

Contemporary African Poetry and Climate Change: An Eco-poetic Reading of Niyi Osundare's *Moonsongs*

Sunday Akingboye
University of Lagos

Abstract

Scholarships on climate change and the ecology are one of the most engaging cross-racial and cross-national contemporary issues of the 21st century which this study attempts to discuss critically. This writing exposes the readers to the intricacies and dynamics of climate change and its effects on humanity in the global context. This essay aims at carrying out an eco-poetic reading of Osundare's *Moonsongs* by using the theory of ecocriticism to show how the poet utilises his unique poetics to justify the importance of natural environment towards human sustainability and essence. The collection employed for this task reveals how Osundare uses aesthetic language, primordial symbolism and Yoruba mythology to explore the relationship between humanity and nature, specifically on how human's injustices rupture the order of nature. The methodology for the study is qualitative as it focuses primarily on the analysis of the text. The study selects and examines some specific poems in the collection for ecocritical analysis. Findings show that the Earth's climate is always changing even without human interferences which scientists term "natural climate change" as a result of the internal and external geo-processes taking place within the orbit of the Earth. However, human operations such as gross chemical productions, deforestation and industrial revolution involving the usage of fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) have caused unmeasurable ecological hazards to humanity. Our conclusion therefore affirms a reverence towards the ecosystem through the eco-poetic reading of the text.

Keywords: Contemporary African Poetry, Climate Change, Myth.

Introduction

In the 21st century, academic writings and professional studies have captured a variety of emerging contemporary issues that are of global importance. The emergence of these recent scholarships, especially issues relating to digital transformation, internet computerisation, gender politics, LGBTQ discourse, cyber-crime and cyber-security, cross-national migration, nuclear war politics (involving the exploration of missiles, drones, armour tanks, sub-marines, rocket launching and artillery), together with bio-weaponry and the antics of humanoid and artificial intelligence have all occupied the center of attention of recent contemporary realities in relation to human experiences. However, the issue of climate change and eco-pollution remains one of the most disturbing as it violently affects both humanity and the global space.

Literature as a humanising discipline should be made relevant outside its literary scope so as to educate both local and elite communities on the ethics of caring for nature and the environment. This shift is necessary for literature to spread its wings and become a formidable force in the larger context of interdisciplinary research and societal development. Erukora (2021) corroborates to this assertion by positing that the global paradigm shift in exploring

literature to approach environmental issues is relevant in the 21st-century African literary discourse for the development of society. (p. 53).

In reality, it is correct to assert that there is a symbiotic relationship between humanity and the order of nature. This implies that man and the natural world are mutually beneficial to each other. As existence and survival become a basic necessity, the quest for food, shelter and material needs have compelled humans to engage nature in an exploitative manner which has a repercussion effect. Ogundipe (2006) establishes that the ecosystem is naturally programmed such that it has conditions which determine what type of organisms can live in it. To paraphrase this, it implies that each type of organisms has adaptation tendencies which enable them to survive and reproduce in their natural habitat. (p. 1). The point in Ogundipe's (2006) argument is simple. The survival of human beings as species of living organism greatly depends on the level of environmental balance, ecological harmony and the order of nature in which they domicile. However, as human expansion grows as a result of the advent of modernisation and civilisation, there has been a constant clash between humanity and the ecosystem. Ogundipe (2006) posits critically that:

Each type of organism has adaptations which enable them to survive, and reproduce. Humans through their various activities often upset the balance of different populations of organisms in the natural ecosystems... so that some species find it difficult to survive. With rapid growth in human population all over the world, there is a serious danger of causing permanent damage to both local environment and the global environment. (p. 1).

Here, from the global perspective, Ogundipe (2006) attempts to demonstrate the idea of symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural environment. On the one hand, humans are the sole beneficiary of the natural world. The forests, rivers, oceans and the raw soils of the Earth and other natural bodies altogether provide food and shelter for man's survival and sustainability. As a matter of fact, the air one breathes, the water used for irrigating crops and other activities are all testaments to the fact that human's health and prosperity depend on the wellbeing of the ecosystem. On the other hand, nature too benefits from man and this could be debatable. In practical terms, man has implemented policies and structures such as natural conservation centres and wildlife reserves, especially in advanced countries which all benefit the natural ecology. However, the fact still remains that humans' existence and their survival antics have endangered nature more than preserving it.

To a great extent, the global space and the natural world have been victimised by human actions, and this development has resulted to series of chaotic natural disasters which consequently contributes to human mortality rate over the years. A testament to this tragedy is a real-life scenario involving the wildfire in Brazil's Amazon Rainforest that occurred in 2019 and 2020 respectively, which reportedly burned more than three million hectares as documented by the Council on Foreign Relations (2024). Upon this environmental tragedy, ecological experts and eco-critics have blamed industrial activities specifically, the practice of gross deforestation in that region.

Also, as reported by Al Jazeera in a recent broadcast, the earthquake that affected Turkey in 2023 was fatal with many casualties. And it has been documented as the most destructive event of the year which manifested in form of a twin earthquake with magnitudes of 7.8 and 7.5 that struck Southern Turkey near the Syrian border on February 6. This natural chaos has affected an estimated 14 million people, representing 16 percent of Turkey's overall population. The confirmed deaths totaled 50,783 in Turkey and 8,476 in Syria according to Al Jazeera. The point is— there have been fatal occurrences and tragic cases of natural disasters such as flooding, tsunami, drought, intense heat wave, heavy snowfall, tornado, winter storm, hurricane, volcanic eruption, pandemics, insect infestations, animal stampedes and solar flares amongst possible others; all of which add significantly to human decay and morality rate. Recently, the heavy rainfall in Dubai in 2024 has caused serious floods in the United Arab Emirates which affected many cities and other suburb. (Source: Ajazera.com).

