



Eco-conflict in Niyi Osundare's *Horses of Memory*: An Interface between the Natural and the Built Environments

The Road Crosses the River/The River Crosses the Road - Niyi Osundare

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Abstract: In our exploration of eco-conflict between the natural and the built environments, we examined Niyi Osundare's the "road crosses the river" metaphor in order to examine how the poems represent the social and aesthetic values of the natural and built environments. We analyze poems adopted from poem "XV" in "The Dream, the Dream is a Moon," in *Moonsongs*; "Forest Echoes", "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me" and "Harvestcall" in *The Eye of the Earth*. We adopt a contextual analysis approach of "Memory's Road" (II.90-163) in *Horses of Memory* and subject same to content analyses. The study applies the eco-critical theory. Our findings show that man's handling of the environment is determined and limited to his knowledge of nature and his worldviews. However, there are those who are conscious of the danger of environmental degradation, but are constrained by economic, political and social considerations. While nature can do without human culture and structural beauty, the human society depends solely on the delicate balance of the eco-system for his survival. The social and aesthetic implications of eco-conflicts are thus succinctly constructed through the literary dynamics of eco-poetics.

Key words: eco-conflict, *Horse of Memory*, The road crosses the river metaphor, natural and built environment.

1. Introduction

In spite of advancement of scientific knowledge, nature still creates a sense of amazement, and holds great mysteries that are yet unraveled by man. Hence, in frustration, man tries to control the natural environment by enforcing control and order through physical activities aimed at domesticating it; the results have sometime been catastrophic human induced environmental disasters. This paper through poetry examines the literary interaction between imaginary characters like road, river, bridge, sky and earth among others; and by so doing, explore how by

implication, human civilization impacts on the natural environment and the consequent eco-conflict. The study adopts an intrinsic contextual analysis of selected poems of Niyi Osundare and explores their social and aesthetic importance. It also examines how eco-conflict is constructed through a symbolic representation of the natural and built environments in Osundare's "Memory's Road": II.90-163 in *Horses of Memory*. This eco-dramatic poem provides a literary platform for the symbolic enactment of the conflict between natural environments symbolized by the

River and built environment symbolized by the Road.

Osundare's response to the immediate issues of communal life is premised on his poetic vision and two impulses command his poetic vision - social imperative and aesthetic imperative. He is constrained to give artistic form to his mode of social response. Aesthetically, the sublime in Osundare's poetry is largely akin to what Longinus refers to as "an adjective, grand and lofty in thought and in language." "A poet of word impression" (Fortress, 46) and a performance poet, Osundare introduce the total poetry, a form akin to the Yoruba oral folk poetry. He reads or chants his poems accompanied by musical instruments like the flute and heavy drums, "agba drum", "bata music", "rain drum" in the poems; "Forest Echoes", "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me", "Harvestcall" and "Let Earth's Pain be Soothed" in *The Eye of the Earth* (Fortress, 45). In his Yoruba peasant ancestry, poetry is acclaimed as the people's property, and aesthetic elegance has to be balanced with social relevance. Thus, his dream is to bring his poetry to his people and to seek the meeting point of the beautiful in art and the useful in society. John Keats, a romantic poet, also known as a poet of beauty, contends that "what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth" (Eruvbetine, 254). Osundare, in agreement with this view distinctly combines the beautiful and the useful

that is, beauty must have social relevance. He emphasizes the need to balance aesthetic elegance with social relevance. In the Yoruba cosmology, the corporate survival and wellbeing of the people cannot be separated from the wellbeing of land, its physical and spiritual landscape, thus, Osundare uses the element of minatory in his poetry to caution humanity against the dismal state of the natural environment in "Humanity in Every Sense" II.434-475 in *Midlife*; "Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder" II. 23-26 and "Our Earth Will Not Die" II. 1-16 in *The Eye of the Earth*.

He uses oral poetic artistry and social experience to promote the course of the natural environment and justify his concern for it. He constructs images of rural setting by adapting Yoruba oral poetry in "The dream, the dream, is a moon":

osupa olomi rooro
to ba di role a besu lori
her pestle is iroko
her mortar a cratered depth
in Oroole's bosom. The yam,
whenpounded,
is the clay rump of Agidimo mountain
Poropoporoporo
Osupa olomi rooro
To ba di role a besu lori

Her soup is the sea
With a teeming tribe of simmering fishes
Her spice is the loyal shrub
which tickles the nose of lofty hills.
(*Moonsongs*, II. 8-19).

