

Original Paper

Environment Degradation and Nature's Reclamation: A Study of Yiro Abari's in the Absence of Man

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Abstract

*The sermon of eco-activists for long has been about conservation of the flora and fauna, particularly the threatened and endangered species in order to sustain the steady cycle of the ecosystem. However, industrial and economic activities by humans have resulted in the obstruction of the ecosystemic chain. Many Western writers have imposed upon themselves the responsibility of promoting biological and environmental conservation through their art. However, the call for global environmental preservation has been answered weakly by black African writers and critics. This is so because the African writer has been preoccupied with issues of colonialism and corruption. Yiro Abari's *In the Absence of Man* is set in Jos, the capital of Plateau State of Nigeria. A city that has witnessed massive tin mining activities from the dawn of the 20th century which left vast ponds and infertile lands in the wake of mining. This paper explores the details of the wasted lands due to mining activities. It has become evident in this article that nature has the capacity to re-invent itself through Darwin's theory of natural selection. The paper therefore posits that nature will always reclaim its lost territories of the earth even after human beings have gone into extinction. It is therefore in man's interest to protect nature for himself.*

Keywords

nature, environment, mining, degradation

1. Introduction

Ecoliterature and its corresponding ecocriticism deals primarily with man's interaction with his environment or nature; it explores the relationship between man and nature. The incorporation of nature into art did not really start with the white Americans or at the period of the industrial revolution as many critics surmise. We can, for example, observe eco discourses in poetry of Romantic poets like

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth and William Blake, not to mention subtle hints of eco discourse by metaphysical poets with regards to the non-living materials of nature. Even in pre-colonial African times, African artists devised means of interacting with nature in their art as evidenced in the few vestiges of oral poetry that have survived colonial times.

What white American ecoliterarists have done is to re-introduce us to our peculiar environment; their topographies, weathers, seasons, rivers, lakes, ponds and all the living things that colour them. Here again, their emphasis is about communion with nature in its unadulterated state and the-passive or active—agitation for its conservation.

Environmental literature was received with a great amount of skepticism by African writers whose “ecohesitation has been conditioned in part by black African suspicion of the green discourse emanating from metropolitan Western centers” (Slaymaker, p. 684). Be that as it may, some black African intellectuals have come to embrace ecoactivism more as a reaction than a proaction, these include NiyiOsundare, Ken Saro Wiwa and Wangari Maathai. However, Slaymaker adds that “ecology and environmentalism have been substantially present in white South African literature and literary criticism for almost a century ... black South African scholarship is under represented but it is growing ...” (p. 697).

Of what significance is ecocriticism to African literary scholarship? For starters, Africa’s wealth of flora and fauna, including breath-taking landscapes cannot be underrated in the global stock of biodiversity. Additionally, many environments in Africa are being destroyed in the name of oil exploration, mineral excavation, war, desert encroachment, urbanization and other factors. Their impact on the ecology will continue to be felt if eco-education (which includes ecoliterature) is not maximized. Bryon Caminero-Santangelo suggests that “ecocriticism might open up some new important ways of looking at African literary texts in terms of environmental concerns and at the same time, how these texts might be linked with recent studies of conservation in Africa” (p. 697). This lends credence to the fact that African writers can play a pivotal role in environmental courses in the same manner they have done in other forms of social activism. Ecological criticism raises concern for the health of the earth and its resources.

To put ecocriticism into proper perspective, Laurence Coupe, in Bryon Caminero-Santangelo’s article, *Different Shades of Green*, defines ecocriticism as an approach to literature which “considers the relationship between human and non-human life as represented in literary texts which theorizes about the place of literature in the struggle against environmental destruction” (Caminero-Santangelo, p. 698). This means that no meaningful ecocritical discourse can be done effectively without the notion of place (environment) and what may be happening to it.

The writers of this article have found YiroAbari’s “In the Absence of Man” as a worthy text in that it speaks to the health of their immediate environment, the Jos Plateau, which has witnessed environmental degradation owing to tin mining activities for over a century now.