In the African context, previously, especially during the primordial age of African history, the natural bodies such as ocean, forest, soil, mountain, sun, moon, star, wind and river amongst others occupy a place of ancestral reverence and dignity as they are associated with some level of spirituality, agrarian heritage and mythic essence as implied by Anyokwu (2009). Similarly, as already established by Tanure Ojaide in his series of collection of poems, especially in “Delta Blues and Home Songs”, there is an unleashing of poetic anger in form of a protesting voice against environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region. Using the Niger-Delta region as a case in point, the aborigines till today, still struggle to feed and survive due to the oil spillage and other mining operations which continuously degrade and deteriorate the region's ecology. The point to note here is that, as a result of the advent of globalisation, enlightenment and the politics of Industrial Revolution which have influenced African civilisation in this contemporary time, it is therefore the case that these natural bodies have become sufferers of human injustices and victims of the long existing exploitative legacy. This foregoing, to a great extent is a contemporary global tragedy which affects climate change and humanity simultaneously.

As tragic as these issues are, it is noticeable that contemporary African poetry has contributed only a miniature degree towards the ecological discourse of climate change. This implies that contemporary African poets have not been producing enough literary works, especially poems that address the problem of environmental hazard and mismanagement of the ecosystem with respect to climate change. Across the ages, the sociological condition of humans in relation to the natural world has been a narrative of tragedy, colossal exploitation and injustices, which testify to the victimisation of nature. In fact, from a socio-ecological perspective, it is the case that the human society has implemented policies that devalue, degrade and disparage the environment and this polluted structure keeps causing distortion in the natural order of things as claimed by Ogundipe (2006).

It is important for contemporary African poetry to address the issue of climate change. Human activities continually make life miserable to living organisms in their natural habitats, and this directly or indirectly affects the ecosystem. In practical terms, according to Ogundipe (2006:2), population explosion and large-scale commercial farming have been identified as some of the problems facing the ecosystem. The practice of deforestation has apparently led to the destruction of natural habitats and wildlife in many parts of the world including Africa.

From a global perspective, large hectares of forest are being cut down periodically to provide more land for agricultural purposes and industrial productions. On soil damage, Ogundipe (2006) further notes that:

When the soil is left without enough vegetation to absorb rain water and bind the soil particles together, there will be movement of the soil by running water, wind, moving ices or gravitational creep. This scenario oftentimes leads to soil erosion which is the process of wearing away or the removal of the upper layer of soil, through natural or human-induced factors. This evidently occurs because the soil is exposed to wind, water, or ice. (p.2).

The point here is that, deforestation, soil erosion and other ecological distortions of nature are perpetuated by humans and they have damaging effects to the environment. Ogundipe (2006) reveals that the natural vegetation is important because it protects the soil from erosion, and it helps to control flood. But, as a result of deforestation, when trees are cut down, heavy rainfall easily washes away the valuable topsoil in which food crops are grown. Ogundipe (2006) also notes that the distortion in the order of nature is not only peculiar to Africa but a universal disequilibrium. From the global context, rapid and incessant destruction of woodlands has been occurring throughout the world; and specifically, between 1880 and 1980, about 40% of all the world's tropical rainforest were destroyed. (p. 3). *Paraphrased.*

Matawal and Maton (2013) further argue that human activities are detrimental to nature and this industrial development has contributed significantly to the rise of global temperature. They posit critically that the planet has changed fundamentally and the World is undergoing a catastrophic climate drift. This occurrence makes it to be hotter today than it has been in two thousand years. Climate change and the industrial revolution have become a formidable force to reckon with in the 21st century. Matawal and Maton (2013) reveal that the Earth is known to be surrounded by an atmosphere composed primarily of Nitrogen and Oxygen which is 149,600,000 kilometers from the Sun. However, gases (also known as Greenhouse Gases) have contributed greatly to the warming of the Earth's atmosphere by reflecting radiation from the Earth's surface through carbon-dioxide, Ozone and water vapour. The point here is that, the operations of industrial activities in the contemporary context have caused greenhouse effects which is the warming of the Earth's surface as a result of the atmospheric pollution of these gases. (p. 62). It can therefore be claimed that climate change in the global context negatively affects negatively all forms of life as it leads to a variety of natural disasters and cosmic tragedies such as land degradation, fresh water shortages, food shortages, insecurity, global warming, flooding and shelter deficits and health care challenges amongst several others.

Therefore, this writing primarily discusses the politics of climate change through an eco-poetic reading. Climate change can be seen as an age long existing term for warming of the planet due to an increase in the average global temperature, and it has already been established that human activities over the years have functioned as factors causing this change in climate. Without mincing words, the burning of fossil fuels including coal, oil and gas oftentimes release carbon-dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere have terrible effects on climate which in return affect humanity. Ogundipe (2006) establishes that

human consumption of fossil fuels has ecological implications. She states that fossil fuels have been used as sources of energy such that the practice of exploration, drilling, mining, transportation and other industrial operations make use of these fossil fuels in large scale which in turn lead to environmental pollution. As a matter of fact, the industrial use of chemicals such as dynamites can be hazardous to wildlife and human beings if not well-utilised.

So, as an interdisciplinary task, this writing cuts across a variety of disciplines as it intersects with literature, geography, ecology and sociology. African poetry and the ecological world are fascinating and critical areas that are yet to be fully explored by contemporary African poets. In this regard, this writing concentrates on the eco-poetic exploration of nature and the ecological environment as poetised by Niyi Osundare which relates with the contemporary tragedy of human injustices towards climate condition. In Osundare's poetics, there is a simultaneous imaginative appeal to man's survival and the order of nature through the poetic rendition of moonsongs. In other words, the songs of the moon as poetised by Osundare critically appeal to the humanistic activities that cause pollution and hazard as a result of alteration in nature.

In exploring the issue of climate change using the eco-poetic lens, this essay employs the theory of ecocriticism for its analysis. In the analysis of the selected poems, the writing focuses on the poet's exploration and symbolic representation of the moon as a metaphorisation of the order of nature. The writing posits that, through the idea of mythic personification, the moon becomes a crooner who sings songs for the reinstatement of natural order and spiritual atmospheric ambience that is suitable for human-nature symbiotic co-existence. By employing the theory of ecocriticism, the analysis becomes critical and extensive as it explores the social, political and economic implications of distorting the order of nature in relation to climate change in contemporary Africa. Through the eco-poetic reading of the poems, the readers are meant to realise that human desires and insatiable wants have made man to be hostile and violent towards the natural world; and as a result, humanity has become cruel towards natural order and the ecologicality of life. Hence, this writing proposes the need to re-think and re-evaluate the injustices against nature which are the mythic songs contained in Osundare's *Moonsongs*.

