

## An Ecocritical Reading of *Eye of the Earth* by Niyi Osundare

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### **Abstract**

*The thrust of this paper is to show the inherent relevance of literature in a society that has left undone what it should have done and studiously attended to all that should have been put in abeyance. The focus of humankind in their earthly existence has been largely anthropocentric in that humans attach importance only to themselves. This paper argues that man's position in this regard is faulty and need be amended to ensure equilibrium in his total environment. To achieve this all important objective, man should be anthropomorphic in his/her thoughts since, in addition to humankind, the environment is also inhabited by flora, fauna and fish. The Ecocritical theoretical standpoint is employed to study *The Eye of the Earth*, one of the several volumes of poetry written by Niyi Osundare. The paper concludes that if man relates productively and carefully with the environment, he stands to benefit more instead of allowing the environment to lay waste through his carelessness by acts of omission and commission.*

### **Introduction**

The environment has played a major role in the continued existence of mankind. It would have been impossible to live if man has no oxygen to breathe in and carbon dioxide to exhale to maintain and sustain the mutual benefits between man and plants. It is not only from plants that man benefits. He does from the earth in whose bowels his seeds are planted in earnest and unfailing expectation of a bountiful harvest. Water, an essential component of the ecosystem, provides sustenance for the planted seeds to grow luxuriantly, for animals to drink and for man's domestic and other uses. Unfortunately, man appears to cut his nose to spite his face because the green areas around him are considered as needless refuse which must be mowed down and incinerated to usher in a more beautiful and attractive environment.

The activities of man have led to disruptions in the occupational lives of the rural populace whose economic survival depends on their daily interactions with the earth. Land despoliation, deforestation and water pollution have resulted invariably in the absence of food crop farming and sea farming of sea foods and other aquatic harvests which provide protein, nutrients and other benefits for the use of man. With industrialisation slapping us in the face and replacing indigenous core values with modernity and its eccentricities, man appears doomed unless urgent and sustained efforts are made to prevent the possible extermination of man by man. The land is ravaged and exploited for mineral resources and oil deposits. Logging activities result in rapid deforestation. Urbanization and expansion wipe off large acreage of arable land for farming, both for subsistence and market economies.

Whilst it is agreeable that in the wake of industrialisation the environment will be remarkably altered, it is important to note that man, the chief driver of the process of industrial growth and globalisation, is endangered if the environment is not prevented from mindless ruination. It is to this salient requirement of survival that the Poet, Niyi Osundare addresses himself in this volume of his poetry titled, *The Eye of the Earth*. Relevant portions of the work as they speak

to the need for man to salvage his environment and retrieve it from total destruction will be highlighted to draw attention to this criminal neglect.

Niyi Osundare's short biodata.

The Poet was sired by peasant farmer parents in Ikere Ekiti, Ekiti State in 1946. Since farming would not guarantee for him a level playing field with the offspring of well off parents, he decided to embrace education, the sure leveller. He enrolled for primary and secondary School education in his native Ikere Ekiti before securing a place at the University of Ibadan to read English. He added a Master's degree in the same field from the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom and climbed to the highest rung of the academic ladder by studying for a Doctoral degree the University of Toronto, Canada. He was appointed a Professor at the University of Ibadan in 1989 and later, Head of Department of English. He relocated from Nigeria to the United States of America in 2007 where he teaches as a Professor of Literature in the University of New Orleans. He has written many scholarly papers which were published in reputable Journals in Nigeria, Africa and the World. He has written many volumes of poetry amongst which is the one which engages our attention in this exegesis. He bestrides the three genres of literature like a literatus and colossus that he really is. He is a playwright and novelist. He wrote articles in dedicated columns in leading newspapers in Nigeria, chief amongst which were the defunct *Newswatch* Magazine and *Tribune* Newspapers.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

