

**REPRESENTATIONS OF NATURE IN J. P. CLARK'S "NIGHT RAIN": AN ECO-CRITICAL STUDY**

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**ABSTRACT:** *One significant beauty of literature is the openness of this academic discipline. It permits sensible endless debate on issues with a view to reconciling them and to bring out the best from the divided opinions for ultimate use of the most enduring and outstanding perspective from among many. Even before now that world has turned a global village; the geography of our existence allows us to tell our stories because man is heavily connected to his environment. Our culture and all our material creations including literature are therefore reflections of our ecological existence. This paper examines J. P. Clark's "Night Rain" as a product of the relationship between literature and the environment, and the representation of nature, which make up the environment in a literary work. With the application of Eco-criticism as our theoretical framework, the paper concludes that our lives are not meaningful except they are situated in the cultural context of our environment. Hence, the study and understanding of culture in relation to the environment through literature will help us in solving the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

**KEYWORDS:** Culture, eco-criticism, nature, environment, literature, representation.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Indeed, there is a sharp gap. We have discovered that enough attention has not been given to natural manifestations in the analysis of most African literary works. Most eco-critics have focused principally on American and British literature of the nineteenth and the twentieth century's. The paper tries to demonstrate that literature projects not only the human society but also the entire ecological entity, which is made up of man and its environment including all other things which dwell in it just as a perfect glass partakes in the colour of the light it transmits. The purpose of this paper is to consolidate the globalization of African literature as well as to make the appreciation and the understanding of the said literature better.

In his artistic creations, John Pepper Clark has intensively and effectively employed natural phenomenon to express his ideas and experiences in an attempt to achieve his motive. J. P. Clark, an Ijaw-speaking man from Niger-Delta, southern Nigeria is able to represent his immediate environment in his literary creation, "Night Rain" by narrating his experiences during a Night down-pour in a simple, easy to decode language.

Fictional entities are "principally those entities originating in and defined by myths, legends, fairy tales, novels, dramas and other works of fiction," (Peter Lamarque, 2000). He holds that

philosophical interest in fictional entities thus covers a surprisingly wide range of the subject such as ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of language and aesthetics.

“A selection of events on the basis of chronological sequence, casually and the value of judgments has always been necessary; that is to say information about reality has been presented to and by the human species in the forms of narrative fiction known to us as History, and the statements of politicians and journalists”, (Joan Rockwell, 1974). From Rockwell argument, it can be deduced that everything is fiction on one hand and on the other hand, fiction is reality.

“Works of literary non-fiction may be defined as those that aspire to be factual and true. These two values, however, are not the same thing. Works of fiction are not factual, but they can be true in that they represent a state of affairs that we recognize as potentially, perhaps profoundly, true. On the other hand, work of fact can distort the truth... By itself, a list of facts may be accurate, but such a list lacks the kind of truth that may be found in works of history, or biography or documentary. When a work reflects an aspiration to be both factual and true, it satisfies a necessary condition for literary non-fiction.” (John Warnock 1989).

As a matter of fact, it is strongly difficult to separate fiction from non-fiction because the two are essentially co-extensive. They have interlocking relationships which cannot be automatically deconstructed. The elements of fiction can be found in non-fiction. Hence, no work of narration; drama, poetry or prose is totally fictional/imaginative or non-fictional/true. “... literature itself has its own purpose and determinants... never wholly autonomous it draws its prime motives from deep within the common culture, the life experience of its producers in their time... but it never speaks for the totality of that culture,” (Warner Berthoff, 1981). Hence, literature or any work of art generally is not closed, independent or self-sufficient on its own. There is a connection between literature and the milieu/environment where it is produced.

Again, “The writer has no means of escape, we want him to embrace his time closely, and it is his lot: it is made for him and he is made for it,” (Sartre, 1948). Society means an association of people, which comprises people that have rules of behavior such as beliefs, customs, traditions, conventions, social values and norms by which the society can change and protect the trade unions of a given society. Society is “a particular community of people who share the same customs, laws, etc” while development stands for “the gradual growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger, etc”, (Hornby, 2000).