The poem collection *Moonsongs* has some ideological conception of nature which the poet attempts to explore either consciously or unconsciously. Niyi Osundare, being one of the leading contemporary poets in postcolonial Africa has been described as a committed Marxist who employs the mechanism of poetry as a tool against injustice and socio-political vices that are prevalent in Africa's governance. However, aside from his inclination to socio-political issues with respect to his Marxist philosophy, it is correct to assert that Osundare is also inclined to nature as he explores the mechanisms of aesthetic language, primordial symbolism and African mythology in his poetics in a bid to explore the relationship between humanity and nature. The eco-poetic reading or ecocritical analysis of the selected poems will reveal the geo-folkloric and eco-literary essence of the study which intersect with the politics of climate change in contemporary Africa. Hence, this writing critically explores climate, ecology and the nature world as phenomena wrapped in the mystery of poetic language.

Climate Change and the Politics of Greenhouse Gases

In understanding climate change, Riedy (2016) makes some significant contributions which are relevant to this writing. He opines that climate, on the one hand is the average of the weather conditions at a particular point on the Earth. Typically, the idea of climate is expressed in terms of expected temperature, rainfall and wind conditions which are based on historical observations. On the other hand, climate change is therefore a change in either the average climate or climate variability that persists over an extended period. (p. 1). Attempting to define climate change based on ecological variability without considering human operations in this contemporary time is apparently incomplete. It is apparent that human activities and alterations with respect to the industrial revolution have contributed dominantly to the change in weather condition. Riedy (2016) establishes that:

...since the Industrial Revolution, human emissions of greenhouse gases from fossil fuel combustion, deforestation and agricultural practices have led to global warming and climate change. Observed and anticipated changes in the climate include higher temperatures, changes in rainfall patterns, changes in the frequency and distribution of weather events such as droughts, storms, floods and heat waves, sea level rise and consequent impacts on human and natural systems. Many scientists argue that the impacts of climate change will be devastating for natural and human systems and that climate change poses an existential threat to human civilisation. (p. 1).

The industrial revolution and capitalist productions are integral factors which significantly contributes in driving the climate change of the 21st century. It is important to understand that change is a natural phenomenon which is constant even without human activities. Riedy (2016) already states that:

The Earth's climate has always changed. Changes in the Earth's orbit, the energy output of the sun, volcanic activity, the geographic distribution of the Earth's land masses and other internal or external processes can influence climate. Scientists refer to this type of long-term climate change as "natural climate change". As a result of natural climate change, the Earth has experienced regular cold periods (or ice ages) in the past, when glaciers covered large parts of the Earth's surface. The Earth has also experienced warmer periods when sea levels were much higher than they are now. In the Earth's long-term history, the current period is characterised by a relatively warm, stable climate that has lasted since the end of the last ice age about 11,700 years ago. This period is known to geologists as the Holocene and is the period during which human civilisation has flourished. (p. 2).

He proceeds further:

If this were the only type of climate change, then the interest to sociologists would be minimal. However, scientific observations and models indicate that the Earth's

climate is now changing due to human activity. This is termed “anthropogenic climate change”. The processes involved are complex but can be summarised as follows. Human activities, such as burning fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas) to make electricity and power vehicles, clearing forests for farms and cities, and cultivating livestock, [altogether] release “greenhouse gases” into the atmosphere. The main greenhouse gases are carbon dioxide, methane, halocarbons, and nitrous oxide. These gases accumulate in the atmosphere and allow radiation from the sun to pass through but trap some of the heat radiating back from the Earth. This is called the “greenhouse effect” because the principle is similar to a greenhouse, where the glass roof allows sunlight in but traps heat for growing plants. (p. 2).

Riedy (2016) argues that climate change is a universal ecological constant which still occurs in this contemporary age. However, the operations of industrial, chemical and mechanical processes involving the greenhouse gases tragically rupture the ecological order of nature. Industrial Revolution has been described as a transformative period in human history and it significantly marks a violent shift from old tradition of human labour into a modern pattern of machine-based manufacturing. It began in Britain around 1760 which later spread across the world. The damages caused by the inclination to machinery are at an alarming rate. A case in point is the smoke emitting from the large pipelines of oil mining industries which the diagram presents.



Fig. I: Urban Greenhouse Gases as Climate Pollutants (Source: Google.com)

The diagram shows that the dark smoke is hazardous to breathe and it significantly increases the temperature level of the sun which causes skin burn, organic tissue damage and

intense heat. The damages of Industrial Revolution on the ecology are huge and, humanity till today, still battle with the global warming effects. Although it should be noted that the terms “climate change” and “global warming” are oftentimes used interchangeably by critics; however, there is a difference. It should be noted that climate change is a broader term that incorporates both global warming and other observed changes in climate. (Riedy, 2). In essence, global warming is one type of climate change and it drives other changes in the climate. Aside from the urban pollutants, the diagram below also shows the detrimental effects and aftermaths of greenhouse gases on rural communities.



Fig II: Industrial Plastics and Wastes as Soil Pollutants in Rural Area (Source: Ebute Ilaje-Bariga, Lagos).



Fig III: Pollutants Defacing a Rural Costal Area (Source: Ebute Ilaje-Bariga, Lagos).

In the African worldview, there are slow actions towards addressing the issue of climate change, and this has not been critically addressed in the academia. The problem of human's slow responses to natural dysfunctionality is raised specifically by Giddens (2011) which is a sociological argument. Giddens (2011) asks why is it that a threat of such magnitude relating to natural mishaps are routinely ignored by human societies. According to him, it is so because there is lack of tangible and immediate danger from climate change. However, by the time the danger becomes clearly visible, it will be too late to act due to the lag between the emission of greenhouse gases and their full warming impact. Paradoxically, at the point where the danger becomes too great to ignore, further warming will be locked in by emissions already in the atmosphere as implied by (Riedy 2016). Climate change is embedded in human social life. In practical terms, everyday social activities such as eating, working, walking, heating and cooling our homes result in emissions of greenhouse gases which contribute significantly to climate change.