There was already in place a well-established poetic tradition centered on the natural environment in

Osundare's Nigerian agrarian environment long before any western contact.

This paper provides a shift from a wholly human-focused conflict perspective to a natural environment-focused one. While we foreground the natural environment and the built environments, man, a part of nature and also the domesticator, is secondary in this discourse, and at the background. The conflict that arises between the built environments, symbolized by the 'Road' on the one hand and the natural environment symbolized by the 'River' on the other is the gap that this paper intends to fill. The disinterested activities/conflicts between the natural environment and the built/domesticated environments are devices deployed by the poet to allude to inter-human conflicts.

2. Eco-Critical Theory

The interaction between literature and nature has been a viable area of research, but it has drawn little critical attention. In order to put the current study in its proper literary perspective, we need to examine how literary concepts gradually grew from nature conscious individuals into organized literary groups which have today come to be associated with eco-criticism studies.

Eco-criticism refers to an emergent movement and denotes a critical approach which began in USA in the late 1980s and in UK in the early 1990s respectively. Cheryll Glotfeltry is considered to be the founder of this academic movement.

Glotfeltry co-edited with Harold Freeman, a collection of essays on nature related matters entitled: *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1990) and also co-founded the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992, with a house journal called *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE). The tenets of eco-criticism revolve around the rereading of major literary works from an ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world and to give special canonical emphasis to writers who foreground nature as a major part of their subject matter. This includes writers like the American transcendentalists, and the British Romantics like Jonathan Bate, John Clare and Thomas Hardy. They extend the range of literary-critical practice by placing a new emphasis on relevant "factual" topographical writings in their essays, travel writings and regional literature. These writers emphasize "ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility, and the claims of the world beyond ourselves" (cited in Fortress, 2013: 32-34). Jonathan Bate, the British Romantics makes a distinction between "light Green" and "dark Green." According to him the former are environmentalists who value nature because it sustains humanity and contributes to our well-being. This school believes man can "save" the planet by more responsible forms of consumptions

and production, while “dark Green” or “deep ecologists” take a more radical stance. They opine that technology is the problem and therefore cannot be the solution and so man has to “get back to nature”. The school “dark Green” dislikes the anthropocentric term “environment,” but prefer the term “nature.” Nature, according to this school, is there for its own sake, not for man’s sake (Barry, 1994: 257).

Eco-critical literary theory emerged from an ever-increasing enlightened consciousness and concern about the state of global environment. Post-colonial studies have been involved in environmental issues, particularly in terms of the relationship between humans and their environment. Recently, anthropologists, geographers and environmental managers, historians and literary critics have shifted focus from these broad areas to relationships between neo-colonial and eco-centered interests. The scramble for modernization has enticed developing countries to the destruction of their own environments, consequently making the destruction of the environment one of the most damaging aspects of western industrialization. Eco-critical theory celebrates the purity and the sustenance of the natural environment on the one hand, and addresses man-made natural disasters on the other. The latter is the concern in this paper because they are deeply problematic issues which conflict with the disinterested nature of the

human environment. These problems are desertification, deforestation, land degradation, air and water pollution, waste mismanagement, acid rain, massive erosion, global warming, ecological genocide or ecocide, which lead to the gradual destruction of a large area of land including all of the plants, animals living there and general threat to biodiversity.

The natural environment has its own way of reacting to built environment’s unwholesome interference with its harmonious existence. These reactions are commonly summed up as natural disasters like flooding, desertification, draught and climatic change which are the consequences of man’s unmitigated activities on the natural environment.