Edward B Taylor (1997), defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habitats acquired by man as a member of society”. According to Daramola (2005), culture is also defined as that universal and uniquely human phenomenon consisting of patterns of thinking and believing, doing and behaving, making and using that all humankind learn in growing up as members of a human society. Culture is defined by Carey as a process, but it can also refer to a shared attributed of a human group (such as their physical environment, tools religion, customs and practices or their whole way of life).

Culture also can refer to texts and symbolic artifacts that are encoded with particular meanings by and for people with particular cultural identification.

UNESCO sees culture as “What has shaped societies’ and individuals’ ways of life; while certainly rooted in ancestral values, it is also a source of dialogue, exchange, innovation and creativity, and the foundation stone of endogenous systems of solidarity, forms of expression and ways of transmitting knowledge that are as valid for meeting the challenges of tomorrow as for preserving traditions”, (UNESCO, 2005). In a simple term, culture is an aspect of people’s identity which promotes social integration and organization among a community of people. However, culture is never static; it is dynamic, hence, it should adopt itself to the changes which come or evolve with time. In this modern world which is ruled by science and technology, an unhealthy attachment to cruel crude culture is unacceptable as it hinders societal development

If not all, most of the concepts discussed above interplay in the creation of many literary works, so they are seen as essential indices in the presentation of our subject-matter, “Representation of Nature in J. P. Clark’s *Night Rain*” “The general resemblance to reality is what makes art recognizable to the rest of us.

But what makes art artful is the fact that the artist imposes his own matter upon these forms in a way that gives them another responsiveness to another inevitability, a new necessity and probability,” (Murray Krieger, 1976). “Literature was (and it is still) the most efficient medium of manifesting African culture and civilization, while poetry became the most effective genre for expressing it ... not just to illustrating and defending Africa’s cultural values ...but also to the rehabilitation of Africa’s damaged image, ... (Cyril Mokwenye, 2000).

Literature has turned out to be” a medium of discussing and explaining contemporary or conventional realities through the exposition of the socio-cultural and political experiences of a given society; since it (literature) is a product of a particular human society. It is far from being ambiguous that literature buys into the expressive function of a given language. And, the understanding of culture and the society, which are potential ingredients on which literature is premised, paves the way for an effective development”, (Ogundokun, Sikiru A., 2013).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

First, the word eco-criticism is a blend of two words; ecology and criticism. In a simple term, ecology, which is a biological register, is defined according to Hornby (2000) as “The relation of plants and living creatures to each other and to their environment, the [scientific] study of this.” While the same authority sees criticism as “The work or activity of making fair, careful judgments about the good and bad qualities of something/somebody, especially books, music, etc.”The study of representations of nature in literary work and of the relationship between literature and its milieu is described as eco-criticism; that is, applying ecology and its concepts to the study and understanding as well as explanation of literature.

As an academic field, eco-criticism started in the 1990s, but its roots date back to the late 1970s because the term was coined and first used by William Rueckert in his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the foremost theorists in the field, paints eco-criticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," and Laurence Buell says that this study needs to be "conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis." David Mazel views eco-criticism as the analysis of literature "as though nature mattered."

This study, it is evident, cannot be performed without a thorough understanding of the ecological crises of modern period/time and must underscore personal and political actions, which undoubtedly makes it a kind of activism. Using this theoretical framework, some critics articulate the interdisciplinary nature of the enquiry, which is informed by ecological variables such as science, politics, ethics, women's studies, cultural studies and history.

William Rueckert(1978) postulates, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment[that] takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature...[Ecocritics ask,] how is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does physical setting play in a novel? How do metaphors of land influence the way we treat it? Do men write about nature differently than women? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis?" This aforementioned posture of William Rueckert provides the background on which this paper is anchored.

### **Analysis of the text**

J. P. Clark's "*Night Rain*" is a narrative poem which reflects on the consequences of nature on a group of people; the narrator, his parents and brothers. The poet attempts to put across a varying universal natural phenomenon adopting a typified poor African household that is worried by a blind night rain. The word "rain" can be variously used and interpreted as there is rain of Fortune, rain of misfortune, rain of poverty and physical rainfall. In this analysis however, the less complex manner of appreciating J. P. Clark's "*Night Rain*" is presenting it purely as physical/ordinary night rain in tune with our theoretical framework; Eco-criticism.