The Jos Plateau is located at almost the central part of Nigeria. Jos city, which constitutes the peak of

Jos Plateau, about 4,000 feet high above sea level is located on longitude 8.54 degrees east and latitude of 9.55 degrees north respectively. The Jos Plateau area is characterized by a vast outstretch of rocky mountains, streams, rivers, rugged terrain, lofty table land, beautiful hills, plains, lush valleys and gorges. The area covers an estimated 1,695 kilometers square of grossy land (Gomwalk, p. 27).

Compared to other areas of Plateau State, the Jos Plateau, comprising Jos North, Jos South, Jos East, Bassa, Riyom, Barkin-Ladi, Bokkos, Mangu and Pankshin Local Government Areas enjoy a pleasant weather, second only to Mambila Plateau in Taraba State along the boundaries between Nigeria and Cameroon. The natural elevation of the Jos area means the area is blessed with an incredibly cool weather. The weather is so clement that it is a choice vacation destination for many people within and outside the country. Also, of its weather, it was said that, “when Europeans arrived on the Plateau, they were so thrilled by the friendly weather that Frederick Lugard even considered establishing health and rest station for the use of the Europeans. As a result, it was recorded by Buchanan and Pugh that as at 1951, the Jos Plateau area had the highest number of European settlers outside of Lagos” (Gomwalk, p. 29).

It should be noted that the Jos Plateau attracted a large population, mostly foreigners, on account of its large deposits of tin and columbite. Since the discovery of steel (an alloy of iron ore and tin) by Andrew Caregie and following its myriad application in the industrial revolution, its exploration and demand had constantly been on the increase. Thus, when the Europeans came across the abundance of tin on the Jos Plateau with an accompanying pleasant weather, they decided to stay for a long time.

YiroAbari, is a native of one of the numerous ethnic groups that abound on the Jos Plateau. He was born in the late seventies and had the privilege of witnessing the twilight of mining activities around Bukuru area where he had his childhood. He has also witnessed the departure of more foreigners to their fatherlands, the abandonment of mining equipment and even residences. His inextricable connection with his place, the same place these authors are familiar with, propelled him to pen down his passion for a particular small town which he termed as a “disappearing town”.

His brief bio at the end of the story says: “YiroAbari High, born Yiro Abari Pede, is a Nigerian who lives and work in the city of Jos, Nigeria. He finds joy in the moods created by sunsets, bird tweets, trickling water and the sight of unhindered landscapes. He loves to travel and listen to music from behind the horizon”.

From his bio, it is obvious that YiroAbari is an environmentalist whose art and natural surroundings inform themselves. His short story, “In the Absence of Man”, which captures the ghost of a dead mining town tells more about environmental degradation on the Jos Plateau and what would follow in the wake of it.

2. Method

This article employs an eclectic approach in its discourse. First, the writers of the article outlined a synopsis of Yiro Abari’s *In The Absence of Man* before x-raying, from a histo-literary perspective, tin

mining and environmental degradation on the Jos Plateau of Nigeria. Eco-criticism as well as the evolutionary theory hinged of Darwin's theory of natural selection were engaged in the discourse and interpretation of the text.

2.1 Plot Synopsis

The story begins with an unnamed character who wakes up on the first day of his annual vacation and decides to walk to a store to buy a few things for breakfast. On his way, he catches an enticing glimpse of the horizon, a stretch of grasslands, a rugged mountain and the sky. Instantly, he decides to walk up to the mountain which shielded an old mining town which hosted his childhood days. The narrator recalls, with nostalgia, how his father had urged them to relocate from the town on account of the dwindling mining fortunes of Hayi, the mining town.

He ignores inner voices of caution as he trudges through the vast grasslands and meanders through the sand dunes and mining ponds created by the heavy mining machineries. As he walks, he takes in the murky puddles caused by trucks conveying sand from the streams to the new towns, the angry buzz of a chainsaw felling tree somewhere around and the merry chirping of itinerant birds.

