

AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH ON THE SELECTED PLAYS OF WOLE SOYINKA

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism, having emerged over a few decades, stated as “the study of relationship between literature and physical environmental. William Rueckert (born 1865), an Ecocritic, has coined this term Ecocriticism in 1978 in his essay Literature and Ecology: An application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. Ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to the study of literature. Yoruban society has the importance of ecology in their everyday life. Presence of non-human environment in literature is an important aspect of ecocritical theory which is evident from the life of Yoruba also. Soyinka portrays the close relationship between Yoruba people and their environment. This paper would be a study of ecoconsciousness of Soyinka based on the fact that Nature plays a vital role in Yoruban cosmology. Two plays are taken for illustrations: The Swamp Dwellers and A Dance of the Forests.

Key Words: Eco-criticism, Yoruban cosmology.

Wole Soyinka is one of the famous Nigerian playwrights. His first play *Invention* proves that he is a political activist. His second play *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958) shows the predicaments of some folks who have been oppressed by the federal thoughts and despotism. His plays, *A Dance of Forests* (1960) and *The Strong Breed* (1964) picture the culture and rituals of Yoruba. The play *A Dance of Forests* has dedicated to celebrate the independence of Nigeria in 1960. It represents the essence of African past and warns the people for better future. He satirizes the evils of European culture and its influence in Nigerian culture. Soyinka, having exposed his efficacy in writing, has been awarded noble prize for literature in the year 1986.

The Swamp Dwellers (1958) examines the sufferings of Yoruba people caused of the federal system. The play depicts the hardships of the people who live in swamp land and the unfavourable nature which destroys the land. A swamp is a wetland that is covered by woody plants, near rivers or streams. Hence, the villagers are the Swamp dwellers who are mentioned in the title. Soyinka states the setting as “*A village in the swamps. Frogs, rain and other swamp noises*” (Soyinka 81).

Ecocriticism analyses and promotes the work of art which raise moral question about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generation. Reuckert, an Ecocritic, says in *Ecology*, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric, of the being at the centre surrounded by environment, vision and his compulsion to conquer, humanizes, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing. The disgusting fact may be man's denial of being bio centric that ruins the man-nature relationship. As man leads an anthropocentric life, he extinguishes himself from nature.

Ecologists have believed that environmental degradation and human suffering may result from human disconnection with nature. Soyinka's “*The Swamp Dwellers*” pictures the land “the Swamp” where People of old generation love the ecological setting of the land and refuse to go out of the village. But the younger generation of the village who wants to make money moves to city. They think that the city is a

place for money-making. Makuri, a swamp dweller, stated how Yoruba's present generation disconnected with nature as,

Ah well . . . Those were the days . . . those days were really good. Even when times were harsh and the swamp overran the land, we were able to laugh with the Serpent . . . [*continues to work.*] . . . but these young people . . . They are no sooner born than they want to get out of the village as if it carried a plague . . . [*Looks up silently.*] I bet none of them has ever taken his woman into the swamps. (Soyinka 87)

Kenneth Burkes (1897-1993), North American critic of 20th century, has proposed many ecological theories. Three modes of Burkean ecocriticism are Ecological Holism, Technological De-terminism and Rueckert's Ecocriticism. Holism is a belief that everything in nature is connected in some way. Among the sciences, Burke stresses people to pay more attention on ecology. It teaches the total economy of this planet. The exploitation part must itself eventually suffer if it too greatly disturbs the balance of the whole. The ecological balance is very important. It does not violate by the human actions. Makuri says Alu that Igwezu returned to the village to visit his farm land which is spoiled by floods. It disappointed Igwezu. Kadiye is a corrupted priest who bought cattle and other offering from the villagers in the name of priest. He tells that people appease the serpent of the swamp by offerings. He makes a vow that the floods are over and after the river recede they plant again. Thus, he uses the unfavourable situation of nature for his selfishness.

An ecological crisis occurs when the environment of a species or a population changes in a way that destabilizes its continued survival. There are many possible causes of such crisis like population and depletion of natural sources. It may be that the environment quality degrades compared to the species' needs. It may that the situation being unfavourable for the species. Natural changes like increase of temperature, less significant rain falling, floods are the important causes for ecological crisis. Human world does not control non-human world. Flood is the symbol of Cleansing or rebirth for man. It's also a punishment for human wickedness.

In *The Swamp Dwellers*, the nature plays an unfavourable role against the human race. Unable to fight with nature and tracked by the physical charm of the city leaves the village. To be an agriculturalist, one has to extend friends with nature. The love for nature should be eternal that floods and droughts cannot evade it. But, Makuri says Alu that his son is not able fight with nature, will move to the city as his crops were destroyed. This is stated by Makuri as "He came for his crops. Now that he knows they've been ruined by the floods, he'll be running back to the city." (Soyinka 87)

Ecocriticism is a study of analysing the text and find the representation of nature in the text. The fact is that the human being is first and foremost an animal, sharing living place with other animal species in an environment on which they are mutually dependant. Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* has many representation of nature. It emphasises the importance of nature in the Yoruba community. Yoruba community believes nature as their god. It is similar to Tamilan's, a community of people who lives in the country called India, Pagan worship. Pagan worship is a belief and activity of worshipping the nature. Whatever human beings do to the ecosystem have the reflections back. If a man does not harm the nature, the nature keeps him safe.

