

Review Article

Fictionalisation in Nigerian Literature: A Reading of Adamu Kyuka Usman's *The Death of Eternity*

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Abstract: This paper undertakes an ecological reading of Nigerian Literature and the way they are fictionalised in contemporary literary representation. Many writers through their works have explored deep ecological concerns and the phenomenon of man's activities on the environment. In literature, as in other spheres of life, these concerns are always on the front burner of discourse. One of such concerns is the insensitive and colossal degradation of the environment as manifested in water, land and air pollution. The paper adopts ecocritical theory to reveal the text under study. In addition to examine matters of environmental neglect and the relationship between fiction and the environment. The theory takes in the analysis of Adamu Kyuka Usman's *The Death of Eternity*. Through ecocritical lens therefore, the paper highlights the ensuing conflicts that develop from the injustice done to the environment. It concludes that eco-activism in the selected novel is man's effort to address the injustice done to the environment.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nigerian literature, environmental degradation, eco-activism, contemporary literature, Adamu Kyuka Usman, *The Death of Eternity*.

INTRODUCTION

Fictionalisation in literature is to make into or treat in the manner of fiction. Nigerian literature is not treated as an independent entity. It does not operate on separate island from other world literatures. Thus, literary writers of Nigerian lineage have always been abreast with issues and conflicts of global affairs in their literary works and have always made attempt to address some. Fictionalisation however, is a life manipulated depiction rather than factual human and life events even though there are recognizable similarities. It differs from historical truth where facts and events are reported with being distorted, while fictionalisation is a purposeful distortion of the truth usually for literary purpose.

In consonance with the above statement, Katie Houstrom buttress that truth is distorted because generally everyday life is not something that is interesting. She holds the opinion that when a writer distorts the truth, they can also potentially distort how the character is perceived by the audience. As well as reshape reality to reveal deeper truth. In essence, the author often changes some of the facts in the storyline.

Furthermore, Nigeria's recent major conflicts between nomadic herdsmen and indigenous farmers have its root causes on environmental exploration. This conflict accounted for death of many people with further more displaced, not to mention the billions of dollars lost the melee. When Nigerian writers fictionalise the society, these recent occurrences are unavoidable themes, but the narrative only uses the environmental conflicts as trope for addressing more germane, underlying political ethnic, hegemonic agitations. As a result, a writer in an attempt to fictionalise this event will not ignore the underlying facts that this conflict actually occurred. Hence, fictionalisation goes deeper in identifying events and recreating it for a purposeful meaning in literature. Nevertheless, the prosaic form of fictionalisation has equally achieved remarkable success through indigenous environmentalism represented by writers such as Cyprian Ekwensi, Gabriel Okara, Adamu Kyuka Usman. Similarly, the notorious environmental crisis and continued wars in the postcolonial Niger Delta

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provide the setting for Ken Saro Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, Kain Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and so many others.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts ecocritical theory in discussing the text under review. When the humanistic writers came under great criticism by those who advocated the inclusion of other environmental or natural elements as topical issues in literature, a post-humanist approach emerged. This body of propositions put forward by the scholars open up new paradigms for which literary works may be examined. Among such relatively recent theories is the ecocriticism school of thought. Further review however will reveal that Africans, as well as global writers' rendition of environmental concerns precede the more recent emergence of the term which seems to have crystallised into a nomenclature of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a term widely attributed to William Ruckart in 1978, addresses issues concerning landscape and the environment that have previously been overlooked by the literary academy. It was Wendell Berry who stated that "when we propose that human should learn to behave properly with respect to nature so as to place their domestic economy harmoniously upon and within the sustaining and surrounding wilderness, then we make possible a sort of landscape criticism" (151). A closer focus and respectful rendition of nature as well as an awareness are probably the most basic principles of the rapidly growing literary theory known as ecocriticism.

