

Allotropes of Natural Trajectories in Selected Poems of J.P. Clark

Chinonye C. Ekwueme-Ugwu & Walter Ugwuagbo

Department of English & Literary Studies

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

Like waves, coursing through the dense forests of the creeks, organic entities in many of J.P. Clark's poems assume a number of similar interesting forms that are of exploratory significance. These poems, including, but not limited to "Night Rain", "Abiku", "Streamside Exchange" and "Agbor Dancer" have enjoyed immense appreciation over the years, but with little emphasis on their ecological merits. This exploration of nature tropes, aims at establishing the relationships among the poems, their organic entities, and natural settings and to contribute towards advancing the perspectives of African ecocriticism, a theory that has globally gained currency in literary criticism, over the last two decades. Besides establishing the connections between literature (the poems) and the environment, an ecological ambience that counteracts the protests and activism, characteristic of contemporary Niger Delta literature is identified in the paper. It concludes that organisms in the poems are deployed to represent the sublime essences of organic purity, harmony and unity that seek to confine anthropocentric concerns to their barest, thereby promoting eco-consciousness in the humanities.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, African, Literature, J.P. Clark, Nature, Poetics

Introduction

Contemporary African literary ecological criticism has notably been characterized by protests, which aim at defending the African natural environment against the devastating Western hegemonic socio-political and economic influences. However, deeply rooted in the convivial natural African environment, J.P. Clark's poems

provide alternative ecological insights that are of significance to literary ecocriticism. This paper, an exploration of the ecological tropes in some of Clark's older poems, participates in reimagining the beautiful natural African ecosystem currently endangered by the neo-activist cultures of "literary militancy" (Egya 96) that has apparently done nothing but

aggravate on-going devastation of many of Africa's pristine ecosystems.

Even though, the environment in African literary genre predates modern day concepts of ecocriticism of the Anglo-American derivation (Slaymaker 684)), as a formal field of literary study, ecocriticism is not just "still a very nascent field of study" (Orabueze 94), but has clearly been viewed with suspicion as an extension of Western hegemonic influence on Africa (Slaymaker 683) by many colonial and postcolonial critics. Thus, dominated by anthropocentric concerns, studies from socio-political, cultural and economic perspectives often address such issues of gender, migration, hate speech, etc, with little reflection on the possibility of connections between these issues and the physical environmental, as succinctly proved by Orabueze's eco-feminist study of the exploitation of a "woman's body as a metaphor for ecological degradation in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*". Where a study of the physical environment is studied as an art or a humanistic issue, emphasis is often on the best possible ways to exploit nature for the maximum benefit of human beings, with the mindset that:

Every spot on earth is naturally endowed with one or more resources, be it material, human or both. Much depends on the ability of the inhabitants of such environment to discover to their advantage the potentials surrounding them; by exploring and harnessing

the resources for their utmost benefits (Osefoh and Agbonome 325).

With such inter disciplinary conferences on 'Ecology and the Convergence of the Sciences and the Humanities' held recently in Lapai, Niger State, attention has been drawn to the necessity of greater participation by Arts and Humanities scholars of public and private universities to the dangers of remaining hesitant towards inculcating ecocriticism into the curriculum of literary scholarship. As a result of eco-apathy, appeals to the environment by individual scholars are often yoked to the socio-economic and political issues that often engender protests, activism and recriminations. A historical examination of the effects of cultural advancements on nature, the ingenious exploitation of Africa's natural resources and the pollution of her organic ecosystems, has equally encouraged many individual African writers, such as Uzoechi Nwagbara¹, to respond to imperialist incursions into peripheral African ecosystems.