Ecocriticism, one of several literary theories, has been identified and chosen as the most relevant theory to address the issues raised in *The Eye of The Earth*. The theory relates literary works to the physical environment in which it is produced and consumed. Proponents of the theory include William Rueckert, Lawrence Buell and Cheryl Glotfelty. There are a lot more others who have made outstanding contributions to the evolution and development of Ecocriticism as a literary theory. The ground breaking essay of William Rueckert who wrote *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978) reveals the term 'Ecocriticism' which refers to 'the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature' (Glotfelty and Fromm 107). Whilst it is true to say that the term, ecocriticism, was first used or coined by Rueckert, previous works have existed before his 1978 essay. In this connection, reference can be made to the work of a British author and critic, Raymond William who wrote *The Country and the City* in 1973. His work was a critique of pastoral literature in which he looked at the relationship between man and his environment. Raymond was not alone as Joseph Meeker followed a year later with *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and Play Ethics* in 1974. Meeker's work also stridently criticised the criminal neglect of the environment by mankind. The greatest fillip to the wider acceptance of Ecocriticism may have come much later with the writings of scholars and critics like Cheryl Glotfelty, Harold Fromm and Lawrence Buell. In 1995, Lawrence Buell wrote *The Environmental Imagination* and a year after, the duo of Glotfelty and Fromm wrote *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1976. Etymologically, the word, 'Ecocriticism' grew from the coalition of two Greek words, Eco (oikos) and Critic (kritis). Taken together, they both mean, 'House Judge'. In this connection, a man's house can be seen to aggregate his total ecology whilst the critic is the Judge who sees how the house is maintained. Ecocriticism is therefore a branch of literary criticism whose concern is the use of literature to interpret man's relationship with his environment. It is differently called, green poetry, green studies, environmental literary studies or simply, environmentalism.

Osundare has chosen to be the judge of our house, in a manner of speaking, in his volume of poetry, *The Eye of the Earth* (1986). His emphasis in all the poems is on the natural environment in relation to man's interaction with it. The volume is divided into three sections containing eighteen poems in all. For this study, the ecological consequences of the poems are

considered to give muscular support to the poet's campaigns for a safe and sustainable environment in which man can live comfortably. The truth in this position is driven home by Bamikunle who says of the volume under reference, "the collection addresses concerns about the earth and its idyllic state" p 189. In a prefatory note to this volume, Osundare notes that "The Eye of the Earth echoes an Eden long departed through the nostalgic portrayal of the earth" (p xi). He brings to the fore this "nostalgia" in his own remembrances and recollections of the pristine and sedate earthly environment in which he grew. This is captured in:

Farmer born, peasant bred, I encountered dawn in the enchanted corridors of the forest, suckled on the delicate aroma of healing herbs, and the pearly drops of generous moon. Living in those early days was rugged, but barns brimmed with yams fattened by merciful rains and the tempering fire of the upland sun.....Earth was ours and we earth's....(p xi)

Osundare is obviously enamoured of the environment in which he grew up as a young lad and is forced to rue the devastation that this same erstwhile environment and cultural milieu have suffered as a result of modernity and industrialisation. His firm belief in the history and ancestry of his land, its people and their origins resonates with the views of Buell who remarks that "the environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated by natural history" (p 7).

"Forest Echoes", one of the poems in the collection praises the rustic, agrarian cultural background of the poet. Since that is the life to which he was accustomed before the advent of modernity and its far reaching implications on the environment, he adores it and records his youthful impressions in the following:

Bouncing boughs interlocked overhead  
Like wrist wrestlers straining muscularly

On a canvas of leaves wounded  
By the fist of time  
I tread soft soled, the compost carpet  
Of darkling jungles...(p 3-4)

As the son of peasant parents whose duty was to farm in the company and footsteps of his father, the poet has grown to love the rich boughs and dense foliage of the trees on his father's farm. This he describes as "interlock overhead" which he compares to "wrist wrestlers straining muscularly". He further describes the mass of fallen leaves which have decayed over time as "the compost carpet of darkling jungles". Sadly, most of the farmlands of old have given way to the merciless teeth of bulldozers and to the unsparing menace of logging activities. The beauty of the rain forest and the natural habitat that it offers to birds and animals is celebrated. Nature imagery is created with "bevy of birds, barrack of beast, a school of truant antelopes, the partridge, the weaver bird, the chameleon, the praying mantis and even the millipede". All of these get a mention as denizens of the forest. The lamentable deforestation of the environment and the degradation of the ecosystem is documented in the following:

A forest of a million trees, this,  
A forest of milling trees  
...wounded, though by time's axe  
And the greedy edges of agbegilodo's matchet  
A stump here, a stump there  
Like a finger missing from a crowded hand...(p 5)

Tree felling has its deleterious effects on the environment. The absence of trees lays bare the forests, endangers wild life, destroys farmlands and terribly alters the entire landscape. Erosion could ravage the environment, given the absence of trees that could act as buffer. The political class, the elite and the multinationals have wrought havoc and destruction on the environment as the lines of Osundare's poem has shown. In another poem, 'The Rocks Rose to Meet Me', the magnificent and resplendent *Olosunta* rock in Ikere, the birthplace of the poet is revered for its mythical properties and presumed capacity to provide a safe haven for the townspeople in the event of attacks by adversaries. The poet advises against the demolition of the rock not only because it adds to the beauty of the environment but, more importantly, because the benefits that the townspeople derive from its existence will be lost, permanently and irretrievably. He notes that 'the rocks...occupy a central place in the cosmic consciousness of the Ikere people of Nigeria. It must be stressed that these rocks are dramatized... as a creative material essence, as lasting monuments of time and space' (p xiii). He adds that the mineral deposits said to reside in the precincts of the rocks should be mined and its proceeds spread to meet the needs of all and not of the overfed cabal which mindlessly extorts and oppresses the people all the time. This is why he says:

...the gold let us dig,  
Not for the gilded craniums  
Of hollow chieftains  
(..who deem this earth their sprawling throne)...(p 14)

He adds that if the proceeds from the minerals are shared equitably amongst the people, 'the world may sprout a hand of equal fingers'. This leaves the reader with the possibility that a society where equality of mankind thrives is still achievable. This is much to be preferred to a situation of winners take all, a depiction of the appropriation of the people's commonwealth by a few spineless interlopers harvesting where they never planted.

In 'Harvest call', the poet rolls out the drums to celebrate the earth as a productive force whose constant and unfailing productivity has kept man going through ages. One of the food crops planted and deservedly celebrated by Ekiti people, of the Yoruba extraction, is yam. Yams are of the *discorea* species. There can be water yam, yellow yam and white yam, the king of all food items. Referring specifically to the preference for this food item amongst his own people, Osundare says:

Here where yam wore the crown  
In the reign of swollen roots  
Amid a retinue of vines and royal leaves;  
Between insistent sky and yielding earth,  
The sun mellowed planting pageants  
Into harvest march...(p 18)

The ecological importance of this poem is that the earth, if it is left undervalued by modernity, has the potential to supply the food needs of man. The Holy writ throws its weight behind this when it says for as long as there is planting there will be harvest. The book of Genesis 8: 22 says 'While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease'. By extension, that scripture maintains that man will always have food to eat when he tills the land and puts seeds in its bowels. It is not the production of yam alone that will be affected by changing fortunes of the earth. Other crops are equally disadvantaged. This is why the poet asks:

But, where are they?  
Where are they gone:  
Aroso, geregede, otili, pakala

Which beckoned lustily to the reaping basket...  
The yam pyramids which challenged the sun...  
Where are they? (p 20)

Repeatedly, the poet asks rhetorically where the food barns have all vanished to. The answer appears to be lurking in the massive acquisition of land by multinational corporations for purposes other than farming. Where land is even available, its quality has reduced considerably by anti-environment practices. The certain consequence is famine, occasioned by poor yield from land which has been misused and untended.

In yet another poem, "Let the Earth's Pain Be Soothed", the poet synonymises the earth with humanity. In an unmistakable metaphor, the animate quality of man is transferred to the earth whose pains from misuse have become palpable. The natural ecosystem has been altered so severely that the elements respond through malfunctions. The overheated environment results in the absence of rains or severe drought with its attendant consequences on plant yields. Absence of or irregular rains can only result in the harvest of shrivelled tubers and other farm produce. It is the thoughts about the reverses in the fortunes of nature that forces the poet to lament that:

The sky carries a boil of anguish  
Let it burst  
Our earth has never lingered so dry  
In the season of falling showers...  
Dust  
Dust in brewing kitchens  
Dust in busy bedrooms  
Dust in retrenching factories... (p 27-28)

The ill-advised interference with the natural ecology invariably results in disequilibrium and dysfunctionality. We see the consequences of this in a parched earth filled with a billow of dust in the absence of rain which should naturally soothe the pains of the earth. It is these manifest absurdities that make Glotfelty to conclude that "we are facing a global crisis today not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how ethical systems function (p3).

Osundare welcomes the soothing balm introduced to an inclement weather and scorched earth in the poem, "First Rain". As the title implies, the poem is a comment on the arrival of rains after what might have been an interminably long spell of aridity in the climate of the environment. His use of "a tingling tang awakes the nose//when the first rain has just clipped" is both instructive and illuminating. His onomatopoeic figurative device reawakens humanity to a fresh breath of life and to a deserved pleasure for plants and animals. The independent clause "our earth breathes again" reaffirms this, tellingly.

The pluvial radiations in man and plants resonate in the poem, "Rain Coming" although with a tinge of paradox and antithesis. Ordinarily, the arrival of rain should have been cause for celebration if it was not coming too late and too little. The poet talks about the damning consequences of infrequent or belated rains in the following:

Slowly  
But  
Surely  
The early rains ring the bell  
But oh my land!  
So deep and dry still  
In the unnatural desert..(p 31)

There is agonising lamentation in “but oh my land!//so deep and dry still”. The land which has remained without water for far too long than was normal will not normally respond to the paucity of rain water available to it after a rather long time. The land has thus become “an unnatural desert”, made possible by the unfavourable and unsatisfactory impact of modernity, industrialisation and globalisation on the environment.

