

**ENVIRONMENTALISM AND AFRICAN LITERATURE:
A STUDY OF SHIMMER CHINODYA'S *DEW IN THE
MORNING***

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Abstract

The study sets out to investigate environmentalism and African literature with reference to Shimmer Chinodya's *Dew in the Morning*. The novelist uses the medium of his writing to delineate the connection between literature and the erratic visible environment. He writes with much candor about the events in his milieu and brings into prominence an earth-centred narrative, his novel depicts the trademark of a writer with his own style and content thereby carving a niche for himself in the canon of African literature. He shows that nature can be preserved or ravaged by humans in their quest to make life meaningful and comfortable for themselves. Man manipulates his physical environment to optimize his life so as to achieve a high level of sustenance. Chinodya reveals that in man's search for a tenable means of livelihood, the atmosphere is devastated which leads to pollution, diseases, overcrowding, death among others. With the new developments, certain cultural practices have to give way in order to take in the realities of the modern time. His content reflects the African landscape and social identity. This study will be situated using eco-criticism as the theoretical framework to the study of literature.

Keywords: Environment, Literature, Nature, Man, Devastation, Eco-criticism

Introduction

The delineation of the two key words: environmentalism and African literature remains very crucial in this study. Over the years, African writers have written more on the issues of colonization, urbanization and

postcolonialism in African literature while few writers have expressed and evoked African landscape, its alluring nature while at the same time highlighting the devastation of the rural setting. In this category, worthy of mention are Tsitsi Dangaremba's *This Mourning Body*, Ken Saro Wiwa's *A Month and a Day*, Ben Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*, Vanessa Nakate's *A Bigger Picture*, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* among others.

There are some facsimiles that evoke the true nature of the image of the African environment; such ringers like the air coming from the trees, the rich humid soil, wild animals, the calmness of the environment, the aura as well as the attractiveness of the countryside are among some of the factors that led to the European scramble and partition of Africa. The habitat is loved and cherished for its closeness to nature. As a result of the development associated with the modern times as well as urbanization, the way of life of the African is altered in order to embrace the new realities; people move away from the rural areas to seek the city jobs. This accounts for the uneven cultural and social posture in Africa. Those remaining in the countryside strive against all odds to do their farming continually on the same piece of land while causing some form of abuse to the earth. The author uses the medium of his narrative to awaken this consciousness in the African people to preserve their surroundings. According to Chinua Achebe, the duty of a writer remains to create awareness and educate his people to understand "what they lost ... a man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body ... it is to explore in depth the human condition" (8). It is as a result of this ugly trend that some African writers are using the platform of their fiction to mount campaign against the degradation of the earth. *Dew in the Morning* is an example of such fiction.

Dew in the Morning is an environmental centred novel which the author uses as a canvas to paint the environmental situation in Africa. This atmospheric glitch lays bare the hitch of the writer's imagination, the solutions which can be resolved with an effective interaction or blending of humanity and nature to manage environmental challenges. Therefore, atmospheric degeneration means how the natural milieu is subjected to a series of hazards or pollutions by human actions; it can also mean altering the atmosphere by subjecting the flora and fauna to danger. In the same vein, the land, the river and the air are equally

polluted. In consequence, the things of nature are forced into extinction, therefore, the novelist uses the medium of his novel to carry out a crusade against the violation of the earth and at the same time, carry out a depiction of environmental predicament.

Theoretical Framework

This study will be situated using ecocriticism as the theoretical framework to the study of literature. The aim of ecocriticism is to investigate the relationship that exists between literature and the uneven or changing observable environment. This involves the vivid representation or the description of physical environment in literary studies. Similarly, it includes the manner the things of nature or natural concepts are preserved or breached. According to Paul Goring, Jeremy Hawthorn and Domhnall Mitchell, “ecocriticism is an earth-centred approach to literary works, especially works that share the critic’s interest in the physical environment” (194). The theory examines the order and circumstance of humanity as well as nature.

Through this literature of place, the reader infers the author’s ideology and aesthetic about the planet. The modern literary critics have not shown much interest in environmental issues, so, the major task of ecocritical writing is evaluating how the things of nature are either maintained or despoiled. According to Rob Nixon, ecocriticism centres on “discourses of purity, Virgin wilderness and the preservation of uncorrupted... environmental literary studies has tended to give priority to the literature of place ... environmental literature and criticism, something different happens to history. It is often repressed or subordinated to the pursuit of timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature” (716-7). It is this literary explication of the milieu that helps to acquaint us with how much the things of nature are loved. Ecocriticism deals with an environmental-centred method to the study of literature which examines the connection between literature and the observable human milieu. According to Greg Garrard, ecocritics generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a ‘green’ moral and political agenda ... is closely related to environmental oriented developments is philosophy and political theory. Developing the insights of earlier critical movements, ecofeminists, social ecologists and environmental justice advocates seek a synthesis of environmental and social concerns (4).