As he moves further, the soothing serenity of the country side welcomes him, and he exhales the fresh air. After a forty-five minutes' walk, he finds himself in front of the erstwhile A.T.M.N (Amalgamated Tin Mines of Nigeria) section of the dead town. He reminisces the beautiful settlement which eventually gave way to Nigerian occupants who later cut down trees to make ends meet and eventually deserted the town. Still, he notices surviving trees which had blossomed in the absence of man's threat. He greets two farmers harvesting potatoes. He walks farther, inwardly lamenting the decay of the houses, as he moved to Hayi, his former neighbourhood. He observes that a large chunk of the community has been transformed into farmlands by people of neighbouring villages but he barely recognizes the pile which represents his former house. Standing in the pile overgrown with shrubs and grasses, he recalls the house as it were in the eighties before they left.

He stops at the hilly settlement of Kazon, which like Hayi, is invaded by shrubs and grasses leaving debris of building as evidence that man had once lived there.

Finally, he moves beyond Kazon to the field where they used to play football now seized by patches of white soil, weeds and gutters. They stand as witnesses to the visit of local miners. In the end, the narrator is filled with the longing to reconnect himself with his childhood, but he takes consolation in the fact that nature will always win whether man survives or not.

2.2 Tin Mining and Environmental Degradation

Prior to tin mining, the native inhabitants of the Jos Plateau, particularly the Beroms, Afizeres, Anagutas, Rons and Miangos, had enjoyed a fairly unperturbed stay on the Plateau owing to their resistance of the KanemBorno Empire and the Othman Danfodio invasion. At the tail end of the nineteenth century, European traders from Lokoja traced sources of locally made steel utensils to the Jos Plateau and plan for the invasion of Jos by the colonialists was hatched. Leonard Plotnicov submits that, "initially, Europeans were drawn to Jos Plateau to exploit its rich tin ore resources. During the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, small quantities of 'straw tin' reached European trading ports, but it was not until 1884 that the English traders became aware of a native tin industry in the North of Nigeria" (Plotnicov, p. 32).

The pacification of the Jos Plateau was not without the use of firepower by the Europeans on native communities which resisted. Armed with the 'rights' to control and administer what is now known as Nigeria following the Berlin conference of 1884-1885, the British government began to make inroads into the Jos Plateau. The cruel invasion of the colonialists was backed by law of which Frederick Lugard says, "The new law asserted the right of the state to disposses of all lands whether occupied or unoccupied, and whether belonging to the conquered Fulani or to the unconquered Pagan communities, without necessarily providing other lands for the dispossessed holders" (Lugard, p. 351).

Fwatshak notes that "the Niger company became the first expatriate company to set up a trading station in Jos. Doubling as both a mining and trading company, the company opened a trading store in Naraguta in 1905-1910" (Fwatshak, p. 111).

Cashing in the opportunity for economic prosperity, other companies began to apply for prospecting licences and "by 1910, ninety-nine applications had been tabled on the desk of Frederick Lugard, the Governor of the colonial state. These companies included Champion Tin Fields, Gold and Base Metal Mining Nigeria, Naraguta Tin Company, Bisichi Tin Company and numerous others" (Freund, p. 37). Mining activities intensified with the coming of these expatriate companies whose production volumes increased significantly with the extension of railway lines into the Jos Plateau. The amount of tin that has left the Jos Plateau cannot be easily quantified but we know for a fact that it was enough to drive the economy of an entire nation. For a fraction of it, Plotnicov says, "by March 1910, there were over fifty syndicated firms operating in the area with an aggregate capital of over £2.5 million" which is equivalent to 2 billion naira in Nigerian currency and going by the present inflation rate. That is for 1910 alone, not including subsequent years in which larger quantities of tin were harvested leaving large ponds and mammoth sand dunes in the wake of tin excavation on the Jos Plateau.

Worthy of note also it that the Jos area (present Jos North and South) was quickly turned into an urban area through the activities of many other expatriate companies, who later got tin prospecting licenses to operate in the area. The demand for tin increased in the global market. Commensurately, the demand for labourers and workers in the tin fields skyrocketed leading to an unprecedented influx of people into the area from within and outside the country.