Thompson (1975) in his book entitled *Africa: The Climatic Background* opines that:

The atmosphere exerts its influence chiefly through weather and climate, which are prime factors determining water supply, vegetation, agricultural possibilities, comfort level and incidence of many pests and diseases, — all of which are of great importance to life on earth. It is usually necessary therefore to take account of climate when studying possibilities for the development of natural resources in Africa. (p. 1).

One significant challenge that still affects Africa and the rest of the world is the mismanagement of pollutant agents which have not been curtailed yet by modern industries. The smokes and other carbon dioxide pollutants such as wood, fossil fuel and refuse emissions have serious degrading effects on the ecology and humanity. In fact, these pollutants oftentimes cause smog and high temperatures; and according to Ogundipe (2006), these pollutants such as Sulphur dioxide from volcanic eruption, burning coal and oil in many power stations and industries can cause acid rain and throat irritation. In addition, the methane from decaying substance and leakage of natural gas can cause explosion and fire outbreak. (p. 9). This therefore implies that the knowledge of climate change and nature is a fundamental epistemology which contemporary African poets should take cognisance of, so as to ensure the relevance and sensitivity of African poetry to emerging plights.

On African poetry, over time, both the old traditional and emerging contemporary are artistic formidable forces that still draw huge inspirations from the ancient oral resources, cultural norms and other indigenous historical artifacts. In the development of contemporary African poetry, it is important to establish that there is a deliberate attempt of alluding to or referencing objects relating to the natural world. To a great extent, Niyi Osundare is one iconic figure from the West African space who has used the dexterity of language, metaphorical contraption and the industry of his poetic prowess to signify the importance of nature in the making of contemporary African poetry. In the eco-reading of his poems, the readers come across elements of myths, folktales, proverbial expressions and an inclination to the natural ecology. The eco-poetics of Osundare shows the natural bodies such as sea, lake, hills, mountains, sun, moon, weather and the forest amongst others all play significant roles in shaping the life and experiences of humans.

In the African cosmology, specifically from the Yoruba traditional context, climate and the natural ecology have both mythic, spiritual and historical implications to the existence and essence of humans. Drawing upon the ancient Biblical myth of creation, it was documented that God first created the natural ecology before constructing man from clay into becoming a living creature. This implies that from time immemorial, natural ecology has held a position of superiority above humans in terms of order of creation. So, as a humanising discipline, literature through the medium of contemporary African poetry has become hugely interested in man's activities and attitudes towards climate and the natural bodies which is the main thrust of this writing.

J.P. Clark, one of the foremost Nigerian poets and playwrights has lamented the tragedy of ecological hazard in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. This is mainly due to the oil mining activities which affect the natural ecology and climate condition of the region. Nigeria and the mining politics is a case of paradoxical complication. This paradox is explainable. On the one hand, the exploration of the greenhouse gases in the Niger-Delta region is the cradle of the nation's wealth. Oduah (2006) in her critical work entitled "An Overview of Nigeria's Petroleum Industry", corroborates that the oil and gas industry is the leading sector in the Nigerian economy, accounting for over 80% of the nation's total exports and almost 70% of total government revenue. She gives a clear historical account of Nigeria's oil mining activity stating that:

Shell-BP was the first to commence commercial oil exploration in Nigeria, in 1956 in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State after futile attempts on 28 wells and 25 boreholes. Apart from Shell BP, other oil companies that were issued licenses by the Federal Government to explore oil in Nigeria included: Mobil Oil, Texaco, Sunray-Tenneco and Occidental, (all American firms); Agip (Italy) and Safrap (France), which later changed to Elf. (p. 11).

Oduah (2006) also makes a deliberate attempt to establish that Nigeria has a reliable oil well which generates wealth through exporting. She reveals that:

Nigeria began exporting in 1958 with crude oil production at 4,000 barrels per day, rising by 1979 to a peak of 2.3 million barrels per day. National crude reserves today are in excess of 25 billion barrels and over 166 trillion stranded cubic feet of gas... From the '70's, the Nigerian economy shifted from its dependence on agriculture to dependence on petroleum. The country witnessed an unprecedented cash flow from oil export in the mid 1970's, a situation that changed owing to the world economic recession of the latter part of the decade when crude oil sold for less than US \$10 in the world market. (p. 11-12).

On the commercial implications of Nigeria's oil production and exportation, Ikein (1990) corroborates Oduah (2006) by attesting that:

Commercial production of petroleum, which began as early as 1958, has since become a dominant factor in Nigeria national life. Oil now accounts for about 93 percent of Nigerian export earnings, 75 percent of foreign exchange earnings, 87 percent of total government revenues, and 45 percent of the gross national product. (p. 19).

In addition to this fact, according to Stevens (1984), the 1970's boom in oil production in Nigeria coincided with the surge in world prices. Due to this development, there was a shift in the balance of power which enabled the Nigerian government to broaden its terms on which the companies lift oil. As a result, Nigerian revenue from oil rocketed from N176 million in 1970 to N1.4 billion in 1973 and N12.86 billion by 1980. (p. 13). The point to note here is that, the Nigeria's industrial revolution in relation to crude oil mining and production has boosted the nation's economy to a very great extent. However, on the other hand, just as these greenhouse gases provide wealth to the nation, they also produce toxics, havocs and pollutants which cause severe harm to both humanity and the ecology; and this appears to be a case of paradox.

In the Nigerian context; coal, oil and gas have formed the bedrock of the nation's energy industry. However, when examined from a critical view, it becomes obvious that the politics surrounding the energy industry have resulted to retrogression rather than progress. Today, Nigeria still suffers double jeopardy of hike in pump price and the scarcity of fuel. This problem is not new; however, it has become worse than what could be imagined. According to Nwoke

and Omoweh (2006), since the 1980s and 1990s, the energy industry has been facing a variety of turbulent issues. They inform that:

Since the mid-1980s, Nigeria's energy industry has moved from one crisis to another with little or no hope of its resolution. In fact, the crisis got its peak in the period 1994-1999. During this period, the petroleum refineries, which were systematically allowed to collapse no sooner than they were constructed in the 1970s, finally ground to a halt. This, in turn worsened the lingering acute scarcity of petroleum products. At different times, the governments of the country have hiked the pump priced of the petroleum products in the hope that the products would be made available, but all ended in future... Though Nigeria is endowed with natural gas, petroleum and coal, among other raw materials for the generation of electricity, the power stations still face acute shortage of these basic inputs. The resultant effect is persistent power outage, which, in turn, has crippled virtually all sectors of the country's economy. From all indications, therefore, Nigeria's energy industry is a gross failure. (Nwoke and Omoweh, p. 17-18).