In “They too are the Earth”, Osundare problematizes the uncanny insularity of a privileged few who are bent on ruining the entire environment for the masses of the people for filthy lucre. The poet points out that in spite of their aloofness and pretensions to the obverse, they too are part of humanity who render the environment unfriendly and unliveable. They foul the air and pollute the water for all. Relevant stanzas of the poem say it all:

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? (p 35)

It is the poet’s insistence and repeated queries about the actual motive and constituency of the individuals that are guilty of despoliation of the earth that makes Agofure aver that Osundare “utilises explicit strategies to convey his awareness of the obliteration of Nigeria’s natural environment by the political class and their cohorts” (p 60). A natural feeling of revulsion is forced from a reader who sees that marginalised and despondent Nigerians are described as “beggars in brimming gutters”, “hewers of wood”, “labourers”, “women battling centuries of maleficent slavery” etc. the pervasive suffering inflicted on poor people does not discriminate in matters of sex and age. The situation remains truly lamentable and execrable. The last, but definitely not the least, poem in *The Eye of the Earth* is “Our Earth Will Not Die”. It is a fitting conclusion of a spirited campaign to save the environment from ruins. The title gives hope to the reader that all is not lost and some ground may still be reclaimed in the desperate struggle to free the land from unceasing despoliation. The poem opens with a direct attack on the adversaries of the land. This the poet does by asking:

Who lynched the lakes. Who?  
Who slaughtered the seas. Who?  
Whoever mauled the mountains. Whoever?  
Our earth will not die...(p 50)

The unalloyed faith in the regenerative capacity of the land is another important lesson the poem teaches us. The continued rape of the earth by careless merchants of death who foist on the masses of the people a polluted environment has been unable to kill the earth completely. The earth lives, albeit in a state that requires improvement and care. The consequences of environmental degradation on man, plants and animals are pointed out when the poet says:

The rain falls, acid, on balding forests  
Their branches amputated by the septic daggers  
Of tainted clouds  
Weeping willows drip mercury tears  
In the eye of sobbing terrains  
Nuclear sun rises like a funeral ball  
Reducing man and meadow to dust and death. (p 51)

The effluents and thick smokes from factories pollute the air and mix with the rain that eventually falls in torrents of acid. Same is true of continuous gas flaring in sites of petroleum exploration and refinery. The dark soot is absorbed in the atmosphere and when there is rainfall, what man experiences is that “willows drip mercury tears”. Acid and mercury are injurious to

human health leading to the onset of such deadly diseases as cancer and bronchitis. Yet the people have to live with the consequences of this ruinous modernity. "Balding forests" is a phrase that invests the inanimate forests with the vivacity of humans who may become bald in the head on account of old age or of a pronounced insufficiency in the quantum of minerals needed to keep the body in shape. The destructive nature of acid which has mixed with and polluted our rains lead inevitably to balding forests. The dense foliage of trees and the verdurous boughs on their branches have become desiccated and withered resulting in the absence of fructification.

Unfazed by the litany of vicissitudes discussed in the foregoing, the poet ends the poem on a note of defiance, hope and optimism. Trusting in the infinite capacity of the earth to renew, redeem and regenerate itself, he has this to say again:

Our earth will see again  
Eyes watched by a new rain  
The westering sun will rise again  
Resplendent like a new coin  
Our earth will rise again  
This earth, OUR EARTH (p 51)

The poet recommends that an incessant clamour for a new earth and a new environment will save man from evitable destruction and needless damnation. The environment can become green again with its pristine, salubrious properties if man replaces felled trees with new ones in a sustained effort at afforestation. Smoke emission tests can be carried out to check the injurious level of pollution that the atmosphere lives with. Old pipes can be replaced so that oil leakages stop forthwith. Restiveness in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria can be arrested if the youths are meaningfully engaged in education, trade and full integration into the civil society. The derivation fund accruing to the oil producing areas should be monitored to ensure that it serves the purposes for which it was earmarked in the first place. Leaders who short change their people by collecting humongous sums of money for contracts but soon abandon project sights should be ruthlessly upbraided and made to refund money not spent for the benefit of their people. This will deter other unscrupulous people who think that duping the people they represent is business as usual. Only then can the campaign against a degraded environment be meaningful and worth the while.

### **Conclusion.**

From one poem to another, the volume of Osundare's poetry aptly titled *The Eye of the Earth* is an exemplar of the literary works that scholars of Ecocriticism adjudge fit enough to address the problems of society in matters of the relationship of man to his environment and his efforts to continuously maintain it. His views and those of the critics consulted in the development of this essay resonate with those of the fore fathers and leading lights in the practice of Ecocriticism as a literary theory.

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