



Ecocritical Consciousness In Wole Soyinka's Play *A Dance Of The Forests*

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Abstract

The field of ecocritical studies has gained prominence in the present scenario to understand the changes evolving in the environmental surroundings. Nature has been dominated by mankind for ages and it has called for the attention towards ecological cataclysm such as pollution , deforestation , extinction of animals, climate change and others. This paper tries to explore the relationship between man and nature through ecocritical lens. Soyinka's establishment of Yoruba culture shows the praxis of eco-friendly attitude since the ancestral times of Africa which he intends specifically to address the cultural interaction and brings a sense of search for the identity in the ecological space. The paper points at the pessimistic view of the future as it addresses a sense of continuous anthropocentric attitude of man towards nature which Soyinka traces from the past to the present while weaving an alarm of need for future sustainability. It attempts to draw a parallel comparison between the philosophy of Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge in proximity to the play that shows the similar ideas on organic oneness where man and nature are one as a whole. The call for the need of optimistic future is drawn upon such conscious writing to reflect back and reassess the problems.

Keywords: Ecocriticism , ecology , anthropocentrism , Yoruba culture , earth-centred.

The play is weaved consciously with ecocritical writings where Soyinka establishes the Yoruba culture to be nature sensitive. It is commonly said that there are an interaction between the dead and the living in Yoruba culture. The play depicts that the culture is eco-friendly where Aroni summons the past ancestors who are namely the dead man and dead woman who arises from the "surface of the earth". One could observe



that the arrival of these ancestors breakthrough underneath the soil for the summoning of the gathering of the Feast. In the light of ecocriticism, the first law of ecology as stated by Barry Commoner clearly reflects the spectrum of the issues regarding the summoning of Dead Man and Dead Woman. In Yoruba culture, the past is linked to present and future and Barry's theory examines the "energy" from the past connects to the present as the injustice faced by them on the hands of Mata Kharibu and Madame Tortoise challenges the harmony of Yoruba culture. The Dead Man and Dead Woman in the present scenario approaches the living but were dissatisfied with the treatment and felt that the entire gathering is a "mistake from the beginning" and derived some chances to relieve the burden of an unborn child "to return the living to the living" to achieve peace. One can observe that the issues of the past are still connected to the present where culture bridges peace which the dead craves for and hence justifies the law of ecology for its earthly engagements.

However, Soyinka addresses the global issues concerning deforestation and in the play. It gives a prism towards the anthropocentric view of mankind towards the nature. In the play, the present scenario shows that the forest have been cleared and cut off for the "gathering of the tribes" to carve the "totem" as well as for the construction of the roads. It is clearly noted in the speech of Demoke who stated:

DEMOKE: For one thing, I did not know what it was all about. The council met and decided that they wanted it done. In secret. The tree was in a grove of Oro, so it was possible to keep it hidden. Later I learnt it was meant for the gathering of the tribes. When I finished, the grove was cleared of all the other trees, the bush was razed and a motor road build right up to it. It looked different. It was no longer my work. I fled from it. (pp. 7-8)

The above extract shows the picture of deforestation and the dominant anthropocentric attitude towards nature. Soyinka weaved ecocritical consciousness of finding a sense of cultural identity in the statement and the character of Demoke. Demoke's resistance and the reminiscing landscape of the forest helped him to realize the eco-friendly attitude of Yoruba culture in contrast to the anthropocentric view of the West which brought destruction and threatened the peace of Yoruba culture. Silko argued that an individual finds their identity in the process of recalling a certain specific features of landscape and Demoke's fleeing away throws light in his successful grasp of his identity.



Moreover, there are implications towards the air pollution which is a major problem of the present scenario. Soyinka depicts the Old Man who sets the forest on fire for the “gathering of the tribes” by pouring the petrol all over the forest. The fumes of the petrol emits various harmful emissions of greenhouse gases which is responsible for air pollution. In the play, the Old Man puts the petrol and burned the forest to show that they welcome and acknowledge the guests in the Feast which he intentionally wants to drive them off with the incense of the petrol fumes. It throws insights into two perspectives where man shows their hegemonic power over nature and other non-human spirits or the guests. Secondly, it shades light upon the ironical overview of cultural essence where Yoruba culture was once nature sensitive and the present scenario has become anthropocentric with their human activities and lose their cultural identity. Critically, Soyinka employs the Yoruba culture to reassess the problems of the present and brings awareness towards the earth-centred culture.