According to Gilbert White "ecocriticism is also concerned with matters of environmental neglect and the interrelationship between fiction and the environment" (299). Putting things in more lucid perspective, Cheryll Glofelty tried to broaden the understanding of readers about the scope and concerns of this theory. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, the author stated that "nature perse is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation. Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the body" (xxiii). Ecocriticism, also referred to as environmental criticism by Lawrence Buell (viii), covers a broad range of issues indeed, involving all that which comprises our human interior and exterior contexts. An important conviction of ecocriticism is that we are interconnected with the world around us and therefore, studying the environment involves studying how human beings affect and interact with the environment.

Consequent upon the above, the word ecocriticism, according to Buell, is a semi neologism (1091). Eco is short of ecology which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. The relationship between man and nature is not just interdependent but also interrelated. Jelica Josic writes that: "by analogy, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature" (43). Atimga Shima succinctly puts it thus: "in ecocritical studies, ecological concepts are applied to literature ushering in an ecological approach to the study of literature. This approach desires a transformation of literary studies by harmonising literary theory and criticising with general ecological issues" (135). However, ecocriticism as a rapidly expanding area of research covers wide range of texts through nature imagery, gender construct, feminism, man-woman relationship, tourism, culture, and so on, have wider meaning than what is portrayed through their literal expressions. Ecocritical theory arrives with the idea of offering a unique combination of literary and natural scientific discourses. This new eco-theory responds to the global ecological crisis and addresses important environmental issues specifically by examining values in literary texts with deep ecological implications.

Fictionalizing Nature in the *Death of Eternity*

There is no gainsaying the fact that *The Death of Eternity* (2012) is a nature book. This is because every aspect of nature: flora and fauna, and the planetary bodies are given due attention. It is instructive to interpolate that the representation of nature in this book is rather sardonic. Nature that is created by God to give comfort, food and solace to man becomes the death-trap for man. Usman presents water, soil, animals, air, trees as the sources of death to man in an ecological butchering environment like the fictitious Cockde. It is to the preservation of nature by curbing man's activities towards endangering it that Tibor is on ecological evangelistic crusade.

One of nature's gifts that serves man's need is water. Water provides life to man when man drinks it. Man uses it for bathing and washing; this is apart from other uses. Usman achieves this by using language to symbolize the River Kodewa. River Kodewa is the source of life for the inhabitants of Nunsa; it provides habitat for wild animals, their source of drinking water, a sports centre for expert and amateurish swimmers and other uses. However, with the activities of workers of Chinaka refinery, River Kodewa becomes poisonous with chemical wastes. This excerpt may not be seen as a fictional creation of the novelist, but rather an attempt to draw on factual activities of the locals which are equally affected by oil refineries. Usman achieves cohesion in his text by the way he renders his subjects as well as the medium of transmission. The choice of language and the delicacy of its communicative extent are in other words crucial to an effective understanding of *The Death of Eternity*. The encoding system of his fictional Cockde settlement and the loaded details are therefore central to understanding the interrelationships depicted about nature and man's activities.

Usman adopts an omniscient narrative technique to explore the different perspectives in the novel through point of view, characterization, and even language, the ideological lining is made manifest. The author selects a more subjective manner of writing as he uses this method of narrative technique. His choice of including epistolary style captures the reality of characters' situations by its very nature of being the plausible means of communication among the characters. Through the characters in the novel, some of these aspects of degradation and their effects on the people are highlighted. While these issues are presented from the perspective of one major character Tibor other characters of like-minds are subordinated to him in unraveling the danger of the environment pose to man. Tibor, the protagonist is Usman's model ecologist character. He encapsulates all the quintessential quality of the new environmentalist.