On the aesthetic and stylistic qualities of J.P. Clark's poems, much has already been written. However, very little cognizance of their ecological merits and contribution

¹"Aesthetic[e]s of Resistance and Sustainability: Tanure Ojaide and the Niger Delta Question. Lagos Paper in English Studies: vol. 5, April, 2010. http://artslasu.org/journal_eng/contents/vol5/nwagbara. Accessed 28 Jun. 2011.

towards African ecocriticism has been made. From a linguistic approach, Ebi Yeibo has investigated the “aspects of textual cohesion in selected poems of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo” using the methods and insights of discourse analysis to “demonstrate that cohesive ties have the potentials to combine with other elements of language to unify different parts of a text” (860). Similarly, his analysis of “mood structures” in Clark’s poems, using the methods of discourse-stylistic, provides additional insights into the linguistic qualities of the poems. But these do not address the ecological significance of the poems. Insightful as Sikiru Ogundokun’s examination of “Night Rain” “as a product of the relationship between literature and the environment ...” (20) might appear, it provides narrow estimation of the ecological significance of Clark’s poems. A wider approach to the ecologism of Clark’s poems would require a study of environmental tropes that courses through, not just “Night Rain”, but most of his earlier poems, including “Streamside Exchange”, “Agbor Dancer”, and “Abiku”. His conclusion that “our lives are not meaningful except they are situated in the cultural context of our environment” (27) appears more to be a fulfillment of a socio-cultural gap than an ecologic sort.

Many of J.P. Clark’s poems, reminiscent of the idyllic romantic enclaves of eighteenth century England, have also been estimated to project a Negritudian assessment of the African cultural and environmental

values. In his study of the transformational journey of the poet himself, Osofisan alludes to the influence of nature on Clark whom he fames as constantly retreating “to that distant, isolated promontory of the Kiagbodo river, where he built his home” (Osofisan 4). From this natural enclave, he observes natural manifestations in their allotropic trajectories.

This paper thus draws attention to the significance of ecologically balanced representations of the physical environment and its resources in Clark’s earlier poetry collections. The study is anchored on ecocriticism, a literary concept that dates back to the 1980s, but which became widespread from the mid-1990s. As a category of literary criticism, ecocriticism transcends the formalist textual aesthetics, as well as other socio-cultural, political and economic debates that have engaged criticism for centuries. It interrogates rather the role of literature towards creating a balance in global ecosystems, with a deep concern for the silenced world of non-human nature (Manes 16). The theory is concerned with the evaluation of literary works on the basis of their ecological merits (Howarth 69). Ecocritics aim at evolving a biocentric world view, capable of demystifying anthropocentrism and enthroning an ecologic web of interrelationship of organism, including human beings, in a symbiotic milieu (Leal 17). According to William Howarth, ecocriticism derives from the Greek *oikos* and *kritis*, two grammatical elements that mean

eco and *critic*, which, when taken together “mean house judge” or “a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action” (69).

Ecocriticism, as a literary movement which embodies the ideologies of culture and its impact on nature and the biosphere began in USA in the 1980s. As noted by Cheryl Glotfelty, prior to the 1980s, the notion had been expressed in academic papers to distinguish literature of ecologic concern from others, which emphasize overtly anthropocentric anxieties (xvi – xvii). Similarly, contemporary African authors and critics, following the successes of ecocriticism in global literature, have embraced the theory, with some, including Slaymaker¹, Nixon², and Caminero-Santangelo³

¹“Ecoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses.” *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. U.S.A: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2007. Pp. 683.

²“Environmentalism and Post colonialism”. *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. U.S.A: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2007. Pp. 715.

³Caminero-Santangelo, Byron. “Different Shades of Green: Ecocriticism and African Literature.” *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato

insisting that prior to the advent of contemporary western ecocriticism, early African writers, like the 18th century English/American romantic poets, have thematized nature in their works. Others, like Anthony Vital, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, have advocated varying shades of ecocriticism to take into account the peculiarities of people’s colonial and postcolonial experiences and their impact on nature, culture, socio-political, and economic structures. Innumerable others, including Senayon Olaoluwa, Emmanuel Sule Egya, Nabeta Sangili have sought to establish the correlations between African literature, her physical environmental, and modern cultural practices, which have culminated in a brand of literary artistry that Egya terms ‘literary environmental militancy’.