Nature is presented as being more powerful than man, yet when there is a problem of life, it is not for man to start panicking but to face the situation squarely until a solution is found to the problem. With uncommon courage and gallantry, the victims in J. P. Clark's "*Night Rain*", especially the narrator and her mother overcome their problem.

The common application of the term "Night Rain" as experienced by the poet and, or narrator of the incidence fundamentally depicts man and his environment with different challenges facing him within his ecological existence. It can be understood therefore that the problems of life could take any form, colour, shape or size and can take place any time it so desires as demonstrated by the poet's sudden rise from sleep at night:

“What time of night it is  
I do not know”

This shows the non-availability of clue to time-piece. But, the narrator compares his experiences with that of a fish which is forced out of the depth of water with a chemical substance:

“Like some fish  
Doped out of the deep  
I have bobbed up belly-wise  
From stream of sleep

Linking eco-criticism to the scholarly analysis of critical representations, in 1996, Cheryll Glotfelty, the Eco-criticism Reader observes that Eco-criticism maintains “a triple allegiance to the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of critical representations, and the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world.” In African culture, women are presented as every-busy people in the affairs of home keeping or home management, very motherly and caring. The poet demonstrates this fact by pointing out that in the dead of night when the rain arrives uninvited; their mother is given a job to do

“Mother is busy now deploying...

Although it is so dark  
I know **her practiced step** as  
She moves her bins, bags and vats  
Out of the run of water”

The noun phrase “**her practiced step**”, which is the direct object of the verb “[know” consolidates the fact that this is not the first time the woman engages in this act. It is a usual thing. The perpetual poverty which bedevils the household is further x-rayed through the group of words, “her practiced step”].

Again, the imagery of a riverside or seaside area or a mangrove/rainforest region is equally well painted in the poem, J. P. Clark’s “*Night Rain*” with references made to words such as water, fish, tree, owl and bat. The metaphors of the land and, or the environment is also documented. This imagery makes the poem to be picturesque, understandable and entertaining. The setting/physical locale of the poem as well as the poet’s choice of words/diction suggests the kind of work J. P. Clark’s people are known for. The Ijaw people are predominantly fishermen and this explains the environment where they found themselves.

The mental pictures of drumming, dribbling, droning, deploying, doped among others help to visualize the density of the down-pour as well as its negative consequences on man. And of course, the images of sheaves, shed, rafters, wooden bowls, earthenware and mats paint the sordid condition of a household living in an abject poverty.

Nature is powerful and natural occurrences are blind as they do not give concession or consideration to anybody. Rainfall,. Thunder storm, volcanic eruption and earthquake just occur without any provision for man, who is always at the receiving end of those natural calamities.

The effect of natural phenomenon, rain, in this poem, on human beings is the central theme of the poet. It consolidates the popular saying that man cannot cheat nature. As you lay your bed, so you lie on it. Man needs to treat his environment in a mode to pave the way for a peaceful and successful co-presence, co-existence and co-habitation among the various occupants, tenants or habitants of a given ecological entity so that man himself can be happy.

It is evident that man's struggle and encounter with the wild forces of nature is practically inevitable since the survival of man is entirely tied to his environment. The air, the water, the food and the materials for man's shelter are all products of nature. Man therefore should be sensitive and conscious of his environment as well as what the environment demands from him for a happy living.

Besides the effect of nature on man, the poem shows the ravaging poverty in Africa where people lack basic necessities of life. There is no decent shelter for the citizens. The victims of this poem, according to the narrator, are wet even more than the birds which perch on a tree all through the rain:

“We have drunk tonight of a spell  
Deeper than the owls or bats”