Ecocriticism investigates how the things of nature are either portrayed or highlighted in a work of art; it examines if a literary work can lend itself to ecocritical inquiry. Therefore, ecocriticism is a literary theory that sets out to use literature to analyse environmental matters or challenges. The eco-critical sublimness exists in its quest to use literature as a showcase to depict the glaring relationship which exists between a literary work and the human environment.

The Clarification of *Dew in the Morning*

The writer uses the medium of his novel to portray the alluring nature of his milieu, the changes and the decimation of the things of nature. With the village becoming crowded, air becomes polluted, the exquisiteness and serenity of the countryside give way to dreadfulness and grotesqueness. Chinodya tries to acquaint the reader with the fascinating beauty of nature, idealizes it and tries to emphasize the glaring distinction between nature and what is left of the human habitat.

The human invasion of the appealing rural milieu destroys the flawlessness of the hinterland with the croaking frogs, the bright fireflies and others that showcase the resplendence and charm of the environment disappear and the author declares that “already the chilly air was creeping into the forest and I knew there would be buckets of dew in the morning – useless beautiful dew scattered over hundreds of acres of grass” (147). Symbolically, the dew or chilly air represents humanity that has evaded the earth, corrupts it solely for his benefit and ushers in loathsomeness and imperfections. Also, “useless beautiful dew scattered over hundreds of acres of grass” can in like manner mean imposing structures and buildings that have been erected by man to cause devastations and erase the beauty and attractiveness of nature.

The narrator recalls with ardor how some aspects of cultural practices have eroded away. For instance, he recounts how children evade the once revered fruit trees and violate them by using stones to bring down the fruits on such trees. He enthuses that, “Gone were the days when children believed that shaking fruit trees would get them lost in the forest and that walking with upturned axe blades would anger the Gods into withholding the rain” (139). The preceding quote shows that the memories and tranquility of the village life have been destroyed. In the same vein, he calls to reminiscence how the children work hard to keep the cattle away from their farms and return home drenched.

According to the narrator, children enjoy sitting by the fire “while the rain splashed down outside, they enjoy sitting wet by a fire ... you suck the salty water from your nose and feel your flesh glowing to the bone. You put your fingers in the hot flames while your clothes steam. Eventually you drowse”(110).

The writer remembers his childhood memory of how the ploughboys yoke the oxen, the herdboys take the cows out for grazing and bring them back home for milking.

In the community, industriousness is admired while laziness is detested. The storyteller reveals how his family is inspired by their new hired ploughboy who manipulates nature to achieve sufficiency and accomplishment. They accompany him to the farm to plough by 3.am, when others are asleep. He questions why people are afraid of the dark, he reiterates that the only reason is the disappearance of the sun which illuminates the earth. Emphasizing how diligence pays, he records that, By the time the sun had risen ... and the other ploughboys had arrived we had ploughed two acres. People stared at us as we went home, wondering how we could return again so early in the morning ... they see you leaving the fields in the morning when the dew is still on the grass and they laugh. But when they spy on your fields and find the mealies tasselling, we will have the last laugh (178).

In the excerpt above the author underscores the importance and desirability in assiduity. Correspondingly, it shows why some people outsmart others and become more outstanding. On the other hand, it is worthy of note that the earth and its devastation are highlighted inextricably in *Dew in the Morning*. If the atmosphere is unwholesome, man’s quest to achieve optimum success in whatever he does will be defeated; life becomes uncomfortable while in such toxic environment, humans will be susceptible to diseases and death.

The writer clamours for an unsullied earth that will make life meaningful and habitable for man. He states that in the village, “people were dying like ants ... we feared poisoning. There were too many graves and too many corpse eaters in the village ... my sister died and my mother decided to leave the village” (50). This disaster can be caused by sullied environment while the people erroneously attribute such deaths to hidden powers because they believe that deaths do not just occur. Carolyn Merchant stresses that environmentalists caution “the irreversible consequences of continuing environmental exploitation

are developing an ecological ethic emphasizing the interconnectedness between people and nature ... on the full expression of both male and female talent and on the maintenance of environmental integrity” (introduction, XIX). It becomes necessary to carry out campaigns against environmental decline and the manipulation of nature.

