



COVID as a Metaphor for Ecodeath in J. P. Clark's "A Dream Still to Live" and "Climate Change the Measure of our Times"

Charles A. Adeniranye

ABSTRACT

Ecological studies have become prominent in the global literary space as a way of bringing issues around environmental degradation to the front burner of global recognition. The destruction of nature has led to some forms of ecocide which will also lead to ecodeath, conceived, in the context of these works, as the death of the environment occasioned by human activities that destroys the environment and ultimately leads to some form of personal suicide because man's existence is premised on the continued existence of the natural environment. Literary artists in all the genres of literature, employ metaphor as a linguistic instrument in their art to pass social commentary on these issues. Prominent among these writers in Nigeria is J.P. Clark whose works have enjoyed literary scholarship. "A dream to live" and "climate change the measure of our time" are poems by the poet that have not enjoyed much critical attention. Against this backdrop, this work employs the psychoanalytic theory with a focus on trauma to analyze these poems to examine the traumatic effect of a destroyed environment on the psyche of people. It establishes a connection between COVID and ecodeath. It discovers that the traumatic experiences of the people who witnessed the pristine state of the environment coupled with the harsh realities of a degraded environment occasioned the feeling of depression and regret expressed by individuals. This is also responsible for the loss of the peace and serenity they enjoyed, which, in contrast to the life-sniffing realities of a polluted or destroyed environment births the trauma they suffer. If the depletion of the environment is to be reversed, all concerned must tackle the menace like the COVID pandemic was tackled with a militaristic plan, focused, tenacious and sustained.

Keywords: COVID-19, J.P. Clark, Ecodeath, Environment, Ecological study.

INTRODUCTION

Ecological studies are important parts of the global literary corpus of creative works. Writers in all the genres and sub-genres of literature as a field of study have expressed their views, opinions, convictions, and reservations about the nature of the interaction of various species of life on earth and the realities of the effects of this interaction on the environment. Within the poetry space, romantic poets have expressed their love and romance with the environment in various forms, usually speaking up against the environmental destruction that started due to the industrial revolution in the 18th century (Jin, 2022). In the works of romantic poets, we see a genuine appreciation of nature and its creations as the hallmark of true repentance and the foundation of truly reviving forgiveness. The natural world in its much untroubled state shone brightly. These poets include William Wordsworth, who conceives the complete poem as that which is captured within the tranquil space of pristine nature, William Blake, John Keats, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; the world of nature formed the basis of their works. It is unequivocal that the fetishistic celebration of nature that we encounter in their literary creations is intentional, conscious and detailed.

Romantic poets did not limit their focus to their efforts to paint the beauty of nature. Rather, their focus extended to noting the degradation that the environment had

begun to suffer even as far back as the 18th century when their literary contributions gained prominence. In poems like "upon Westminster's bridge" and "the world is too much with", poets portray the negatives of human interaction with the natural environment. Industrialization, the uncontrolled efforts of human to achieve a better living standard and create their own general conception of the modern society, was held responsible for the unbridled destruction of the natural environment which had affected the flora and fauna and the general natural ecosystem. The destruction of the ecosystem is not limited to one continent. It is a global occurrence, since the environment has been destroyed all over the world by human actions, which gained prominence in the 20th century (Xie, 2023). The destruction started when other continents began to copy the European template of development that has little regard for the environment and leaves the planet as the loser in the long run. It will not be totally right to assume that it was the Europeans that taught other continents the dynamic of environment degradation, through human actions like bush burning which was prominent even in pre-colonial times, people living in would-be colonial environments have contributed their own quota to the universal destruction of the environment. Although, it must also be said that they are unaware of this as there was no body of knowledge available to them as at that time. Poets and writers in other parts of the world have also

recorded instances of environmental degradation in their works. Niyi Osundare, the Nigerian poet, playwright and scholar has critically considered this thematic in works like "they too are the earth", "ours to plough, not to plunder", "they too are the earth" and others. Osundare describes the beauty and relevance of nature to the existence of men. He also employs the destruction of nature as a metaphor to describe the destruction of the economic, social, religious, political and general existence of Nigerians through the failure of the political class. Other poets of the anti-anthropocentric human activities orientation are also prominent. The natural environment has become more than a place of tranquility to gather poetic thoughts as opined by romantic poets, it has metamorphosed and employed as a matter of query on the political and general survival of humans.