3. Poetizing Eco-Conflict: the Road Crosses the River

By alluding to inter-human conflict, Niyi Osundare in his *Horses of Memory* employs the dramatic narrative technique for eco-conflict dialectics. Through literary devices like personification, abstract and concrete imagery, symbols and metaphor, Osundare constructs a poetic conflict that centres on two main imaginary characters/personae: *the Road* and *the River*. *The Road* and *the River* symbolize the built/domesticated environment and the natural environment respectively. When man interferes with the natural environment or domesticates it by building roads and bridges for his own comfort, he is advertently

preparing the ground for eco-conflict between his own culture, symbolized by the built environment and the disinterested natural environment like the landscape on which the river flows. The yoking of the river and the bridge may remain apparently stable until the elements of nature break it down through activities like erosion and corrosion. The elements of nature weaken and break down this unnatural union with resultant dire consequences like flooding, destruction of human culture and the entire ecosystem. This retributive justice of cause and effect is what is encapsulated in eco-conflict. Through the use of literary devices, the conflict between the road and the river: two environmental elements that symbolize built and natural elements of the environment respectfully are juxtaposed for eco-poetic discourse:

The Road crosses the River
The River crosses the Road (25).

The road built across a river in the lines above symbolizes eco-conflict: built environment against the natural environment. The road and the river crossing one another is the reason for the eco-conflict management, resolution and prevention in eco-critical dialectics. In this poem in question, it is the road that calls the river to a duel or combat of words. The Road speaks first:

Meet me at the crossroads
where the road wears trousers
of uncountable legs

Meet me at the crossroads
where raging fire breaks the teeth

of iron
before joining steel to steel
in spiderworks of urgent flares
Meet me at the crossroads
where strand crossing strand
yields a barn of rapid looms (23).

In the first stanza, *the Road* employs the psychological weapon by inviting *the River* to observe its physical ability to display labyrinth of feeder roads and lanes from its junction. The Road boasts that the River, by its nature, cannot break into tributaries from its confluence. In stanza two, the Road also boasts of the stuff it is made of, which is incomparable to the River's fluid nature. He observes the effort it takes the "raging" natural element "fire" to break the teeth of iron in the attempt of melting iron into steel. The third stanza alludes to the ingenuity of the creator and builder who builds the loom that converts strands of cotton into cloth by the weaver's rapid motion in artistry that surpasses the rapid flow of the rivers' early stage in creating waterfalls. Images of the "loom" and "rapid" as represented in this stanza helps in conjuring a vivid picture of early industrialization and the natural environment. The third stanza also makes allusion to the loom - an early form of weaving industry, which is a relatively healthy occupation and an environment friendly endeavor. The road did not only invite the river to a duel, it employs the use of provocative and offensive statements:

bristling with lengthy rage,
the road said to the river:

“see, you boneless serpent,
see what you have done
to my supple frame” (25).

Provoked by this accusation, the River replies in rapid retort:

You saddle without a hill
You hoofmat for pissing brats
Never deem me the pain
In your broken joint
I am the sea which predates the hill,
The slender honey in the eye of
the gods (25).

The language of the river is dictated by words imbedded in its nature and cosmology. It observes the unnaturalness of the road. To ride a horse without a saddle is not a royal etiquette. The combined use of the words “hoof” and “mat” helps us to appreciate the poverty of the Road, as it was a symbol of servitude: “hoof” as vehicle for conveying the horse and its master and “mat” for the floor, the feet and even “pissing brats,” In contrast, the River not only claims to “predate the hills”, it eschews the values and virtues of its constituent innate makeup, the Rivers kingship with the “sea”, its ancient place of esteem before the creation of man as a deity of worship and an object as sweet as “honey in the eyes of the gods.”

The landscape bearing the “river” was created before “vegetation,” followed by “moving creatures” and then Adam or “man” (Gen.1:27, KJV) who domesticates the environment by building roads etc. In the light of this, the “Road,” which is human built is five removes from the “River” and six removes from the

landscape on which the River flows. This analysis is based on Plato’s postulation in his *The Republic* book III&X (Dorseh, 1982:10-11) on the God’s creation which is “absolute” against man’s creation which is the imitation of the absolute. In the light of Plato’s position, the Road or built environment, which is a creation of human beings, is three removes from the River or natural environment, which is a creation of the absolute. Consequently, the River is naturally older than the Road and the latter being a creation of man is a symbol of imitation of the river, an intruder in the harmonious flow and balance of the eco-system.

In order to resolve this conflict between the River and the Road, both parties agree to call mediators to intervene in this war of words. They invited the Earth and the Sky, two elements that represent the natural environment on one hand and human Sages to represent humanity and built environment on the other: “They call the Earth, they call the Sky/They ask each sage their season of birth” (26): “To speak first is Earth,/ Her fingers still quick with clay; She who is earth, earth her memory.” As far as the memory of the earth can go, the road and the river are part of her being; thus, the earth’s speech directed to the Road was paradoxical:

You Road are older than the River
You Road are younger than the River
You are as old as the dust in the wind
You were born after the River
You were born before the River (26).