According to the novel: "Linking Nunsu and the refinery was River Kodewa into which the refinery channeled its untreated wastes. The wastes were carried downstream to Nunsu village. [...] A hundred kilometers away from the refinery, River Kodewa transported the hazardous wastes of the refinery to also pollute the otherwise pristine forest village of Nunsu" (35-36). It is pertinent to stress that one hundred kilometers is not a short distance. This shows how water pollutants can travel great distances and still be effective in causing harm. To give a more specific illustration of how River Kodewa is contaminated, the novel records through the omniscient narrator: "Mmanyu, living in Nunsu village, for the third time, peered at his reflection in the water of River Kodewa, but did not have as good a view of his face as he used to in the same river some years ago" (37). Mmanyu's inability to have a clear view of his face looking into the river is a testament to the contamination of the water. Chemical wastes released into the water distort its purity and color. The author proceeds: "He could not say why, but he knew River Kodewa was not as clear as it used to be. Something dark and grey seemed to have flowed into the river" (37). The change in coloration of the water signals introduction of a deadly chemical into it by Chinaka refinery that deliberately fails to treat its wastes. For Mmanyu to bath becomes a problem. How can he put death on himself? But as there is no other option for him, Usman says: "He rushed through his bath like a man who was not bathing with water but fire. Indeed, he had a queer feeling of bathing with kerosene. Gone was the time when he used to enjoy bathing in the river. ...Now instead of the water radiating eternity of health, it sprang a plague of disease and death" (38). The burden on Usman is to relate actual events happening in communities hosting the Kaduna refineries without sounding like a news reporter or a historian. Nonetheless, the activities of the Kaduna refineries are factual, and the damage to the communities' ecology is equally factual. It is the rendering of such realities in literary texts under the guise of creative fiction that bears all the attributes of fictionalization.

Not only the inhabitants of Nunsu village, as distant as they are, suffer the devastating effect of water pollutants but villages near the refinery like Kudima village is badly hit. Here, water, animals, crops, and human beings are adversely affected. Usman has the precise description of this sorry situation: "Well water in the village tasted oily; so did sugar cane. Water kept outside for some hours became as black as charcoal. Normally white sheep had turned black. Incidences of animals dying from drinking polluted water were rampant in the village" (35). From the excerpt above, it is deducible that the inhabitants of Kudima village suffer the same fate with those of Nunsu: their water source turns oily, undrinkable. This ecocide has caused death even to domestic animals. The author does little to conceal the similarities between the names used in his text and the real-life names of cities which form the background environment of his novel. The use of Kudima can be seen as a distortion of the word Kaduna state, a land whose other attributes fit the descriptions of Kudima as used in the novel. Without derailing from its ecocritical focus about the environment or even the postcolonial influence of multinationals such as the refinery management, *The Death of Eternity* still achieves the fictionalization of real events, albeit in a fictional text. The thrust of this work is to reveal the deft maneuvers of the author in achieving such a feat.

Furthermore, another natural gift to man that serves as source of food and refreshment is animals: both domestic and wild. Providence has given man this source of protein to build his body and make it richer and healthier, resistant to diseases. In the pristine state of the villagers, those in Poloa, Nunsu, Kudima, Tanka Plateau, etc. animals are a common sight and serve man's nutritional need. However, with the contamination of crops and water sources, these animals become extinct. The author employs the use of dialogue in this instance to depict the obvious effect felt by characters who are conscious of the changes in their environment. In a conversation between Mmanyu and Ajili about the recent uncommon sighting of animals again within their neighborhood, Ajili, the hunter, has this to say: "I don't know why I still roam the forest stalking animals that no longer exist... I winnow the forest without turning up a grain; yet I continue winnowing. I don't understand myself" (41). It is not only the fact that these animals' lives are threatened that will agitate the mind of any eco-missionary but that the animals which are still barely living, carry within them toxic substances capable of not only killing them but anything that consumes them. At the foot of the Tanka Plateau where Chitima, Demmi, Odoko and Soto wait for Tibor to deliver the Macedonian Call of Nunsu community to come and help them, Demmi, who is not satisfied with the antelope the four of them eat, takes the bandicoot rat they kill and begin to roast and eat while his trio companions are asleep. According to the omniscient narrator: "He had not lain down for half an hour when he started retching and vomiting, which did not last long before he lay still in death" (81). Apart from the greed and gluttony displayed by Demmi, by eating the bandicoot rat after eating an antelope, his death signals the danger inherent in a supposed food.

The paragraph above is technically loaded with imagery, real names and occurrences that cannot be separated from the author's origin. The animals that have gone extinct; the names of places such as Poloa, Nunsu, Kudima, and Tanka Plateau; people such as Chitima, Demmi, Odoko, Soto and Tibor; and the activities of the hunter can be said to be more than fictional creation, yet, the manipulation of their sequence, pronunciation and rearrangement of facts by the author depict to the active literary critic that environmental conflict revealed through historical, political, and economic activities of Kaduna is being portrayed in a fictionalized manner.