With the prominence gained by ecological scholars, the importance of achieving a solution and reversing the trend has also become a universal effort. The efforts of multinationals which are into oil exploration, logging, and steel rolling have contributed to the degradation that poets of the ecocritical orientation have dedicated their lives to fighting through the instrumentalities of their pen. In what seems like commiseration with the inhabitants of primitive environments that wealthy companies have invaded and destroyed, Snyder (1990) notes that the contrast between the poverty and the wealth of the invaders underscores the

total helplessness of the inhabitants against the invading marauders. He also captures the psychological trauma of these inhabitants who consider the environment as sole means of livelihood, such that their existence is totally dependent on how well they are able to care for their environment in a way that it continues to yield their food for them. On a spiritual level, the environment is, for them, a sacred place that also ensures their spiritual survival and the hallmark of their ancestral lineage. Any destruction of their environment inflicts the psychological torture of a spiritual disconnection with the Supreme Being, especially when sacred places are desecrated or totally destroyed. It also jeopardizes their hope of the tomorrow they envisioned before the act. These heinous crime against the environment become traumatogenic signals for different types of psychological conditions that people will suffer in the environment; these include depression leading to suicidal thoughts, anger occasioned by the level of helplessness they feel at allowing that to happen, and in cases where some forms of violent altercations occurred in a bid to stop the degradation, cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. When these fights become incessant, the tendency of the erstwhile peaceful people to tend towards violence towards, others and the self is high. Heidarizadeh (2014) affirms that "trauma refers to the state of mind which results from an injury. It is a devastating and damaging experience". The trauma of

this problem is both communal and personal.

This study examines the impact of the degradation and at times, total destruction of the environment on the psyche of the individuals that lived or are still living in the environment. These groups of people are affected by trauma caused by the loss of the pristine nature of their former environment and for those who moved to industrialized communities, the contrast between the serenity of their former environment and the choking pollution of the cities aggravates their sense of loss, thereby engraving their traumatic experience and psychological pain. Many eco-centric poets have been studied. Orhero (2017) reveals the interconnectedness of the folkloric tradition of the Urhobos in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and the literary creations of Tanure Ojaide. Scholars have paid attention to the poems of J.P. Clark. "Casualties" have enjoyed a lot of scholarly attention. Olanipekun *et al.* (2017) studied Clark's representation of failed nationhood in his poem "a decade of Tongue". However, the poems under study, "a dream to still live" and "climate change the measure of our times" have not enjoyed much scholarly attention. This may be unconnected with the thematics of these poems and the apparent lack of the needed knowledge of ecological problems. This study examines them to reveal the destructive tendencies of ecocide on the human mentality.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies on psychoanalysis to highlight the trauma involved and the effects of same on the mentally of people who witnessed them as portrayed in the poems. The study will also foreground COVID as a metaphoric representation of ecocodeath and interrogate the implications of this for the sustainability of the environment.

CONCEPTUALIZING ECODEATH

The general understanding of the term Ecodeath relates to morbidity, focusing on how the bodies of dead people are committed to mother earth. This relates to burial with the least negative impact on the environment. In the context of this study, the term ecocodeath is employed as a referent to the death of the environment. Though the Yorubas in South-western Nigeria believes that *kàkà kí ilè kú, ilè à sá* (the land will wear out instead of dying) but if the death cannot die physically, the physical destruction of the flora and fauna of the ecosystem which leave the environment unproductive, abandoned and bare could be conceived as a form of death. As employed contextually here, this is the understanding of this term. Close to this is the concept of ecocide.

The Stop Ecocide Foundation defines "ecocide" as any unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a

substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts". Wantonness of an act is determined by the "reckless disregard" for the destruction and clearly excessive because the expected social and economic outcome is great compared to the benefits. "Severe" refers to adverse and grave disruptions to the lives of human and other resources in the environment. "Widespread" will be used depending on the geographical spread of the destruction, or if the damage affects an entire ecosystem or a specie. An environmental damage is considered the "long term" if it is not reversible or cannot be recovered within a reasonable period. "Environment", as conceived by the definition above, captures both the whole of earth and space. The impact of the human actions on the ozone layer must have contributed to the scope of the "environment" as used in the definition. The correlation between ecocide and ecocodeath is in that the former leads to the later. The coinage of the term ecocide identifies human beings as the creatures that bear all responsibility for their own demise; it is more of an ecological suicide. In committing this, man ultimately commits ecocodeath knowingly or unknowingly. It is also used to capture the death that man is bringing upon himself by killing the environment.