This claim is a prophetic metaphor, giving that it speaks to the current predicament of Nigerians who suffer fuel hike and scarcity in the present regime of Bola Ahmed Tinubu. What should be noted is that, cruelty to nature is a cruelty to man. When raw resources and the natural environments are misused and abused, it has a corresponding consequence which affects the economic, political and social well-being of a people. The point here is that, in the case of Nigeria, the politics of mismanagements, gross disregard and infidelity towards nature all have repercussions which Nigerians suffer today. In other words, the indiscriminate antics of frequently exploiting and polluting the soil, water and gas through industrial labour such as drilling, dredging and mining without making deliberate efforts to refill, repair and reserve the ecology can be interpreted as injustices which consequently results into economic, political and social backlash which Nigeria is tragically experiencing today.

To a significant extent, these issues are reflected in the eco-poetic reading of "Moonsongs" in a uniquely covert way through the use of aesthetic language, primordial symbolism and Yoruba mythology. Osundare, therefore employs the text to explore the relationship between humanity and nature, specifically on how human's frivolities, incoordination and injustices rupture the order of nature and politics of man. On the part of the poet, in relation to Nigeria's predicaments, Osundare critically laments the negative ecological effects of abuse of nature through the greenhouse gases and other mining activities which in turn affect the natural ambience and psychological sobriety of man. In relation to the poems, he makes deliberate efforts to decry the tragedy of humans' injustices and hostility towards the natural world which this writing attempts to unveil to the readers in "Moonsongs" through the poetic lens of ecocriticism.

An Eco-Poetic Analysis of Niyi Osundare's *Moonsongs*

The text "Moonsongs" is a collection of poems that has been selected for an eco-poetic analysis in this writing. The collection, in terms of structure has opening poems of twenty-four phases

which are significantly untitled. In the first opening phase (which is a performance poem), Osundare dwells so much on the interplay between humanity and the natural world through the literary trope of myth. As implied by the title of the text "Moonsongs", the poet makes a deliberate attempt to mythically personify the moon as a crooner or a bard who is ready to sing aloud an acoustic and melodic song that produces a natural ambience of comfort which is suitable for man's condition. It is important to note that African myth is instrumental in the conception of contemporary African poetry and it has become one of the defining features of Niyi Osundare's poetry.

Aristotle is the first formalist critic to establish the fact that art has its own truth and principle of natural dialectics. Similarly, myth in the African context has its own poetic truth which is important to note. In the African conception of poetry (in its raw oral form), myth has been in existence as an integral poetic aspect. Chinua Achebe, a popular iconic figure in African Literature makes some critical postulations upon which this writing begins its arguments. Achebe (1975) posits that:

... art is, and was always in the service of man. Our ancestors created their myth and legends and told their stories for a human purpose (including, no doubt, the excitation of wonder and pure delight); they made their sculptures in wood and terracotta, stone and bronze to serve the needs of their times. Their artists lived and moved and had their being in society, and created their works for the good of that society. (p. 19).

Here, Achebe (1975) is of the opinion that art in the traditional African context is not just "art for art's sake". On the contrary, art is conceived as a craft that is functional, pragmatic and purposeful when viewed from the African lens. In fact, Okpewho (1979) also corroborates by affirming that art has always served a dual function in the African context— religious edification and aesthetic delight. (p. 2). On the part of Achebe (1975), art has always been a medium for Africans to commune with their ancestors in the primordial age. This implies that the idea of creating artistic ornaments in form of woody sculptures or stony designs is a physical representation of African animism, mythic metaphysics and cosmo-rituality.

Giving that the African primordial ancestry and animist consciousness are symbolically mythologised in these physical artistic artifacts, then it should follow that traditional African poetry (and even the contemporary African poetry) as artistic crafts go beyond just a mere rendition or imaginative composition but a rhetorical heritage that captures the cosmology, epistemology, history, epic and cultural ethos of the African people. The point here is that, if it is agreed that myth is crucial to the conception of African poetry, then it is the case that African poetry is functional and pragmatic (being a mytho-poetic craft). Anyokwu (2009) corroborates by asserting that "if tradition is a crucial and significant part of African poetry, then myth serves and functions as a crucial and significant source of African oral poetry". (p. 2).

According to Wheelwright (1966), myth refers to "our tribal habits of conceptualisation." In his argument, he postulates that within the framework of myth, there are other components which include taboo, totem, magic, legend, initiation ceremonies, death chants, worship of gods and goodness, and all of these constitute myth which in turn is used in

literature as expressive symbol. (p. 59). This therefore implies that mythology and spirituality are closely interwoven in the African context, and they are not necessary statements of facts. Douglas (1966) in his critical work entitled "The Meaning of Myth in Modern Criticism" posits that myth or myths are opposed to facts, to catalogable and manageable phenomena. They are significantly opposed to the logic of ordinary knowledge, positivism, the empirical, the finite, the logos, the intelligence and will, and to the consciousness. (p. 121).

Myth is a fundamental component of traditional and contemporary African poetry and it has also found a valid space in the poetics of Niyi Osundare who is a foremost Nigerian contemporary poet. In the poetics of Osundare, there is an imaginative appeal to nature and climate for reverence through the mechanism of myth. Osundare makes a deliberate attempt to "ecologise" myth in relation to the natural world in a psychic manner that interests the readers. This mytho-poetic craft of Osundare is a valid exploration of the natural universe. Wheelwright (1966) affirms that the mytho-poetic vision involves a certain idea of nature, for a myth that undertones psychic extrapolation which tells a story whose locale is in the world out there. (p. 61).