There is pollution as animals are not restricted to their stables. According to the narrator, “there was a strong sharp smell of cow dung, of dust and human refuse” (94). This becomes a threat to human lives and these stray animals destroy people’s crops and economic wellbeing. Furthermore, there is so much destruction to the surroundings as the raconteur recounts: “It was the reign of the axe and the goats; the axe which opened the forests to the ravishing plough, and the goats, which mushroomed in number and were rarely killed for meat, but served only to create hatred between neighbours as they ate everything in sight” (139). Deforestation has not been a favourable act and that is the reason why the ecologists or the friends of the earth preach against such wreckage.

Additionally, the author reveals the ravaging of the atmosphere through burning in October (16). The natives suffer the effects of the smoke as carbon and soot which emanate from factories cause pollution which is dangerous to the people and the animals. The novelist deploys his narrative as the strategy to analyse the debasement of the earth. Generally, he evaluates the despoliation of the environment and creates awareness of those agricultural practices that can bring about environmental abuse. Toxic earth decreases human population and when the surrounding is preserved, people will enjoy healthy living. Therefore, *Dew in the Morning* becomes a clarion call to take care of our milieu.

Derukas are dispossessed of their lands and have to be relocated to another area of fresh virgin fields, the reader observes the numerous experiences and contradictions that follow their existence in the new location. The novel depicts volubly this childhood experience; with the development of the new area, the once idealized rural setting becomes polluted and crowded.

As a result of the council’s division of the lands, and their intent to make money, the rural and serene environment gives way to the semi-urban setting with its destructive effects. Yona’s father complains of the problems associated with the council’s interference in the new

environment. Eventually, when they come, they begin to use pegs to mark the grass strip areas thereby wasting lands with the attendant ecological flaws which will ravage the crops. The council is not interested in conserving or protecting the earth since they are out to amass wealth; the ploy of the council remains a strategy of constraint to cinch the people's resources thereby causing ecological depletion. According to Obari Gomba, "dispossession, underdevelopment and environmental degradation are strategies of repression" (48). The novel is a reflection of the depredation of the African surroundings and desperate call to put an end to such destruction.

The novelist is passionate about his thematic concern and uses his narrative to portray environmental issues and problems in Africa. According to Byron Caminero-Santangelo, "African writers can play a significant role in environmental causes, just as they have in other forms of social activism" (698). Apart from the problem of the council, wealthy individuals exploit both the earth and the human labour for their own selfish aggrandizement. For instance, Mangova is one of such fellows who does not care about the despoliation of his milieu including the people who work for him. The writer remarks that, Mangova was one of the illustrious agricultural demonstrators. He had ... fenced off his huge fields in the fertile land and near the Vlei. Here the soil was black and crumbly, so damp that worms burrowed it all year round. He kept his soil drugged with manure and fertilizers, so that even in bad years his mealies grew tall, and his acres went white with cotton balls. He was one of those derukas who enslaved the soil, overworked their servants, sent out huge herds of cattle to tax the humble meadows. In such homestead milk, egg, meat, vegetables, rice, green mealies were available at most time of the year but human sweat oozed all year round (101-102).

From the foregoing, one observes that Mangova does not care about shifting cultivation, he overuses the soil which loses its nutrients, uses fertilizers excessively which can affect health; he is only engrossed in obtaining abundant harvest and stresses his staff as well. As a result of over-stressing the soil, the purity of the earth is threatened. Thus, the writer uses his novel to expose those practices that can cause atmospheric decline. The writer shows that the things of the landscape can be attractive and appealing as he makes a distinction between the countryside and the contaminated earth when he contends that,

There are distinct pockets of smell and as you come up from the valley you can distinguish them. You can even pick out the scents of the individual fruits trees and flowers. And as you leave the forest and approach the village, you are suddenly confronted by the strong smell of humanity ... smell of the mud huts, the smoke, the heavy damp stink of cow dung ... all the smell of the rubbish heaps (147).

In the aforementioned quote, the natural world is portrayed as calm, soothing and attractive while human dwelling is pictured as being destructive, disorderly, polluting, offensive and hazardous. It shows that nature is fascinating when it is uncorrupted. Chinodya is a nature novelist who adores and glorifies the things of nature; he painstakingly describes in detail different millieux, depicting the glamour and attractiveness associated with God's creation.

Furthermore, Chinodya limns the admirable communal attachment cum good neighbourliness as residents come together to listen to the word of God, pray, and sing from an old hymn before going to sleep. Often, the narrator's father prepares breakfast for the residents; he reveals that, "bread and cakes and biscuits were brought out and tea made in a bucket. There were not enough cups to go round so the children had to wait. Eventually we had our turn and a score or so children joined us in gulping down mountains of bread and oceans of tea" (23). This action shows the communal nature of the neighbourhood.