The Jos Plateau is acknowledged as the home of endemic species of birds like the Plateau indigo bird and the rock fire finch. There were probably other species of plants and animals that have been either driven completely out of their autochthonous habitat or even forced to go into extinction, since in some instances during the colonial invasion, pacification entailed annihilation of resisting communities. Making reference to Soyinka's lament on degradation of Jos as captured in his *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (1996), Slaymakersays, "he (Soyinka) cites a tin mine near Jos, in North Central Nigeria accusing the government of violating virgin spaces and wreaking ecological devastation" (Slaymaker, p. 687).

As mentioned earlier, in our main text, the writer, through the narrator expresses his grave concern on the environment courtesy of aggressive mining of tin and columbite in his former town, which has become a haunting ghost of itself. As the unnamed narrator move towards his former town he says, "... its background decorated with reddish heaps of overburden materials from mining operations that had stirred its birth and growth, scores of decades back." But modern equipment and machinery were not left out in their own share of environmental destruction as he adds, "I meandered my way around the murky puddles in the bowls created by the weight of heavy trucks ... except for a chainsaw that screamed and echoed from a rear end of town as timbermen cut down trees."

The narrator alludes to a moribund European mining company, symbolically representative of other mining companies that have ravished the virgin lands of the Jos Plateau. After a forty-five minute walk, I was pacing in front of the first house of the A.T.M.N section of the town. The Amalgamated Tin Mines of Nigeria (A.T.M.N) was a European mining company that operated in the town until 1985 ... the companies' only sins were the topographic ruins they left behind: water channels that sucked human souls, and the heaps of mining waste that stood by them." The writer somewhat makes light of the companies environmental havoc by saying, "The companies' only sins ...", because these same mining companies of the Europeans "oversaw the birth of a beautiful settlement with homes, offices, trees, and road links from what was previously a dense, obscure jungle." In this regard, the Europeans exploited nature for their benefits and for nature's benefit unlike the black Africans who inherited the same quarters after the departure of the Europeans and "started cutting down trees to make ends meet."

Still on the same attitude of Nigerians who inherited the European section, the author remarks, "In place of glass window panes, there were pieces of drooping cardboards and plywood. The walls had remained unpainted since the exit of A.T.M.N. There were gapping sutures that revealed the russet colour of the mud bricks ... the gritty maintenance tradition of the company had successfully concealed this secret ..." It is plausible that even though our natural environment was altered by European setting, we can still recreate the environment for posterity sake. It should be preferred to serve as a museum instead of lying in its ruins.

The writer is worried that the ponds have also affected transport as those travelling by road and foot will have to circumvent short distances in order to arrive at a destination. He explains, "the distances between A.T.M.N quarters and downtown would have been shorter, but for the frightening ponds that stood between the two settlements. "The pond stretched for more than five hundred metres across its length." Activities of local miners illegally prospecting for leftovers of tin and columbite further decimated certain areas that had been earmarked for recreational activities like the football field of their childhood days of which the writer says, "The ground was overlain with farinkasa (white soil). We often used it to mark the perimeters of our football pitches. The topography was now a provoking mess, with crude mining jigs, shafts and water gutters, all lined irregularly."

Towards the end of the story, the writer admits the colossal devastation of the environment as a result of mining operation on the Jos Plateau, "there, the land had been brutally injured by the operations. Back in

the seventies and eighties, watching the immense trenches that channeled water to the mines, the horrifying mine craters, and the mountains of overburden soils made one realize the terrifying monster that technology is.”

The advent of mining disconnected certain flora and fauna from their habitat and the wake of the mining operations also forced out the human inhabitants thereby disconnecting people like the writer from a place that would fondly remind them of what home used to be. In the absence of mining, the whole town dies, but that is not the end of the story.

2.3 Evolution: Nature's Means of Reclamation

The theory of evolution was in 1838 a hypothesis for which evidence needed to be collected. After spending a considerable amount of the time on the Galapagos archipelago (or Galapagos islands) and having observed related species of plants and animals across the islands, Charles Darwin came to publish on *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 and the theory has since managed to survive to date amidst crises. What is more beneficial, however, is that the concept of the theory has been applied to various fields of academic discipline ranging from Biology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, linguistics and literature, and has been found to be very productive in the explication of occurrences and phenomena. Darwin himself admits that “in 1938 he was reading Malthus’ *On Population* and he received the inspiration for natural selection,” (Dawkins, 18).