In the opening phase of *Moonsongs*, the poet sings a folktale of the moon who has been transmogrified as a fairy alluring woman with unimaginable beauty that attracts suitors. Just as the suitors keep coming, the moon replenishes her beauty in freshness. In the ending of the folktale, as the suitors come with yam and kolanuts to take her as a bride, she vanishes and goes with the time. The poet sings:

Peree o pere yaju l'orun
Agbamurere
Peree o pere yaju l'orun
Agbamurere
Aseseyo osu o da bi egin
Agbamurere
Ka kosu ka kobi ka lo mu saya
Agbamurere
Ka to de be o ti b'oyo lo
Agbamurere
Kiriji kiriji kiriji pepelupe
Agbamurere (p. 1)

In relation to nature and climate change, the myth of the moon being personified as a bride has a connotative epistemology. In the African context, a woman who has been prepared to be taken as a bride is usually dressed and adorned in an elegant attire. Giving that the moon is personified as an African bride, then it follows that she must be revered and adorned. In the eco-poetic reading of the poem, the preservation and adoration for nature is brought to the fore through the symbolic reverence of the moon. The moon as a symbolic representation of nature and climate needs to be maintained. The eco-poetics of Osundare through the mechanism of African myth therefore retells the story of maintaining the order of nature. Over time, the misuse and abuse of natural bodies has necessitated flood, wildfire and other environmental

dysfunctionality. Therefore, Osundare employs the poem as an advocacy towards cultivating the environment well. The moon as a symbolic embodiment of nature therefore sings a song of preserving and reverencing the ecosystem. From the traditional African perspective, the appearance of the moon is symbolic. The moon usually comes out at night which is a time where stories are being told in the typical African setting. This implies that the author draws a line of intersection between the setting and the message of the song.

To a great extent, nature and climate change are fundamental, and this is because they affect other crucial aspects of life such as politics, economy, personal life and social relations. When the natural world is provoked, there is significant backlash which disrupts man's life. In the eco-poetic reading of the poem, it could be inferred that moon is the bride while man is the groom. Without mincing words, Osundare implies that man is guilty of infidelity as he pollutes the purity and virginity of nature. Therefore, man's infidelity and inordinate activities have damaged nature and the climatic condition; hence, man's infidelity towards the moon (nature) is a miasma of injustice and hostility.

Osundare employs the poem as a critical reminder of man's primary duty since primordial age. According to the poet, to preserve nature is to preserve life. Also, ensuring nature's happiness is same as sustaining the happiness of humanity. The poet sings further:

*Oh moon, matron, master, eternal maiden,
The bounce of your bosom
The miracle of your cheeks
Your smile which ripens the forests
Your frown which wrinkles the dusk
The youth of your age
The age of your youth... (p. 1-2).*

Aside from the mythologisation of the moon, another interesting mechanism used by the poet is aesthetic language, especially the way the poet transmogrifies the moon into a human being. The personification of the moon is achieved here in an elevated language. The moon is described as a person who has “bosom” and “cheeks”. At some point, the poet describes the moon as someone who can “smile” and “frown”. This implies that the poet regards the moon and the natural world as objects of reverence. On Osundare’s eco-poetics in relation to his dignification or deification of nature, Anyokwu (2009) comments that:

For anyone who has an acquaintance with Osundare, the reader will notice the poet’s overwhelming deployment of nature and traditional Yoruba orature. Osundare’s poetic canvas is framed in large measure by the mythic cosmos of the Yoruba whose religion and metaphysics are rooted in animism. (p. 4).

Here, Anyokwu (2009) admits that Osundare has committed so much time and energy in deploying myth and orature into projecting the essence and reverence of nature. When nature is abused and desecrated, there is a repercussion effect that sets in. The poet sings that:

*And the moon masters the stars
Masters the sea
Sharpen every tip of its tidal teeth... (p. 2).*

The symbolism of teeth in the context is significant to the eco-poetic understanding of the poem. The “teeth” of the moon is a mythic symbolism of anger. This means that when nature is provoked, there is a rebound which usually results into fatal accidents. In a real case scenario, according to Matawal and Maton (2013), when people mine coal and extract oil from the Earth’s crust, and then burn these fossil fuels for transportation, heating, cooking, electricity, and manufacturing, it simply means that they are effectively moving carbon more rapidly into the atmosphere than it is being removed naturally. Also, by clearing forests to support agriculture, people are simply transferring carbon from living biomass into the atmosphere. And according to them, the result is that humans are adding ever increasing amounts of extra carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. As a result of this, atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations become higher today than they have been over the last half-million years or longer. (p. 62). *Paraphrased.*

The central argument of this writing is to foreground the fact, even though climate change naturally, human activities have further polluted the climatic condition which brings about disruption in the natural order of things. According to the National Wildlife Federation, climate change has contributed to a rise in terms of extreme weather level which has resulted into floods and high intensity hurricanes. Using Nigeria as a case in point, flooding can cause a wide range of risks including death and injury, contaminated drinking water, hazardous material spills, increased populations of disease carrying insects and rodents, moldy houses, community disruption and displacement. As rains increase, it follows that streams, rivers and lakes tend to overflow which increases the risk of water-borne pathogens flowing into drinking water sources. Downpours can damage infrastructural structures like sewer and solid waste systems which in turn triggers sewage overflows that could spread into local waters. (Matawal and Maton, 64).

In Nigeria for instance, according to the National Emergency Management Agency, flood incidences in 2012 alone have ravaged about seven states of the federation claiming 363 lives and displacing 2.1 million people from their homes, together with destroying properties and farmlands whose values are yet to be estimated. To be more specific, the Niger-Delta over the years has been in a cosmic cul-de-sac due to the ecological barstardisation orchestrated by the mining companies. Historically, the exploration of crude oil and gas began in Oloibiri community of Bayelsa State, In the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. As a result of this oil mining activities in the Niger-Delta, Nigeria has currently become the largest producer of oil in sub-Saharan Africa with about 32% and 34.2% of oil and gas reserves respectively. Nigeria is still the fifth largest oil exporting country to the United States and the fifth largest exporting country in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) according to Tamuno and Felix (2008).