Similarly, to stress the point of ecological buccaneering of animals and human beings alike, the reader is informed that "[a]bout a month ago, some young men had found the dead body of a grasscutter, which they cooked and ate. None of them survived to the following day. They all died of vomiting and diarrhoea. It was clear that what killed the animal was what killed them" (39). The way the passage concludes that what kills the animal is what kills them is very vital in the sense that it highlights the death of both animals and human beings by toxic chemical deposited by chemical refineries like Chinaka, which, in essence perpetuates the narrative that conflict exists between man and nature due to the nefarious activities of man.

However, apart from animal extinction and animals constituting a source of man's death in Usman's novel, indiscriminate death of animals also presents a cause for concern. Wild animals do not just die: there must be a serious cause. In the novel under analysis, Usman presents a picture of wild animals dying without being shot at or killed by predators. As Mmanya takes his bath and is returning home, he meets the dead body of a boar. The eye of God narrator recounts: "He had not moved far away from the river when he came by the dead body of a boar" (38). It should not be lost on any reader that it is not too long that Mmanya passes the road to go and bath. This is not the only dead animal Mmanya alone has seen. Usman continues: "The dead boar was the seventh dead animal he had come across in the last three days" (39). It is not only Mmanya that is destined to see dead animals, in a conversation with Ajili, Mmanya asks: "How many dead animals did you come across in the forest today?" Ajili responds: "More than may be counted on the broken field of a tortoise's shell. The last animal I saw was a hyena lying face up, its eyes still tablets of misery even in death" (41). The hyperbole in Ajili's response cannot be lost on any serious reader of this fiction. The device is meant to underscore the fact of the death of numerous wild animals which serve as food to humanity. What other representation of nature as an endangered entity than has been shown by Adamu Kyuka Usman in *The Death of Eternity*!

Another vital component of nature that Usman represents in his narrative is trees. Trees perform very crucial functions in the life of man and the ecosystem in general. Trees produce oxygen needed for the survival of man. They produce shade that gives shelter to man and other lower animals. They serve as windbreakers and protect buildings from collapse. Further than these, trees store up water which is used by the atmosphere in the production of rain. The authorial voice of the author resonates through the omniscient narrator who has a vivid exposition of this process of water cycle. According to him:

Trees are part of the water cycle, if you don't know. They take water from the atmosphere and the soil, and return it to the atmosphere, only for the atmosphere to send the same water back to the earth during the rainy season for the trees to take once more. [...] Trees are rivers from which the atmosphere fetches water to produce rain. If you lose your trees, the water they would have stored would find no resting place and it will evaporate into space. When the atmosphere over your land comes down to earth looking for water to produce rain, the desert that has replaced your trees will be laughing at it. (63)

Water cycle is what has been described above. This cycle is essential to man's living because without the presence of the trees, drought will set in. Usman establishes this claim when he says the atmosphere over your land comes down to earth looking for water to produce rain, the desert that has replaced your trees will be laughing at it. This laugh will not be for the desert. Metaphorically, it will be living things that will bear the brunt. They will surely die. Tree felling or deforestation or logging is the prime cause of drought. It is the reason other living creatures are losing habitat. It is also the cause of gully erosion. Highlighting the effect of logging on the soil, Usman explains: With the forest gone, sheet and gully erosion began to take their toll on the exposed soil. The roots of trees that used to bind the soil to resist erosion were gone. Trees leaves that used to act as shock absorbers, thereby reducing the impact of falling raindrops on the soil, were also gone. Erosion swept away most of what was left of the vegetation of the area. (59). From the excerpt, it can be learnt that the emergence of sheet and gully erosions bedeviling communities is traceable to logging. Also, tree leaves that act as shock absorbers, hindering heavy raindrops from hitting the soil are no more there. The absence of tree leaves and roots has caused serious damage to the environment. It is not only the non-living things that are affected with man's activities of tree falling, other living creatures too are affected. In the novel, the reader is made to realize that vulturine habitat is fast eroding as such the near absence of the tribe. Giving credence to this claim is Usman's assertion thus: "The vulture, as you know, sets its nest on high trees. It is there it lays its eggs. The high trees in which the vulture used to lay its eggs have been felled either by loggers or burgeoning cities. So the vulture has lost its habitat" (106). Relatedly, Usman speaks of the hyena. To him: "The hyena, which used to share meat with the vulture, is now sharing death with the vulture... the hyena,