Theoretical Learning

The trauma theory, which is an offshoot of psychoanalysis, is employed for the analysis of the poem. Early trauma theory believes that trauma stems from a singular event. Van Styvendale (2008) argues that traumatic events in the life of people is trans/historical and has a generational dimension. Van Styvendale believes that it has a cumulative angle, meaning that trauma is collective. Caruth 1996 initiated this field of study and even with the modification by Laura brown and Maria Root which incorporates the trauma women suffer from abusive situations, the field still overlooked the traumatizing sting of the (post)colonial experience as declared by Craps and Buelens, 2008 that the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities has yet to be fully accounted for (Sevana, 2019). Craps (2010) also foregrounds the position.

Van Styvendale (2008) argues that early trauma theory inhibits the understanding of trauma that continues into the present or over a long period of time. She terms this trans/historical trauma and describes it as trauma that is intergenerational: it is cumulative, collective and intergenerational. It is not fixed in one single event and even though it expects us to pay attention to specific atrocities that the specific in history. It is also different in that unlike other trauma theories that focus on how the trauma of the ancestors affect the living generation,

trans/historical trauma pays attention to those who are still suffering traumatic events which are ongoing domestic colonization or what could be termed a new variant of colonial oppression. Relying on these arguments, this study examines the nuances of the representations of trauma by J.P. Clark's poems under study.

COVID as a Metaphor

Matos (2021) examined the use of metaphors that are used to describe COVID and came to the conclusion that the metaphor employed in describing COVID and all the surrounding realities are major war metaphors. This must have been used to highlight the seriousness of the situation that COVID puts the whole through. The whole world was caught in the race to defeat COVID which has ravaged the whole world. Almost every country lost some citizens to COVID. COVID-19 therefore assumes the status of the dreaded ailment that challenged all humanity to battle. Just like it is in every outbreak of diseases, the victory is sealed by the number of the ravaged specie that dies, in favor of the illness or the discovery of a drug or some forms of solution or cure that makes man the winner of the battle. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) opine that metaphors are crucial linguistic instruments that help to express beliefs, attitudes and coming to term with complex events. They are also crucial cultural tools in conceptualizing diseases (Larson *et al.*, 2005). As much as this work is not an analysis of war metaphors in

political communication, as done by Seixas (2021), it nonetheless shares her believe that the use of militaristic or war metaphors helps to prepare people for hard times, persuade them to change their behavior positively, foster unity and mobilization as a way of building resilience, show compassion, concern and empathy and highlights a call for peace. It also helps to elicit and immediacy of response since there us an inherent threat to life.

Environmental degradation should be considered as a threat to life, just as COVID. A connection rod between COVID and environment destruction is the threat to human existence and the eventual death that it leads to, not only on the physical plane where it increases the morbidity rate in the society but also at the psychological level where it reduces men to living dead, bereft of ideas and the will to actually live their life, where they have accepted their fate and are just living in expectation of death. A difference that has not allowed governments to pay the needed attention to environmental hazards like climate change, environmental pollution, deforestation and others is the slow but steady rate at which these conditions are defeating humans; if the rate were to be high like in the case of COVID or HIV-AIDS, governments would have been forced to pay some close attention and find solutions with military precision as it was done for COVID.

Ekweme-Ugwu and Ugwuagbo (2018) study the metaphors that are used in the poems of J.P. Clark; they conclude that environmental metaphors are deployed to great effect and thematic precision. The use of natural human and non-human organisms endears his works to an ecocritical audience and help to create an authentic African environmental ambience, and make a call for a total reassessment of humanity's exploitation of the ecosystem.