While Vital contends that “the best way to reconcile postcolonial criticism and eco/environmental criticism might be to take into account ‘the complex interplay of social history with the natural world ...’” (Huggan and Tiffin 22), Olaoluwa insists that “ecocritical consciousness has always been constitutive of African literature ... even if this consciousness was initially subsumed under the label of anti-colonialist writing (126), an indication that the West has as much to learn from African environmental literature as Africa has to learn from the West. Besides these anti-colonial sentiments,

Quayson. U.S.A: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2007. Pp. 699.

environmental issues of exploitation and degradation of the natural African ecosystem have also engaged African literary scholarship in the last one and a half decades. Environmental issues, for instance, underlie many contemporary Nigerian literary genres: drama, poems and prose narratives, including but not limited to the works of Isidore Okpewho, Kaine Agary, Tanure Ojaide, Helon Habila and Greg Mbajjorgu. The works of these authors have, over the years, along with older African texts, such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*, have received ecocritical readings in various African and non-African journals, as indications of the viability of ecocriticism for the study of African literary genres, along with the peculiarities of African colonial, socio-political and economic experiences.

Ecocriticism's biocentric movement, which was officially launched into the annals of American literature in the mid nineteen nineties and which has since spread through Europe, Asia, and parts of Africa provides the theoretical basis of this paper. Its principles of "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Rueckert 107), and of "a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xix), inform an exploration of the eco-centric values of Clark's poems. Equally conditioned by the postcolonial ecocritical voices of such African ecocritics as William Slaymaker, Tanure Ojaide, Senayon Olaoluwa, Rob Nixon, Nabeta Sangili, and Anthony Vital among others, the

paper explores the poems from a peculiar African perspective to ecological imagination, mindful of the advocates of a peculiarly Afro-centric model of "reading for nature with an awareness of colonial history" (Vital 87). A study of the environment alongside "issues of land, culture, agriculture, politics, and economy among others" (Ojaide 66), emphasized as an African dimension to ecocriticism is also at the backdrop of this paper.

By asking the question: "What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel [or poem]?" or "How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?" (Glotfelty xix), ecocritics seek ways of realizing the goal of inculcating environmental consciousness in the literary artist, critic, and scholar. Thus, nature's affinity with poetry forms the core underpinnings of this ecocritical study of the poems; one of ecocriticism's major assumptions being that the study of literature from a biocentric view point is fundamental to the attainment of ecological consciousness, harmony, purity and sustainability. To this end, this study seeks to identify natural entities in Clark's poems and celebrate their ecological merits.

The necessity of environmental consciousness among practitioners of the literary art and other art forms is informed by the array of environmental issues discovered by studies in the socio-environmental and natural sciences. The issue of climate change, its causes, effects and mitigation, for instance, has become

sources of concern in these other fields of endeavour. Okafor and Unachukwu observe that “The global climate change will continue to have a strong impact on Nigeria ... in the areas of agriculture, land use, water resources, health, energy, coastal resources and sectors of its economy” (29). Similarly, the study by Ezeokpube *et al* on the environmental impacts of indiscriminate dumping of used water sachets in the Nsukka urban reveals the sheer lack of environmental consciousness by the people. To this end, a reexamination of some of J.P. Clark’s poems from a bio-centered perspective is a contribution towards the achievement of the ecological goals of bio-consciousness. Another of ecocriticism’s supposition is for the incorporation of ecology and the ecological principle into literary imagination and criticism. This is in an attempt “to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community...” (Rueckert 107).