like the vulture, has lost its habitat” (107). He concludes: “The vulture and the hyena are our concubines. When a man loses his concubine, he may soon his wife” (107). Trees have suffered the brutal activities of man just for man to gain wealth. In the name of modernization or rather industrial revolution, trees have been felled and several atmospheric conditions are hitting hard on earth.

As if cast in the Marxist orthodoxy, *The Death of Eternity* shows what could be seen as reaction from the trees as a result of merciless logging by man. Francis, notorious for his tree felling business, goes to the forest at night for his trade. As Tibor approaches where he is, he decides to engage Tibor in a fight. This is the conflict the author attempts to chronicle in his text. Conflict in the novel is dramatized through individuals (characters like Tibor) who are representatives of pro-environment in contrast to those who are cruel and unjust to the environment. Francis on the other hand, is an agent of those who maltreat and see the environment as a thing to be exploited and conquered for one’s use. The rest of the action that happens can best be heard from Usman. According to him:

He abandoned felling the tree and wheeled round to confront Tibor, slashing the air with a machete while he whirled round. Forgetting he had cut the tree, near felling it, he kept moving around, beaming his torch in all directions he thought Tibor might come to attack him. He went round the tree four times in a mad orgy of anger. On the fifth round, there was a loud crumbling sound of a falling tree. The mahogany tree Francis was felling had fallen, and Francis was under it, dead. (189)

Again, environmental conflict with fatalities is revealed, for although nature does not have arms to fight back, Usman portrays the tree in this case as capable of killing its killers. This attribution of heroic traits to natural traits becomes the vehicle by which Usman fictionalizes real events, albeit with the latitude of exaggerations and distortions. As revealed in the excerpt, Francis thinks Tibor wants to engage him in a duel. This thinking crops up because Tibor has been advising him against logging. Tibor explains to him, on several occasions, the repercussion of deforestation to the atmosphere, people and animals but Tibor’s pieces of advice always hangs, regrettably lowly, to Francis’ inordinate ambition of becoming the wealthiest man around the Tanka Plateau. So, as he cuts the tree almost to a falling point, his desire to confront his opposer overtakes his focus on self-given duty. The tree seems to revolt against him by falling on him, thereby sending a chilling message to whoever wants to eliminate their tribe. Adamu Kyuka Usman’s representation of nature as seen in the value of trees and the effects of falling them in *The Death of Eternity* is worthwhile for readers to learn and join experts’ calling for nature’s preservation.

CONCLUSION

The narrative of Adamu Kyuka Usman’s *The Death of Eternity* has further advanced the discussion on how environmental despoliation is reconstructed in fictional works by contemporary Nigerian writers. Therefore, the essence of Usman’s discourse in the text is not only to harmonise man with nature but to reconnect it to have the semblance of premodern era. By doing so, the author applied fictionalisation approach to drive home his narrative blending fiction and facts at the same time trying to avoid moving wholly into history. A startling revelation from this study is that it reveals how Nigerian writers of ecoactivism embark on environmental narratives, which interrogates human/nature relationship and how the exploitative connections between them could compromise biodiversity and ecological equilibrium. The paper reveals how the writer fictionalises natural and social interactions to protect environmental conflicts arising from degradation. In addition, it portrays how the life, values, and culture of these people are invariably changed by environmental debasement. It also revealed that the daily conflicts between man and his environment such as denudation, logging, oil spillage, gas flaring are distorted to wear a veneer of fiction while in reality they are merely distorted or reconstructed facts. The paper concludes by drawing analogy from wider perspective how violence is employed as an inevitable tool left for the natives to use for the protection of their environment.

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