In addition to this, the play approaches the ecocritical notions of earth-centred writings. Soyinka cleverly bridges the essence of nature friendly culture and brings earthly attachments in the play which justifies Glotfelty approaches to study ecocriticism. This essence of earthly connections can be seen in the speech of Dead Man:

Dead Man: But the dark trees and the thick earth drew me. When I died, I fell into the understreams, and the great summons found me ready. I travelled the understreams beneath the great ocean. I travelled the understreams beneath the great seas. I flowed through the hardened crust of this oldest of the original vomits of Forest Father.... (pp. 25)

The above references suggests the ecocritical earthly attachments of organic relationship between man’s soul to nature. Soyinka bridges that nature is the place which man’s soul connects after the death and becomes united as one. This unity of man and nature shows the entire cosmology of ecology where man is a part of nature and their soul travels the domains of organic space.

Critically, the play can be examined from the view where African myth is “incumbent on man to protect his natural environment for his own survival” (Fai, 95). Agboreko highlighted that the Aroni is “wisdom itself” and means to “expose the weaknesses of human lives” which is



hiding the guilt and mistakes that had hurt nature in the past and continues till present. Aroni's significance becomes important to give knowledge the mankind of its evil practices which had separated culture from nature by their propagation of anthropocentrism. It is seen in the speech of Eshuoro who states that man has polluted the forest "by poisoning the air with petrol fumes" and "torn down". Demoke had hurt Eshuoro by cutting his top and pushing his servant Oremole from the tree and died whereas Adenebi is a corrupt officer who takes bribery and he let seventy people to pass the "passenger lorry" in the council which could only fit forty and as a result of his actions there are only five who managed to escape from the fire who were going for the gathering. It is ironic to notice that Yoruba culture is eco-friendly but the anthropocentric actions of humans have separated Yoruba culture from nature where Meeker (1974) stated that the cultural tradition in the West separates culture from nature. These "energy" from the past threatens the harmony and peace of Yoruba culture and hence Aroni shows a light to teach mankind of their mistakes for their survival as the continuous sense of anthropocentric attitude leads to the lack of future sustainability. Aroni becomes a prism to which the characters understands nature which justifies Rigby(2005) who stated that an individual comprehends nature through cultural contracts.

However, the play correlates with Wordsworthian philosophy of organic oneness where man and nature are one and hurting the nature can result in a serious consequences for mankind. Coleridge propagated his philosophy in the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" where the killing of the bird "Albatross" resulted in the curse of the mariner to pass down to other people about the same experience for the rest of his life. In Soyinka's play, Demoke mistreated Eshuoro by killing his servant Oremole and Eshuoro's "head was hacked off by his axe" to make a "totem" which Eshuoro felt as an "insult" and eventually enraged him to take vengeance on Demoke. It clearly reflects Wordsworthian philosophy of organic oneness which Soyinka propagates to show that Demoke hurt himself by hurting Eshuoro. Aroni's summoning showcases the philosophy to a greater extent as well because it aided Demoke, Rola and Adenebi to realize their guilt and past mistakes which threatened the peace of Yoruba culture and the optimistic future. His implications play a greater role in showing that man can completely comprehend nature through culture and man is the part of the ecological cosmology.



Lastly, the play consciously weaves the idea of sustainable development and propagated the future uncertainty. Soyinka established the pessimistic view of the African society where the society was in a grip of Western tradition of anthropocentrism. He brought by bringing awareness regarding the environmental crisis of pollution and deforestation which leads to the future uncertainty. In the light of ecocritical lens, Greg Garrard (2004) postulated the argument between “Environmentalist” and “Cornucopians” where the “Cornucopians” believed that the human activities and its impact on nature are vague expressions and postulates the handful sources for future sustainability. The “Environmentalist” showed concerns towards the ecological catastrophe that is following due to human activities. Soyinka concisely takes the side of the “Environmentalist” and gives an alarm of the need for future sustainability and development for the future needs and demands as the resources on the environment is limited for future. He warns the present scenario against the global issues of deforestation and air pollution which is separating the eco-friendly culture from nature and the devastation of nature can lead to the destruction of oneself and planet earth itself.

Thus, in conclusion the play *A Dance of the Forest* (1963) tries to revitalizes the Yoruba culture to give the African society a sense of their cultural identity and detaches from the Western tradition. The play shows the eco-friendly attitude of Yoruba culture and becomes a prism to comprehend nature. Soyinka depicted the global issues of air pollution and deforestation which is progressing rapidly and separating the nature sensitive culture from nature. He tries to present the earthly attachments of man’s relationship with nature and shows the Wordsworthian philosophy of organic oneness that imbues the whole ecological cosmology. Hence, the play addresses the ecocritical attributes and essence in its depictions and weaves an alarm for the need of sustainable development.

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