Ecocriticism, equally deriving from “environmental imagination”, as inward and outward explorations of nature’s property, is said to require “writers to defer ... to the authority of external nonhuman reality as a criterion of accuracy and value” (Buell 113). This principle has unarguably apparently informed Clarkan nature metaphors in the poems. As eco-studies generally deemphasize humanity’s inherited anthropocentric dominance of the biosphere with its teaming animate and inanimate matter, a “web of life” of which human

beings are just a part (Leal 21) has been advocated. Thus, at the core of the study is an understanding that the poet, in his creative mission underscores a world view of divine order in which the human and non-human elements of the environment participate in ushering balance and harmony in the ecosystem. Similarly, that “poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted” (Shelley

<www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/q-defence-of-poetry>) helps in situating the study within the ecocritical scope. Besides contributing towards a re-imagination of the natural idyllic enclaves of their settings, project the original connection between modern ecocriticism and its romantic antecedent. The poems underscore ecocriticism’s quest for a re-evaluation of modern anthropocentric cultures with its advocated bio-centric opposite.

The poems evoke moreover ecocriticism’s cardinal concepts reanimation of nature and the natural elements, with a view to provoking more viable social environmental culture. In the words of Christopher Manes: “to regard nature as alive and articulate has consequences in the realm of social practices. It conditions what passes for knowledge about nature; and how institutions put that knowledge to use” (16). It is thus from these ecocritical viewpoints that J.P. Clark’s poems are examined.

Nature and its Trails in the Poems

From the vantage point of nature and its gifts, the poet observes and

documents natural entities in their transformative aura. Water, for instance, assumes various postures in the process. 'The Year's First Rain', 'Night Rain', 'Water Maid', 'Olokun', and 'Stream Side Exchange' address the same element - water - but from different angles. In the first instance, the same element takes the form of rain which "after long surcease in the desert ... comes / Hot-breathing, alert / Swift to thunder-rolls and claps" to water the parched and thirsty earth. But then, it interpolates the traditional African worldview of the male - female sexual imagery and the associated tropes of procreative essences. The rain, possessing the male attribute, 'after long surcease in the desert' (line 1), returns, reinvigorated, with swift action to impregnate the earth, who in turn is imbued with the feminine attributes of docility and willingness to receive, incubate, nurture and birth new lives.

*After long surcease in the desert,
Rain comes,
Hot-breathing, alert
Swift to thunder-rolls and claps (lines 2
- 5)*

*And earth waiting, waiting inert,
Fallow and burdened ...
Shudders to her rump,
Tingles to the trump
Of the long-missed one.*

*Now with more than tongue can tell
Thrusts he strokes her, swamps her,
Enters all of him beyond her fell,
Till in the calm and cool after
All alone, earth yawns, limbers her stay,*

*Swollen already with the life to break at
day. (lines 7 - 11)*

On this one hand is the allotrope of congenial ambience that counteracts that of ruin or degradation in "Night Rain", with its reminiscences of modern day ecologic ruin occasioned by humanity's misappropriations of science and technological inventions. Assuming the form and force of the "night rain", streams of ecological metaphors course through, inundate and animate the multi-faceted natural entities. "Like some fish doped out of the deep", to a fresh but repeated experience with nature, the riverine and fishing enclaves combat nature's now anarchic influences. The poet persona's sleep, cool, and smooth-sailing, like a typical African stream, is rudely interrupted by the rain. 'And no cocks crow' to indicate what time of the night, a recreation of the natural interaction between organisms in their ecosystem as well as a symbiotic relationship between the environment, the birds, and the humankind.

The 'roof thatch' and the 'sheaves' that 'slit open to lightening', open more vistas to an appreciation of some of the natural elements that are at the root of advancements in building technology. "The rhythm is soothing, real, and concrete". The poem represents "an Africa that, sadly, many of the present generation no longer know" (Osofisan 10) and may never know.