The crux of Darwin’s theory of evolution rests on his concept of natural selection. In a nutshell, Darwin posited that all life developed from simple unicellular organisms into complex multicellular organisms and the improvement between each stage of the development was determined by the species’ ability to adapt to a new environment, overcome challenges and find a means of survival. In Darwin’s opinion, not only do the strong survive, they also breed a much stronger specie which will bear no close resemblance with its ancestors after millions of years. To buttress this point, Richard Dawkins, a staunch disciple of Charles Darwin, adds:

In 1989 I wrote a paper called ‘The Evolution of Evolvability’ in which I suggested that not only do animals get better at surviving as the generations go by: lineages of animals get better at “evolving”. What does it mean to be good at evolving? Insects on land and crustaceans in the sea seem to be champions at diversifying into thousands of species, parceling up the niches, changing costumes through evolutionary time with frolicsome abandon. Fish too show amazing evolutionary fecundity, so do frogs as well as the more familiar mammals and birds (Dawkins, p. 424)

The first strategy of a living organism for evolving is survival. And to survive, a living organism must learn to adapt even to terrible conditions. Once a certain specie survives, it tries to populate the region which it finds itself. Genes of two species of the same origin may continue to lose their similarities once they are far away from themselves as it can be observed in the case of dogs which evolve from wolves (but that is the case of artificial selection). Here again, Dawkins lends his voice “populations on separate islands don’t meet each other often, so their two sets of genes have the opportunity to drift away from one another. This makes an island as more than just a piece of land separated by water. To a frog, an oasis is

an island where it can live, surrounded by deserts where it can't." (Dawkins, p. 66).

What really has evolution got to do with ecology? It simply provides the assurance that nature will always survive in the eventual extinction of complex species like man. The smaller species will eventually adapt and blossom in the absences of man, and perhaps, after millions of years, a semblance of man will have evolved. Without green plants to outnumber animals at least ten to one, there would be energy to power the animals. At the rate which humans, particularly Africans, destroy their environment, we are putting ourselves more at risk because plants have a higher chance of surviving in the absence of man on top of the food chain. Dawkins notes that *Homo Sapiens* is the only surviving genus of mankind, as the extinct *Homo Erectus* and *Homo Habilis* remain in fossils just like dinosaurs. (Dawkins, p. 60).

Our main text, "In the Absence of Man" portrays the reclamation of nature over regions that it has been dispossessed of as a consequence of man's mining activities which gives little regards to nature. In the text, the narrator notices how the green environment flourishes amidst rubbles of a disappearing town: "The tall grasses and rejuvenating eucalyptus stubbles prevented me from seeing who it was." In a Sudan Savannah like the Jos Plateau, grasses around a community rarely grow taller than the heights of an average man due to overgrazing of man's animals, thatching, mowing and other activities. Here, the writer sees how the grasses thrive in the absence of man.

The narrator is amazed as he observes "mountains of excavated soil were becoming less conspicuous, gradually getting washed back into the pond too." Not only were the dunes washed back into the ponds, some which were considered inarable became a home for some plants, "vegetation had grown over the alluvial material, preventing me from walking across to Hayi."

The remainder of the buildings, having succumbed to the invasion of plants, insects and creeping animals, became a feasting ground for plants. The narrator re-iterates, "there were no houses standing-only heaps of their fallen walls. Again, I realized that nature was reclaiming the environment ... the relics of defying concrete ... remained as proof that a settlement once existed." It will just be a matter of time before the plants, sunlight and rain will conspire to weather the "defying" concrete for nature to make a total reclamation of that land. The narrator moves further to where their house was erected and he recounts, "I struggled through the bushes, shoving the tall plants out of my way until I had walked enough to be in the estimated location where our house once stood."