Another fascinating experience is the hunting of madora and the excitement which propels the women, children and some men of the neighbourhood to go in search of it. The search for this nutritious delicacy is quite a new acquaintance to Godi the narrator for such savvy never exists in their former neighbourhood from where they relocated to their present abode. The reader notices that this new environment offers adventure and active social for both the young and the old. There is also the provocation and feeling of joy that accompany the beer party and Christmas celebration.

The people detest indolence; while the deruka's crops and pastoral farms blight the surroundings, Jairos is heavily criticized for his sloth. The storyteller reiterates that, he "spoke of prosperity, peace and progress and yet made not one positive effort to achieve these standards. He spoke of good houses when his own compound consisted of only two huts, two unplastered huts with old grey roofs. He spoke of cotton, groundnuts and sunflowers when his own fields reverting to bush ... he

spent all his money on beer” (74). Jairos the headman of the community is excited with the influx of the derukas to his village, according to him, “I want beer parties every night in this village. I want all these thick forest to be chopped down to provide fields” (33). Rather than being an instrument of conservation as the community head, he symbolizes an agent of annihilation. To show how the author despises him, he dies in his drunken state and in penury too. He is presented as a foil to the short and ugly Ndogo, who works hard on his farm to take care of his wives and children.

What’s more, the storyteller is emotional as he describes his mother’s closeness to nature, how she fondles the earth, her tenacity and willingness to achieve great strides out of farming. She spends every day weeding and going round her farm “defending her precious crops from cattle and goats. In the blazing sunshine or drenching rain, she was the human fence to our fields” (141).

As a result of the fact that the council is now in charge of allotting new plots and extension of the farms, the villagers complain that they build “contour, ridges and grass strips” and never fenced off the stream (90). They do not care to preserve the rivers which provide fish and water for man’s needs. Also, the narrator remarks that people have a lot to gain by preserving nature for instance, people take herbs and leaves to cure illness (88). Following the inflow of the emigrants, there is scarcity of lands as they want lands to build their houses and do their farming. There is pressure from the settlers to get land for different purposes and this demand becomes a challenge to Simon the new community leader.

The natives believe in the existence of ghosts, witches and strong medicine men who can keep them away (49). Also, there is the ritual of thanksgiving beer which demands a new deruka family into the community to brew beer and entertain the elders as a sign of gratitude for accepting them to live in the neighbourhood. Although Masiziva makes a mockery of such a custom, however, she hires someone to brew the beer on her behalf (58). The people are so much immersed in superstitious beliefs and build their lives around them. Jeni’s body is allowed to decay before it will be buried because of the erroneous belief “that the witches don’t dig up her grave and eat her flesh” (166). This act will invariably pollute the atmosphere and expose the people to danger.

In the same vein, a possessive ceremony is carried out to honour the dead because the people believe that the dead manipulates the living. An example is when Cheru has been constantly sick and her dead aunt is accused of being responsible. It is believed that she wants to possess Cheru “because she has something to say to us” (54). It is done on a Saturday with many people in attendance, “Lots of food, meat, stamped mealies, beer, *Maheu*, dancing and drums” (55). The people of this milieu strongly believe that the dead still have affinity with the living.

In addition, the residents assume that nature can be maneuvered, for instance, seeing the effects of the droughty atmosphere, the villagers invite a rain maker who manipulates the physical environment by carrying out a ritual of destroying two strange birds and burning “a dead woman’s hut”(27). Rain pours in torrents subduing drought and heat that have affected the dwellers.

Conclusion

This study has been able to examine environmentalism and African literature with reference to Shimmer Chinodya’s *Dew in the Morning*. The novelist uses his work to relay ecological debate, creates environmental awareness, criticizes its destruction and stresses the need for its preservation. He reveals the environmental issues, its devastation that is inimical to the welfare of man; the author has demonstrated that writers from Africa can contribute immensely to the campaign against atmospheric ruination. He reveals that our ecocritical reaction to the human habitat is very crucial and writers should use their works as the medium to emphasize the redeeming of the earth. The novel depicts an authentic African milieu and history. Unarguably, there is no paucity in Chinodya’s narrative in relation to ecocritical yardstick for all the elements of ecocritical investigation like the environment, pollution, nature, human habitat, the atmosphere, the rural, wildlife and narrative apocalypse are given prominence. He animates his fiction and vents into it a high degree of plausibility.

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