*Great water drops are dribbling
Falling like oranges or mango
Fruits showered forth in the wind*

With the rising movement, and with the urgency of the tone, the effect of the usually very strong tropical African rain is felt, so strong as to be compared with the fruits, oranges and mangoes 'showered forth in the wind'. This urgency calls for action and replaces the earlier soothing tone:

*It is drumming hard here
And I suppose everywhere
Droning with insistent ardour upon
Our roof thatch and shed*

Environmental issues are often universal, though with regional variations. Rain, flood, cyclone, tsunami, drought, etc., are associated issues witnessed to a greater or lesser degree from one region of the world to another. Thus, this call, as under a military command with all necessary arsenals, brings about the desired action:

*In wooden bowls and earthenware
Mother is now busy deploying
About our roomlet and floor.
Although it is dark
I know her practised step as
She moves her bins, bags and vats
Out of the run of water
That like ants filing out of the wood
Will scatter and gain possession
Of the floor.*

Although armed with the most rudimentary tools, mother (significantly not father) confronts nature, with 'practised step', an indication that nature must always have its way, and that it is incumbent

upon human beings to devise appropriate measures for mediating the effects of natural occurrences without incurring greater damages to the ecosystem. The current situation around the world whereby human beings, in their attempt to secure maximum comfort for themselves, endanger the lives of their fellow human beings as well as other organisms, only produce greater natural disasters, in the forms of severe flooding, soil erosion, earthquakes, etc. that cannot be overcome by simply removing 'bins, bags and vats out of the run of water'.

Then, from the allotrope of ruin in "night rain" nature's affectionate essences looms large in "Olokun". Transcribed in the lyrical fashion of the earlier English romantic tradition, 'Olokun' tells the story of an African in tune with nature and the supernatural world. Knowledge transcending the natural boundaries embraces the sublime world of Olokun, the sea goddess, to create a symbiotic, transcendental, love relationships between the poet persona and the spirit being:

*I love to pass my fingers
(As tides thro' weeds of the sea
And wind the tall fern fronds)
Thro' the strands of your hair
Dark as night that screens the naked
moon:*

Tides, weeds, sea, wind, fern fronds, hair strands, dark night and naked moon provide glaring metaphors or images of symbiotic relationships

among the transcendent, natural organisms and environment. The poet persona thus, in addition to making a strong case for his metaphysical world view, demonstrates the unity of all things in nature. With strong allusions to, and comparison with the natural elements – tides, weeds of the sea, wind, fern fronds, hair strands dark as night that screens the naked moon – the speaker highlights the beauty of the goddess and compares the strength of his passion for her with that of the Jew for Jehovah in this equally very strong allusion:

*I am jealous and passionate
Like Jehovah, God of the Jews,
And I would that you realise
No greater love had woman
From man than the one I have for you!*

The hair, “Dark as night that screens the naked moon”, speaks of the natural African hair on the speaker. The image of a dark night screening ‘the naked moon’ is one familiar only to those close to nature, and who reside within the natural environment, as most Africans are, even today. This projects a peculiarly African perspective that is mostly lost to modern metropolitan city dwellers around the world. One has to reside away from the city and its dazzling superficial lights to appreciate the natural elements. The ecological metaphors, embellished with the transcendental images of nature and the metaphysical world, continue through the rest of the lines:

*But what wakeful eyes of man,
Made of the mud of this earth,*

*Can stare at the touch of sleep
The sable vehicle of dream
Which indeed is the look of your eyes?*

The image is that of a man, a product of earth, mouth agape, eyes wide open, staring in unbelievable wonder at the goddess, whose eyes are compared to “the touch of sleep ... vehicle of dream”. Conclusively, Olokun is nature sublime and generous.

*So drunken, like ancient walls
We crumble in heaps at your feet;
And as the good maid of the sea,
Full of rich bounties for men,
You lift us all beggars to your breast.*

The image, first and foremost, in the lines above is that of men who, satiated with the beauty of a woman, “crumble in heaps”, beggars, at her feet. The other image of “ancient walls”, which, soaked with rain, “crumble in heaps” is evocative of man’s earlier attempts with architectural designs, which nature, in the form of heavy rains, demolishes as imperfect. Thanks to man’s natural resilience and ingenuity, more durable houses are available now, though not to many in Africa’s rural settings. In other words, many Africans are still battling with crumbling walls.