ANALYSIS OF POEMS

In "A dream still to live, J.P. Clark portrayed the beauty of the natural environment and the regret of the poetic persona at coming home longer he should have, having travelled out of the home he built in a place where nature functions in full swing. In the poem, the poetic persona contrasts the beauty of nature. Juxtaposing them against things that have close affinity to them as a way of highlighting the precedence of nature, in its pristine form, over creations of humans. He regretted coming home only at a time when his time and life is coming to an end having spent the best part of his life in the city where death was an ever-present reality. He realized it late. He also took a swipe at the level of individuality that has overshadowed the communal nature of traditional lifestyle. Right from the second line of the poem, the persona referred to the location of his house which was built in a place where "two rivers, holding hands". This reveals not only the

natural aura of the environment which was represented with the foremost element in existence - water. That the two rivers were holding hands speaks of the communality, friendship and genuine connection that inhabitants of indigenous societies share and cherish. However, beyond the description, it is also geared towards creating a spiritual calmness and the sacredness that the environment evokes.

The most pristine and romantic stage of human existence is described in spiritual books, the Bible description of the garden of Eden reveals the beauty of creation and life. The Bible mentions rivers that water the garden, river Pishon and Gihon. Clark's unnamed rivers in the poem echoes the two mentioned in the Bible. Ecocritical scholars and critics who advocate for the protection of the environment strive to achieve this Edenic state of universal existence. The structure of the environment of the house also gives the persona "free way". This points to the freedom that the natural environment affords man before its desecration or destruction. The first inkling of trauma in the persona is revealed in the use of the word "regrettably" (line 5) to describe his feeling about his failure to make it to his home. The desire to have a house that serves as the drive for him to build it and his apparent inability to go to a place that gives him much comfort reveals a disconnect between what he wants and his inability to get it; so the loss he suffers reveals the foundation of his trauma.

Apart from the two rivers, the forest is another representation of ecological aesthetics. He noted that "the forest...are...guards" (line 7). This speaks of security and they gave him "no cause for alarm". He feels peaceful, secured and had close contact with nature. This also helps to him to maintain psychological balance because he enjoys inner peace with the self and nature. The poet juxtaposed natural flora and fauna against the creations of man. He affirmed that "no corporate forces from abroad" can silent the splash that fishes make with their tails. "Rain" and "Sunshine" cannot stop the feats of the crane, a type of bird but they can effectively keep planes which the poet represents with "iron wings", from flying. The beauty of the "moon" and "stars" at night, lights up the sky in the wetland – an area of environmental peace. Unfortunately, multinational oil companies which are represented by "corporate forces" (line 12) has destroyed the environment through their activities resulting in oil spillage, environmental pollution and gas flaring echoed in "gas fields a nation is running to waste". These are revelations of the destruction of the environment.

He revealed his psychological torture by castigating himself for staying away from a place that has so much natural wealth. Leaving his perfect environment creates a void in him and made him query himself:

So, with all this wealth, in a land,
Seawind and rain cool all the year
Round, why have I delayed all

These years, from one century into
Another in a new millennium,
And failed to settle I this place
I built... (lines 21 – 27)

In the above, the poetic persona raises what seems like a query of his sanity and correctness of thought process for failing to come home longer than he is now doing. It is incomprehensible for him and even drove him to the conclusion that it must have been a form of "spell" (line 34). His traumatic experiences arise from the loss of the better part of his years to the city which he describes as his "sure way to death". To an African, communal living is central to existence because the society is a place of wide communion. The feeling of loneliness that has become the hallmark of city life is also highlighted but he is ready to jettison everything and reconnect with nature, with his home. This, for him, is more than a return to his root; it is also his way out of the psychological stress and anger he feels at his own abandonment of his sure way to life and good health. The "wake" from his long sleep symbolizes a cultural reawakening in him that made him decide that going back home is the only thing he wants; it is his return to the Edenic state of nature, to a place he described as a place "straight out of paradise".

In "climate change the measure of our times", the poet mocks all activities of man geared towards sequestering elements of nature or taming nature to his whims and caprices. He affirms the

resilience and invincibility of nature represented with “water” and “air”, he asserts that no “blade” can cut into water and air. Blade is symbolic for humans and the barrage of efforts at environmental degradation. The poet opines that the inhabitants of earth are full of “fuming fire”. He is surprised that even with this knowledge, we are still trying to arrest or control the works of nature. “Fuming fire” captures the height of human zeal, even though unconscious, to self-destruct; it also reeks of anger as a representation of our psychological state. The picture J.P. Clark painted here echoes the death drive as conceived by psychoanalysis. At the base of this death drive is the unconscious desire to recover a loss. In “*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*”, Freud (1920) developed the concepts “life-instincts” and “death-instincts”. The pleasure principle drives man to ensure a pleasurable life by reducing things that can cause excitation, pains or anxiety.