The play has a celebration and anti-celebration of gathering of tribes. The Vedic school of thought believed that trees to be a sacred and primary from of living beings, possessing great knowledge and having witnessed the rise of the civilization. People of Yoruba planned to call two statesmen for the festival to glorify their race. Yoruba people also believed that tress are witnessing the good and wrong of the community. They request groves to send the statesman for the gathering of tribes as they respect the Groves as one of their deities.

Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive and the interaction is rapidly worsening. People misuse the weather for violation. Weather plays a role of tool in the future violation.

Geo engineering is about reducing carbon dioxide from air for good environment. High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HFAARP) doing research work by misusing nature. They do research to prevent the sun light by the artificial clouds. These activities exploits both human and non-human world.

In the play *A Dance of the Forest*, people obey the nature. But when they struggle to escape from the spirits, they act against the gathering of tribes. Old man, who fears for the spirits, wants to drive it out from the forest. So, he pours the petrol in the forest which pollutes the air of the forest. Thus, humans' selfishness drives to the destruction of environment. It is stated by Eshuro, a wayward cult spirit as “. . . Have you seen how they celebrate the gathering of the tribes? In our own destruction. Today they even dared to chase out the forest spirits by poisoned the air with petrol fumes.” (Soyinka 41). By this act of human race, dwellers of forest affected and smoked to death. It is stated by Eshuro as “Four hundred million of their dead will crush the humans in a load of guilt. Four hundred million callously smoked to death. Since when was the forest so weak that human could smoke out the owners and sleep after?” (Soyinka 42)

Eshuro, a spirit which observes that the forest polluted by the human activities. The old generation Yoruba people give due respect to the Bush or Groves of the forest. But in present, people misuse the bush as a place to throw the garbage and a place to left their excrement. Eshuro says, “Where the humans preserve a little bush behind their homes, it is only because they want somewhere for their garbage. Dead dogs and human excrement are all you'll find in it. The whole forest stinks. Stinks of human obscenities.” (Soyinka 41)

Kenneth Burke in his theory of Technological De-terminism says technology plays the role of separating humans from their natural conditions. He calls man as 'tool-using-animal'. Technology leads to destruction of nature. The human race knows that their ancestors who know the crimes of human race have arrived to take revenge in the gathering of tribes. So the old man pours the petrol in the forest to escape from the spirits, which is an Ecological crisis from which the beauty of the forest destroyed. It also affects the dwellers of the forest. Old man orders that “Get him to drive it is back on the road in the forest that is get him to drive it right through here and he can let it smoke as much as he likes...” (Soyinka 29)

The visible emission of smoke from the vehicle affects the environment. Ozone layer helps the earth from the sun preventing the violent rays from the sun. Vehicle smoke plays a vital role in destruction of ozone layer. Ecologist advises the people to create a smoke-free world as much as possible. In the play *A Dance of the Forest* human community let the lorry to smoke the forest for their selfishness. This shows the Ecological crisis of the forest in the play.

In the gathering of tribes, the forest head asks the spirits of the nature to share their complaints against human race. The palm tree, symbol of peace, calls humans as blackened hearts which filled up with westernisation. The palm tree predicts that their race will be destroyed as they did not give importance to nature. It uses the word red which is the symbol of anger and disorder. It explains the disorder of Yoruba as

White skins wove me, I, Spirit of the Palm
Now course I red. I who suckle blackened hearts, know
Heads will fall down, Crimson in their red!” (Soyinka 64)

Human beings hunting the animals for its flesh, skin and ivory also considered as an act of against Ecology. The spirit of the Pachyderms complaints that their ivories were stolen by the wanton raiders, persons who stole ivory from elephants. It is stated by the spirit of the Pachyderms as,

“Blood that rules the sunset, bathe
This, our ivory red
Broken is the sleep of giants
Wanton raiders, ivory has a point
Thus, thus we bled. (Soyinka 65)

The spirit of the volcanoes which disappointed with human's unfaithful nature is planned to

explode and destroy the whole Yoruba people. But it did not leave the heat for last twenty hours. Because, the gathering of the tribes taking place in the forest for what the ancestors of Yoruba attended. Volcanoes anger stated as,

Nipples I engender, scattered
Through the broad breast of the earth,
I, Spirit of erupting mountains
But I am nor now winded. I have not belched
These twenty hours or more. I have spat
No hot ashes in the air.” (Soyinka 67)

In African cosmology, ants play a vital role that the world created from the excrement of ants. Yoruba people give due respect to ants. But in this play, Ant leader who disappointed with human race says

“I thought, staying this low,
They would ignore me. I am the one
That tried to be forgotten.” (Soyinka 68).

Ants are complaint that they were forgotten by the Yoruba people. Another ant says “I am the path of the carless stride” (Soyinka 68). The ant tells that ants are dead by the careless march of the human race. Thus, the spirits of the nature warn the Yoruba community.

Conclusion:

The objectives of ecocriticism are an understanding of man through literature as man is an inseparable part of the environment and enhance the relationship with nature. The role of ecocriticism is to understand the environmental problems. Ecological concerns have become the centre of today's discussion. Ecoconscious shares concern for the environment. It displays the growing awareness of environmental issues. In this twenty-first-century, people try to understand the environment and save it. The present generation should prevent the pollution for the future generation. As ecology is the heart of the world human race should save it. Harward Gardner (b 1943), American developmental psychologist, is proposed the Theory of Multiple Intelligence in his book *Frames of Mind, The theory of multiple intelligence* (1983). People who have intelligence towards nature easily find elements of nature. They easily recognize the sounds of the animals. He finds that the intelligence about nature is naturally embedded in the mind of the people. Hence, understand the nature is the solution for people to avoid the ecological problems.

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