Olokun, or nature, “as the good maid of the sea” is moreover “Full of rich bounties for men”. As such, she lifts them all up, beggars to her breast. Olokun/nature is transcendent over and above human beings, who are but beggars, vagabonds or tramps before her. Thus, human beings, creatures of nature “Made of the mud of this earth”

(line 12), are here deposed from their presumed sublimity as the centre of creation and reduced to just another of the natural entities.

The 'Abiku' ecosystem is very much similar to the 'Night Rain' *oikos*, as both embody more or less the same natural elements. Birds, fish, trees, humans, floods that 'brim the banks', fire, night, day, sun and seasons all interact in an ecological milieu. The only difference is in the supernatural experience of the poet persona who transcends the physical world and ventures into the metaphysical world of the *Abiku* and its 'kindred spirits'. With these, the "web of creation", as envisioned by Robert Barry Leal, is completed. Leal attributes anthropocentrism and human arrogance to humanity's willful disconnect from their position in the hierarchy of created and immanent beings, thereby losing their transcendental origin with the spirits and other more sublime metaphysical entities. This in turn results in the unwholesome exploitation of the natural world by human beings (Leal 16). The world of *Abiku* is one in which all, the physical and the metaphysical, interact in an organic unity and ambiance. The poet persona addresses the spirit entity in familiar terms:

*Coming and going these several seasons
Do stay out on the baobab tree,
Follow where you please your kindred spirits
If indoors is not enough for you*

As the seasons come and go so does the *Abiku*. As the seasons take their

toll on the seaside habitat of the fishing community, causing 'leaks through the thatch', "floods brim[ing] the banks", and harmattam making "the bamboo walls ready tinder for fire", so does the *Abiku*'s seasonal coming and going make the body of the mother, tired and her milk sour. There, the poet draws a striking parallel between the natural elements and the spiritual; the physical and the metaphysical akin to Olaoluwa's analysis of the Igbo metaphysical worldview of *Things Fall Apart*.¹

The poet employs the metaphor of contrasting reciprocity with the imageries "when flood brims the banks, and it leaks through the thatch" alongside, "the fire that dries the fresh fish up on the rack". The poem readily reflects African ontological and animist viewpoint regarding spiritual habitats. The *Abiku*, a spirit-child, in want of a permanent habitat, craves the womb of the mother. As such, the poet persona, privy to the pains of child birth and mortality suggests that *Abiku* stays out "on the boabab tree", considered in many traditional African societies as the natural habitat of spirits. This is suggested by "follow where you please your kindred spirits". Hence, the poem is anchored on the African natural animist environment in which human beings, trees and other natural entities may be inhabited by spirits and none is

¹ "Animist Intimations in *Things Fall Apart*" in *Ecocriticism of the Global South*, eds. Scott Slovic, Swaranalatha Rangarajan and Vidya Sarveswaran. New York: Lexington Books, 2015.

in a limbo, purgatory, heaven, hell and other such habitats of spirits conveyed in foreign religions and mythologies.

The "Agbor Dancer", probably anchored on an actual experience involving the poet and a traditional lady-dancer, is an expression of nature and artistry. From a vantage point among the audience, the poet draws quick attention to her, using the grammatical *operator* "see." The setting, Agbor, is a hilly town; the dancer is a woman, dancing to the intricate beat of a traditional drum. The drum is made of animal hide and the gestures and dance steps of the woman expose her: 'opening out in her supple tan' is compared to, fresh foliage in the sun". The dicotyledonous plant can only open-up to the sun in its state of virginity, akin to the dancer's two hands thrown into the air in tandem with the drum's rhythm. The poet establishes a clear relationship between animal, plant, man and nature, interacting in a physical environment.