The poet systematically calls our attention to the perceived inadequacies of the society we live in combing the sober and the humorous, the grim and the witty. Commenting about this trend in African communities, Okey, D. Ebele, (1998) observes: “It is evident today; the rural communities have been cut off from the urban areas because their roads have become impassable. Most, if not all our communities, are smarting from their rustic eerie darkness. The people of our hinterland are hungry for development, and desirous of the opening up of their villages to beat back the forays of want, deprivation, poverty, primitivism, superstition. Generally, they long for better living conditions and the benefits of science and technology,” It is therefore not surprising, if we link the event in this poem to the neglect the Africans suffer in the hands of their governments. Instead of marching on with primitive cultural practices, Africans should think of fixing the system and prevent it from collapsing. As it were, the economy is meltdown, occasioned by bad governance, repressive policies, corruption and docile followership. African countries are in bad state of indebtedness, flat broke up to their ears, even with cuts in government expenditures like the removal of subsidy on basic daily commodities. This pitiable and poor living conditions of most Africans in forgotten villages is a serious issue, again, there is the need to prepare for emergencies. The situation of the victims in J. P. Clark's “*Night Rain*” would not have been so bad if they had made provision for the said rain. We all know the seasons of the year and their peculiarities.

There is a feeling of tenderness and sympathy as the victims react with an attitude of helpless resignation to the powerful natural phenomenon in the name of a heavy rain. The run-on-line technique employed denotes continuity and progressiveness of the event captures in the poem while the first person narrative point of view makes the event real.

Problems come and go as no condition is permanent. The experience of the narrator is an everlasting lesson for us that we do not need to blame the natural phenomenon for making life unbearable for us or blaming God for making our family poor. Instead the poet just displayed a nuance of Shakespeare's literary wisdom in "King Lear": "This is the excellent foppery of the world that when we are sick in fortune – often the surfeit of our behavior- we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion."

Literature is without doubt, expected to perform the function of healing which we described as therapeutic function. Readers are expected to be healed or cured of emotional, psychological, economic, pathological and/or socially related health challenges through reading a text, watching a drama or listening to the recitation of a poem. It is again believed that literature can be employed to develop the language of both the writers and the readers. Language is the vehicle, the context or the medium by which message content/information in any literature is been conveyed and disseminated to its publics. Hence, language and literature are two inseparable kinds. "Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation...Literature represents life and life is in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation", (Wellek and Warren, 1968). In a simple diction, a regular rhythm and a high degree of narrative expertise which provide suitable imagery, readers are made to share the poet's or the narrator's agonized situation and his unsettled state of mind as well as the degrading living conditions of the entire content message..

Words such as *dope, bobbed, droning, dribbling, deploying, sheaves, rafters, tremble, spell, bedraggled, stir, scurry, ample and soothing* keep the pictures of the narrated event in the minds of readers. Thanks to his ability to adopt and use constructively relevant literary techniques and, or devices such as figures of speech (alliteration, assonance, irony, metaphor, personification, simile, etc); enjambment, I-narrator, detailed description and didacticism only to mention a few,

J. P.Clark is successful in documenting the representations of nature in his literary creation. "Literature, whether handed down by the word of mouth, or in print, gives us a second handle on reality, enabling us to encounter in the safe, manageable dimension of make-believe the very same threat to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life, and at the same providing through the self discovery which imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us", Achebe (1988).

## CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated in this study the relationship between literary works and environment, which is portrayed as eco-criticism and how literature can serve as a tool for lasting developments. Our chosen writer has exposed a fundamental social problem which bedeviled African states and still dwells in them. For recommending solutions to this social problem the poet can be described as a social pathologist. Literature is a veritable tool for actualizing societal developments and global advancement in general. With literature, good governance and best practices can be achieved; since this will create rooms for transparency, accountability, youth empowerment, women liberation and eradication of barbaric traditions among other societal ills.

Three things are responsible for everybody's behaviour; desire, emotion and experience. J. P. Clark believes that our lives begin to end the moment we become passive and/or silent about things that matter in our environment and society at large and this is this opinion we hold too. Human history is connected to natural history and man responsibility to the environment needs to form a part of every text's ethical or cultural orientation. Our lives are not meaningful except they are situated in the cultural context of our environment. Hence, the study and understanding of culture in relation to the environment through literature will help us in solving the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Literature, whether as verbal or non-verbal is an effective tool for articulating societal developments and global advancement in general based on the numerous functions it performs.

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