The Niger Delta region is geographically situated in the Southern part of Nigeria or in the South-South geopolitical zone. The Niger Delta region consists of nine states which include: Akwa Ibom, Abia, Bayelsa, Imo, Delta, Cross River, Edo, Ondo, and Rivers (UNDP, 2006).

One major signpost to note is that the region is popularly known to be a land flowing with milk and honey, as it remains the host of crude oil for Nigeria. As a matter of fact, Nigeria's economy relies on the generated revenues from the oil production by multi-national corporations for its survival. However, the area in reality is marked by massive underdevelopment, poverty and colossal ecological dysfunctionality. Effion (2010) corroborates in his article entitled *Oil and Gas Industry in Nigeria: The Paradox of Black Gold* by asserting that the Niger Delta's main environmental and social challenges result from oil spills, gas flaring, deforestation, decreasing productivity of the land and pollution. His critical submission is a direct affirmation to the problems that arise from the scavenging for natural minerals without observing the principle of natural order. Throughout the years, oil exploration activities in the area have caused tremendous environmental hazard and ecological mess, which has adversely affected the livelihoods of the people who are mainly farmers and fishermen.

From another perspective, aside from the creative use of Yoruba mythology of the moon, Osundare also makes use of primordial symbolism in the poem in a bid to project an appeal to the natural world. The symbol of the moon itself is strategic and significant to comprehending the message of the poet. The idea of "roundness" in relation to the shape of the moon is symbolic as it suggests the cyclic nature of existence. Things come and go. Time as a historic factor expires the old and rebirths the new. The moon itself comes, goes and keeps revolving in its own orbit. This can be interpreted to mean that, whatever human does to nature, it takes it, revolves and later returns it. The cyclic symbol of the moon, in the context of this analysis implies that since man has only decided to pollute the ecosystem in a continuous manner, then nature also responds violently causing natural disasters, economic decline and socio-political dysfunctionality. And this scenario keeps revolving in a cyclic progression.

An observed scenario is the case involving plastics and wastes. Aside from the damages of industrial revolution, human domestic habits involving the indiscriminate disposal of plastics and wastes in rural and coastal areas also contribute to the abuse of nature. In some rural areas, the domestic routine of indiscriminately disposing plastics and wastes into open heaps, stagnant swamps and the gutters all contribute to the abuse of the nature, such that when there is a chronic blockage and the flow is hindered, then there is the consequence of natural retaliation coming upon the environment such as flood, climate change and global warming which will have humans as victims.

In a more critical scenario, people oftentimes dump corpses in open heaps or sometimes throw dead bodies into the river. These unhealthy occurrences come with natural violence as nature is being provoked and abused. Therefore, it can be inferred that the cyclic structure and progression of the moon is a symbolic reminder which warns humanity on the repercussion effects that will befall humanity whenever the principle of natural order is tempered with.

In the phase "II" of the text, the poet also sings about the moon:

*The moon is a mask dancing
Mask dancing
Mask dancing
The moon is a mask dancing
And in the milky grove*

*between the cloudmountains
the moon's tropical eyes
are chameleons of silver forests (p. 5).*

As already established earlier in this writing, one dominant device that is strongly used in the selected poems is personification. The poet makes a deliberate and conscious effort to personify the moon as a human being who can dance and perform other humanly activities. This therefore shows the correlation in asserting that humanity and nature are two sides of the same coin as they are mutually beneficial and share a symbiotic relationship. The message of the poem is simple. In the opening lines of the phase "II", the moon is mythologised as a "dancing mask." The idea of dancing has a semantic connotation which one can associate with joy, happiness and euphoria. In most cases, people tend to dance when they are happy or excited. This therefore implies that the moon or nature generally has the tendency of being happy and excited. Also, in the same line of thought, the moon or other natural bodies have a tendency to be sad when provoked or abused. Using Nigeria as a case in point, nature has not been dancing, rather, she has been disrespected and abused due to the advent of modernity and civilisation, specifically the industrial revolution involving the greenhouse gases whose effects contribute violently to climate change and distortion of natural order of things.

The use of myth and primordial symbolism runs through the poem. Also, another noticeable stylistic deployment in the poem is the poet's aesthetic language which is aimed to give reverence to nature. The poet, in the phase "III" uses a mastery of poetic language to eulogise and give reverence to nature for its therapeutic essence. The poet sings thus:

*From the silence of the seasons
From the hush which murdered the wind
With thunder's sword
We borrow the restless throat of adoko
We borrow the permanent query
On the parrot's beclamoured beak
From the vowel of the river
From the consonant of striving valleys
We name the moon, we name the sun
We pledge a fluent chatter to the stammering sea (p. 7).*

Here, the aesthetic language used suggests the degree of melody contained in natural order. The idea of phonetising nature through the use of "vowel" and "consonant" as used in the poem creates an image of sweet sound and natural melody. The point here is that, nature always produces an ambience of melody and harmony when cultivated well. Similarly, in the poem, the poet makes use of a significant symbol by alluding to the "Adoko" bird. The adoko is a bird that is known for its incessant songs. It could therefore be inferred that Niyi Osundare attempts to presents a poetic truth of the significance of reverencing nature. By doing this, weather, climate and other geo-bodies will produce a melodic and sweet ambience suitable for human co-existence with nature.

More so, in the phase "IV" of *Moonsongs*, the poet sings:

*Oh moon oh moon
Wife of the sun
Brother of the wind
Behold my front
Behold my back
Is my face still where it was
A little wink ago? (p. 8).*

Artistically, describing the moon as the "wife of the sun" and "brother to the wind" suggests ethereal matrimony in the natural world. In essence, the feminine depiction of the moon and masculine description of the sun mean that the poet attempts to foreground the view that nature too has a matrimonial essence. In summary, the point remains that, any human activities that disrupts the matrimony of nature can result to repercussions such as climate change and ecological havoc. In the eco-poetic, reading of the poem, there is the repetitive use of "behold". In the English vocabulary, the word "behold" in the context of the poem connotes looking after something, or to consider or regard something. Therefore, Osundare advocates for the need to reverence nature and climate.