The Sky spoke next, his speech directed to the river. He dramatically laces every statement with the experience of ancient wisdom, paradox and irony:

You River, you are older than the Road
You River, you are younger than the Road
You were born after the Road
You were born before the Road (26).

In the above lines, the earth and the sky do not want to offend either party. All efforts made by the mediators to manage and diffuse the tension brewing between the two contending parties meet further with confusion and dissatisfaction; so, “the Road and River rage on in a cloud of doubt”(27). They turned to fauna: the eagle, the hawk and the vulture with the same question but no satisfactory answers from these birds. But because of their searching question and the desire for reconciliation their experience in prevention of discord was sharpened:

The more they ask, the older they grow
They ask till their questions ripen into answers
They ask till their answers re-form into questions (27).

As the road and the river mature with age and experience, they grew wiser and together they consult a child of the ‘Road’: the ‘bridge’ - built of steel and concrete, an improvement in road construction across the river.

They ask
And the Bridge answers
In stratemgs of steel
Tongues of steaming mortar
Incantations of fire stone

The Road and the River realized that the bridge is distinct in built from its parent-road. While the bed-spread of the Road is of pure earth – tar and clay, the length-frame of the bridge is built of iron and concrete: its foundation of layers of pillars of steel rests beneath the river bed:

The Bridge, ah the bridge
The Road takes off his cloths
Upon your iron bed (27).

The conflict is thus resolved by mutual understanding of the individual differences, in character and natural composition and cosmology; their distinct nature in the scheme of things, especially as far as the built environment impacts the natural environment and vice vasa. Though the natural environment and built environment impacts one another, there is need for a mutual co-existence that will not destroy the other because of gains to the detriment of the survival and sustainability of living things in our eco-system. Reconciliation demands respect of opinion and culture difference; thus, “When the road looks down upon the River/Once upon a lofty platform,/Let it not forget the stream waiting noiselessly/behind the hills/Far, far below the belt of the forest”(II.149-153) recognizing the natural environment as a subject preserver and an object to be preserved for the common good. The natural environment must not only appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the built environment in arts and craft but its added value stance in

improving the quality of life that comes through positive advancement in science, technology and in knowledge that is all embracing. The natural environment should see the road/the bridge as a symbol of “the god who looks back by looking forward” (II.155-156).

4. Conclusion

This paper is a comment on the interplay between the natural environment symbolized by the *River* and the built environment symbolized by the *Bridge*. We deduced from our imaginary characters and mediators like *the earth, the sky, the eagle, the hawk* and *the vulture*, whose memories are limited by their nature that man’s handling of his environment is determined and limited by his knowledge of nature and by his worldview. He thus, takes for granted the significance of the natural environment to the wellbeing and survival of all living things. There are also those who are conscious of the danger inherent in environmental degradation, but whose will and conscience have been compromised by economic, political and social considerations. Albeit, human culture remains an integral part of nature and human society cannot be separated from nature. While nature can do without human culture and structural beauty, man cannot do without nature because man depends solely on the delicate balance of the eco-system for his survival.

Since the natural environment is a disinterested aspect of nature and man is a conscious and active part of nature, the onus is on man to form a new standard of living and this challenge of our time rest squarely on the shoulders of three groups of people: the scientist/technologists, to experiment and build through their ingenuity, preventive-eco-transformatives that could mop up pollutions and carbon emissions from the atmosphere at a rate faster than the overall global emission, and to focus on a universal use of alternative energy or what Ted Turner referred to as “pure energy.” Secondly, the psychologists to look into the root cause of human tendency that promotes greed induced suicide in human nature; and thirdly, philosophers and policy makers to provide mental and leadership enablement for corporate global survival models that will help build a new definition of value and beauty based on collaboration over competition.

In this eco-conflict dialectics, it is imperative that human kind, the major active stakeholder must proactively, turn again and like the bridge (his creation) harness the dynamics of human intelligence coupled with disinterested nature of the river: a synergy of “The bridge who looks back by looking forward” (II.155-156) and the river who looks forward in its flow and never looks back for the common good.

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