Every human has a collective unconscious where experiences of a general or communal nature are stored; against this backdrop, there is a collective knowledge of the realities of the beauty of the pristine “ecoscape” which I have used as a referent to the ecological landscape of a place. The experience in an ecologically peaceful ecoscape satisfies the pleasure principle for man and helps to maintain, in him, a psychic balance. The movement in space to the seasons is a demand of the survival instinct of man and a way to come to terms with the temporal nature of existence. The poet’s view of the

invincibility of time and space seems premised on the Kantian position that time is a *a priori*, a necessary condition for the ability to sense, perceive and experience things. It also means that without time, it may be difficult for man to have any repository of experience.

According to Freud, “most of the ‘pains’ we experience are of a perceptual order, perception either of the urge of unsatisfied instincts or of something in the external which may be painful in itself or may arouse painful anticipations in the psychic apparatus and is recognized by it as ‘danger’”. The urge to reconnect with his home that we find in the poetic persona in “a dream still to live” is driven by his inability to satisfy the urge to enjoy the serenity of his home. This urge must have been repressed into the unconscious until he made up his mind to go home. In “Climate change the measure of our times”, the cutting of time into neat slots is man-made as a way of keeping up with the pleasure principle. However, his destined failure at getting pleasure from it is the foundation of his psychic pain. The poet paints all efforts at tethering time and space to human ideological post as exercises in futility. The destined failure of this exercise is also highlighted in that we “blindly...spin on and on” through existence, meaning that we do not have a full conscious grasp of our actions; this aligns with the Freudian assertion of the power of the unconscious to control our conscious mental processes which are “timeless” (Freud, 1920).

The “wings of fire” (line 24) is symbolic. The word fire is a representation of global warming as one of the sources of the problem affecting climate change. The whole expression “wings of fire” represents the dangerous speed at which man is moving and in the context of the poem, the speed of environmental degradation occasioned by induced climatic change. If speed kills as drivers are warned, then the race on the wings of fire as driven by the death-instincts is sure. Freud (1920) asserts that the “instincts of self-preservation...are part-instincts designed to secure the path to death peculiar to the organism”. In psychoanalytic understanding, dreams are expressway to the unconscious, they help to reveal the repressed ideas in the unconscious, “happiness” is described as a “dream state” in the poem. This reveals the drive of the pleasure principle, to recapture that state is also the Thanatos for them. The road to pleasure, for them, leads to pain of a final nature because deploying the strength and powers of our “hands and brains”, “we of the earth...seem dead set” are set, “dead set to torch the world”. When this happens, we would have achieved our death drive and put an end to our existence survived by both time and space that we tried to control in order to achieve a pleasurable existence. The warning of the poet is that we must be careful about our activities that promote climate change because the implications will be too much for us to handle.

CONCLUSION

The realities of a polluted environment which is caused, driven and sustained by men affect not only the non-human occupants of the environment; it is also a form of suicide because man ends up destroying himself by destroying his own habitat. It is more of an ecological suicide. J.P. Clark is a prominent artist that employs his works to campaign against ecological destruction. COVID has been described using different metaphors. Of these, metaphors around war reiterate the importance and the need for urgency on the mind of readers and listeners because it points to the need for concerted efforts at a resolution. COVID and ecocodeath, the killing of the environment are related in that both have high death rate. Unfortunately, the speed at which they kill differs; while COVID kills with some speed, ecocodeath kills gradually and this has not imprinted the need for concerted efforts in the minds of both individuals and governments. Those who understand pay lips attention to efforts at reversing the ugly trend that has led to the ravenous, wanton and inhumane destruction of the environment. The analysis of the poems reveals the traumatic experiences of the persona as a representation of the psychological state of individuals who reside in or have experienced the desecration of the environment. The loss of the peace, tranquility and security of nature and the debilitating realities of a destroyed or polluted ecosystem occasions the loss

and complicates the feeling of depression and loss they suffer. Governments, individuals, multinationals, and all concerned must tackle ecocide and environmental degradation with the same vigor and focus with which wars are handled. These efforts must be all-embracing, and sustained.

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ABOUT AUTHOR(S)

Charles A. Adeniranye

Corresponding Author(s)

Adeyemi College of Education

adeniranye.ac@aceondo.edu.ng

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