Niyi Osundare has earned the status of a legendary activist who has successfully placed humanity at the core centre of literature and ecology. Dare (2003) commends by asserting that Niyi Osundare is a forceful and dissident eco-activist Nigerian poet, is endorsed. (p. 157). In addition, Eukora (2021) describes him as a foremost and vibrant Ikere-Ekiti born Nigerian eco-poet and social activist who condemns negative forces of 21st-century activities and the unscrupulous Nigerian leaders for their corrupt practices which impact negatively on the people, their psychic and the environment. (p. 54). Eukora (2021) points that there has been an extensive critical focus on Osundare dwelling on issues that plague humanity and the continent such that his contributions to the environment and the ecosystem can be relatable to the dysfunctionalities affecting justice, equity, fairness, security and sustainable human and national development of the 21st-century Nigerian society.

In summary, as explored in this writing, a harm to nature and the climatic condition is a harm to humanity which eco-poetry should address well. Aside from "Moonsongs" which is explored in this writing, Niyi Osundare has equally displayed his philosophy of eco-activism in some of his notable poems taken from the collections "Village Voices" of 1984, "The Eye of the Earth" of 1986, and "Waiting Laughter" of 1988.

Conclusion

Niyi Osundare, according to Eukora (2021) has engaged the readers over the years on trends of thought on the ominous despoliation of the environment, its exploiters and their victims. In the analysis of Eukora (2021), Osundare, as a foremost African eco-poet feels nostalgic about the good old days before the present eco-degradation when the environment was nurtured and had a symbiotic relationship with humankind. However, this present-day Nigerian society, with all its attendant negative vices of modern technology and people's lifestyle brought about by

modern technology have negated human progress and alienate man from nature. (p. 54). E nukora (2021) argues that “it is a paradox that man who stands to benefit from the lustrous environment if it is properly managed, nourished, and kept healthy, is regrettably guilty of its balkanization and the injury inflicted on the same Mother Earth and its natural resources.” (p. 54). In regret, he decries that “man and the environment as a whole which are nature’s gifts suffer from the negative forces of climatic change, land degradation, flooding, air, and water pollution, and other forms of destruction which go on daily and hinder optimal human and national development.” (p. 54).

In sum, this writing has been able to critically carry-out an eco-poetic reading of “Moonsongs” which is one of the most influential and popular collection of poems written by Niyi Osundare. The environment, according to E nukora (2021) is linked to the socio-economic, political, and cultural activities which invariably intersect and interfere with human existence and the country’s security and development. By employing an ecocritical lens to examine the intended message of the poet, the analysis achieves a good degree of eco-advocacy which attempts to reconcile humanity with nature. Through the mechanism of aesthetic language, mytho-poetic representation of the moon and literary tool of primordial symbolism, the analysis of the selected poems in the collection has been able to show the ancestral relevance of nature to humanity in the African context. The detrimental effect and tragedy of the Industrial Revolution remain a nightmare, however, this writing stresses the need to give reverence to the natural ecology.

WORKS CITED

- Achebe, C. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann. 1975.
- Anyokwu, Christopher. Myth and History in the Poetry of Osundare. *Comparative Literature and Culture*. Vol. 11, no. 4, 2009, pp. 2-9.
- Dare, S. A. “Morphology and Meaning in Niyi Osundare’s Poetry.” *The People’s Poet: Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare*. Edited by: A. Na’Allah. Trenton. 2003.
- Effiong J. “Oil and Gas Industry in Nigeria: The Paradox of Black Gold.” Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Volume 18, 2010, 323–349.
- E nukora, E. N. “Literature and the Environment: The Dynamics of Niyi Osundare’s Eco-poetry for Security, Justice and Sustainable Development in the 21st Century Nigerian Society.” *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*. vol. 23, no. 3, 2021. pp. 53-62.
- Oduah, A.A. *The Impact of Oil on a Developing Country: The Case of Nigeria*. New York: Praeger Publishers. 1990.
- Oduah, P.S.A. “An Overview of Nigeria’s Petroleum Industry.” *In Oil and Gas Financing in Nigeria: Issues, Challenges and Prospect*. Edited by Austin Avuru, Adewale Adeyemi, Alaba Olusemore, Adeolu Oluyinka, I.K. Muo, Marcel Okeke, G.A. Ajibade and Femi Ogunderu. Lagos: The Chartered Institute of Bankers of Nigeria. 2006.
- Ogundipe, O. *Introduction to Environmental Issues: Causes, Effects and Solutions*. Ikofa Commercial Press Ltd. 2006
- Ojaide, Tanure. *Delta Blues and Home Songs*. Ibadan: Kraft Books. 1998.
- Okpewho, I. *The Epic in Africa*. New York: Columbia UP. 1979.
- Osundare, N. *Moonsongs*. Spectrum Books Limited. 1988.

- Stevens, Christopher. "The Political Economy of Nigeria." *The Economist*. London: Cambridge University Press. 1984.
- Thompson, B.W. *Africa: The Climatic Background*. Oxford University Press. 1975.
- <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.aljazeera.com/amp/gallery/2023/12/27/natural-disasters-that-plagued-the-world-in-2023>
- <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/ecological-disasters>
- https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_United_Arab_Emirates_floods
- Matawal, D. S. "Contributions of The Nigerian Building and Road Research Institute (NBRRI) to the Memoranda on Climate Change Policy (NCCP) and Adaptation Strategy and Plan of Action on Climate Change for Nigeria (NASPA-CCN)."
- Matawal, D. S. and Maton, D. J. "Climate Change and Global Warming: Signs, Impact and Solutions." *International Journal of Environmental Science and Development*. vol. 4, no. 1, 2013. DOI: 10.7763/IJESD.2013.V4.30.
- National Wildlife Federation. [Online]. Available: <http://www.nwf.org/>
- Nwoke, N. C and Omoweh, D. A. *The Management of Nigeria's Energy Resources for National Development*. PrintServe Ltd. 2006.
- Tamuno, S. and Felix, J. "Crude Oil Resource: A Blessing Or Curse To Nigeria – The Case Of The Niger Delta." *Journal of Research in National Development*, 4(2). 2008.
- UNDP. *Niger Delta Human Development Report*. Abuja: United Nations Development Programme. 2006.
- Wheelwright, P. "Notes on Mythopoeia." In *Myth and Literature*. Edited by John B. Vickery. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1966. pp. 59-121.