The dancer is so engrossed in the intricacies of the musical notes that she is said to be in a trance. So, she departs from the conscious and travels; ferried by the music, metaphorically carrying tufts until she enters her 'cloud nine'. This orgasmic climax, the poet again relates to the natural, organic and environmental reach: "to meet the green clouds of the forest". She trembles to the beat as she involves her whole body parts-tips, toes, hair and so on; to a superlative degree that leaves the poet tongue-tied and 'poem-tied'. Then, the crux of the issue is addressed in that stanza. The poet-persona

rhetorically wonders if he - the westernized prodigal - could return to the traditional African ways, and once again put down his toe on the native soil and dance as well, even to the point of giving the Agbor dancer a warm caress. The persona refers to himself as a 'lead-tethered scribe' schooled to read and write; tied like a domesticated animal to foreign letters. He agrees to the fact that he is separated from communal ways long ago-in his infancy. But there is a longing for a return to self. The very last line relates the dancer to a warm caress with the earth, sky, and flesh.

In all, the flora and fauna are firm anchors of the poetic tropes. The Africaness of the poem lies in relating the success and beauty of the Agbor dancer, not to expertise or training or modernity but to the pristine; hence, the clear invocations of "fresh foliage in the sun", meeting the green cloud of the forest" virginal habits", and cares intertwining earth, sky and flesh". This is where the interplay between humans and their physical environment, as well as the influence of the latter on the former lies. "Streamside Exchange", with its thematized title, suggests that a conversation is held in a serene, natural setting: a streamside. The dialogue is between a child whose mother leaves home for an undisclosed place and a bird perched on a tree branch by the side of a stream.

The ecological dimension to the poem is that the dialogue is between a human being and an animal. In Judeo-Christian mythology, the last time human beings dialogued with an

animal is in the Garden of Eden. Out of curiosity, the child asks the bird to do the work of a clairvoyant; that is, to tell if his mother would be back from her unknown destination. The bird agrees, but only to inform the child that his knowledge of seasons and events is limited, and he needs not worry about the unknowable. The bird consoles the child and draws a parallel between the tide that comes and goes and journey of the absent mother. As “markets and tides” come and go, so shall the mother go and return. This reflects the cyclical world view. In other words, the instinct of the lower creature, the bird, supersedes the knowledge of the higher creature. The thematized setting of the “streamside”, the river itself, the river bird, the grass, the tide and market are all elements of the natural environment which are suggestive of the symbiotic relationships of organisms with their natural environment. The imagery of an idyllic natural setting, where humans converse with animals, is also suggestive of this ecological ambience. The strength of the poem thus lies in its evocative power and the longing by humans to blend with nature. The mood, setting, and characters are brought together through the choice of environmental diction.

Conclusion

The deployment of the natural organisms, humans and non-humans, the flora and fauna – mother, cocks, owls, bats, oranges, mangoes, ants, thatch, rafters, lightning, fish, stream, great water drops, the poet persona

and the brothers mentioned towards the end of “Night Rain”, etc. – all in one ecological setting, indeed, recommends the poem to an African ecocritical reader. Since Africa possesses the rich natural environment and resources that are often targets of imperialist conquests and exploitations, a more active participation of African literature in the global call for a reassessment of humanity’s exploitation of peripheral ecosystems is an imperative. Clark’s poems, mostly set in Nigeria’s Niger Delta, embody environmental metaphors that are capable of projecting authentic African eco-lit. Thus, employing the methods of ecocriticism, this paper has explored environmental tropes in selected poems of J.P. Clark to in order to project integration of the study of the natural environment into African literature. Granted that as an academic discipline, within the African humanities, ecocriticism remains in its nascent stage, and the environment is yet to gain recognition, a conscientious and consistent ecocritical exploration of African primal texts by adherents of the principle will pave way for such recognition to occur.

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