The vegetation takes hold of a former human community and positions its soldier plants to slow down any movement of human beings, "Even though it was risky, staggering through the uneven, overgrown topography with only buckled leather ribbons around my feet, I cared little". Not only the narrator's former settlement was hijacked by the plants. In another nearby settlement, Kazon, the plants were still undertaking the same task, which the narrator describes "as in Hayi, there wasn't any house standing in Kazon: just stacks of soil, overgrown by weeds. There were other people-once-lived-here signs: blades of sisal, lines of cacti stem that marked out farm boundaries"

Towards the end of the story, the narrator admittedly submits: "Mining scars, human settlement, and people were all vanishing. Within a fraction of my life time, nature's reconstruction of a wilderness was

perceptible, the speed transcending my imagination.” It is pertinent to note here that a season, for a human being, is a lifetime, if not many lifetimes for some plants. Therefore, the speed at which they decompose matters and ensure the cycle of the ecosystem is phenomenal. After donkey years of human existence, in a certain township, it took less than three decades for nature to reclaim the entire territory. In the very last paragraph of the short story, the narrator makes his final submission, noting from all he had experienced in the wilderness that was once the town of his childhood days:

The vast, astonishing power of nature suddenly inspired clairvoyance. I was able to see vividly something bigger than life, something bigger than death. I could see that the only big thing about death is dying, nothing more. But, ultimately, the biggest things are the eternity of the earth, the eternity of the universe, in space and in time, and the ability of nature to reinvent and sustain what belongs to it when mankind isn't there.

This sums up the whole idea behind this paper. In every contest between man and nature, nature will always win. Why shouldn't man then treat nature with care and respect so that nature will please him in turn?

3. Conclusion

In this paper, we have understood one of man's numerous ways of environmental degradation, which is mining and its consequent effect on man and nature. However, through Darwin's eyes, we can take consolation in the fact that nature is eternally in the business of recreating itself and will continue to do so even if man has gone into extinction as exemplified in the short story, "In the Absence of Man" which we have chosen to succinctly express our idea. Dawkins supports Darwin by stating that, "the evolutionary process seems to pick itself up and resume its recurrent flowering, with undiminished freshness, with unabated youthfulness, as epoch gives way to epoch." (Dawkins, 422). Man's interaction with his natural environment evokes a certain kind of priceless pleasure which YiroAbari captures in the story that we have studied, "the soothing serenity of the countryside was amazing, and I would have given off my disposable income just to have it." The connection man has with his environment can be likened to that of a foetus with a mother through the umbilical cord. Once the cord is severed in the womb, the child dies. Again, YiroAbari captures the feeling, "the depth of my emotional connection made me feel like I was standing on mama's grave ... I nevertheless, found consolation in the strong belief that water from such an astonishing setting couldn't be lacking in healing powers." Nature nurtures us, but it surely outlives us. We return to Dawkins, for the last time, who says, "we are surrounded by endless forms (nature) most beautiful and most wonderful, and it is no accident, but the direct consequence of evolution by non-random natural selection" (Dawkins, p. 426).

Perhaps, it is more appropriate to bow out with a question posed by Manthia Diawara in Slaymaker's 'Ecoing the other(s): the call of Global Green and Black African Responses,' which says "should (Africans) be interested in (ecocriticism) because it is a global phenomenon, or because it has a potential to enlighten them, better than their lives, or give them pleasure? (sic)" (Slaymaker, p. 691). We can all

ponder on the question while nature continues its perpetuation.

3.1 Recommendations

- a. The interest of the environment should be taken into cognizance first before a mining licence should be given to any mining company anywhere in Africa.
- b. Ecoliterature such as the short story we have studied should be contained in recommended syllabuses of, especially secondary school students so as to raise ecoawareness.
- c. Environmental literature should be taken as either an elective or a compulsory course in African institutions of higher learning, with a bias for literatures that reflect the immediate environment of the institutions(s).
- d. Writers should use their art to honour or immortalize ecoactivists such as Ken Saro Wiwa and Wangari Maathai, who have spent themselves in order to protect our environments.
- e. Inter-disciplinary workshops, conferences and symposiums pertaining ecology and the environment should be promoted and funded by the government and spirited individuals.

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