must be checked.
- The culture of tree planting and forest reservation should be advocated for at all levels of government.
- Climate smart initiatives should be encouraged in agricultural practices.
- It is high time countries in the world embraced the idea of comparative advantage as regards agricultural produce and natural resources to prevent overstressing the available resources and unhealthy competition.
- Research activities in the areas of climate change, strategies to reduce pressure on available natural resources and ways of managing environmental risks and disasters must be of interest to scholars of higher institutions.

In protecting the environment, everybody needs to take action to achieve “environmental balance” which Bansal & Roth (2000) described as “going green”. This study, therefore, suggests a thorough understanding of the ecological crises of modern time.

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**\*Note:** The excerpts of the poems are from Johnson et al. (1996) *New Poetry from Africa*. Ibadan: University Press.