

Human-Nature Interactions in the New Normal World: A Study of Selected Pandemic Poems

Onyechigoziri Chikere

Department of English Language and Literature, Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State.

Okachukwu Onuah Wosu

Department of English and Literary Studies Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt.

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ABSTRACT: *The global outbreak of the Corona Virus disease in this 21st Century not only shocked the sensibilities of people but also introduced emerging patterns of behaviour and interactions that have become the new normal. One of such altered interactions is in the aspect of human-nature relations. Many scholars have churned out volumes on the scope and implications of human activities on the environment; others have linked human-induced environmental challenges to patriarchal social conditioning and proposed the dismantling of all forms of dualisms, especially the human-nature dualism. But not many have represented the disposition of humans to the natural environment in the new normal world. Hence, this paper examines the selected pandemic poems in the light of emerging patterns of interaction with the environment, using the eco-critical theory. The study concludes that the selected poets have presented the new normal as a panacea to the lingering environmental challenges which have defied many solutions in the past decades and recommends further foray into environmentally friendly adaptation discourse in the new normal world. It is important for promoting the study of content and style in eco-critical discourse and for raising consciousness towards environmental sustainability.*

KEYWORDS: Human-nature, ecocriticism, new normal world, environmental justice.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of new normal generally refers to the acceptance of certain strange phenomena and necessary adjustments made to co-exist with such phenomena. The Corona Virus Disease 2019, widely known as COVID-19, which hit the world in 2020, spread and has continued to spread like wildfire across continents. Since scientists claim that it can be transmitted through physical contact, countries across the globe that were hit by the virus adopted extreme measures like partial and total lockdown to check the spread of the virus. A year after COVID-19 pandemic emerged, many have been forced to adapt to the 'new normal' which includes work-from-home setting, parents home-schooling their children, lockdown, quarantine, and the mandatory wearing of face mask and face shields in public places (Jeff Corpuz, 2021). With

time, these measures that kept people away from work, public spaces and all forms of social relations became counter-productive as they negatively impacted economies. It became obvious that the virus was not going to disappear as quickly as it had come and many countries gradually began to relax the lockdown measures and allow business interactions under regulated terms. The adjustments made and are still being made to cope with the virus have become a way of life – what many scholars and social analysts have described as the new normal. Clearly, this emerging social code will have economic, religious, social, emotional, psychological and environmental implications; scholars have represented some of these implications in literature.

The literature of any society usually engages the prevailing social, political or economic realities - what scholars have described as the ‘social commitment function’. Chinyere Nwahunanya suggests that “in every age and clime, literature has always mirrored society, and writers have often shown concerns for the convolutions that beset their societies” (125). Similarly, Onyemaechi Udumukwu avers that “the commitment function in literature produces certain knowledge effects that help man to reconstruct nature, understand himself, and his context” (16). Consequently, the outbreak of the Corona Virus Pandemic has received massive literary reactions. Many scholars have attempted to capture the issues which have transcended the peak of the pandemic to become the new normal. Prominent among these issues is the implication of the new normal for humans and the natural environment. Human life is directly linked to its relationship with the nature and there is an inbuilt physical and emotional connection with nature (Pabitra Baral, 2020). Hence, alterations to the life processes of humans will inevitably affect the relationship with nature and vice versa. Positive alterations yield positive results with regard to human-nature relationship and vice versa. Many scholars have attempted to depict the nature of alterations to the human nature relationship experienced in the new normal world and their submissions form the thrust of this study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Reviews

Ecocriticism is a hybrid theoretical frame that seeks to promote environmental sustainability by consciousness raising and drawing attention to human practices that undermine and threaten life-support systems in the environment. It is a broad movement that allows a nexus between literary and environmental circles. The major promoters of Ecocriticism as a critical approach are Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Howarth, William Rueckert, Michael P. Branch and Glen Love. There are many approaches to ecocriticism. Some of them are nature writing, deep ecology, ecology of cities, ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, bioregionalism among others. Ecocriticism, like other critical theories, developed out of a social and historical process of the western societies. The original tenets were steeped in nature writing and deep ecology. As scholars developed and expanded the horizon of this theory, newer approaches like social ecology, ecology of cities, ecological justice, environmental justice, postcolonial ecocriticism, eco-feminism, feminist ecocriticism, eco-Marxism, eco-philosophy, literature of toxicity, virtual environment and urban nature emerged. Eco-feminism, an approach in ecocriticism features scholars who suggest that dualisms such as male-female, nature-culture, science-magic and women-nature are patriarchal constructions that sustain domination and frustrate the clamour for social and environmental

justice (Shamara Riley, 1992; Val Plumwood, 1993). These scholars advocate a dismantling of dualisms and a more pragmatic approach towards interdependence of human and non-human nature. They see humans as part of nature, hence cannot master nature (Val Plumwood, 1993; Daniel Wilks, 2008). Nature writing and deep ecology accommodate forms of art that revere the natural environment and captures environmental issues like human-nature relations.

In the wake of growing consciousness towards environmental degradation, green politics has dominated world conferences and debates, highlighting environmental issues such as global warming, threats of acidic rain, and several infernos in various parts of the Western world as well as oil spillage and gas flaring in some parts of the Africa. Anthropogenic activities, especially industrialization, increase in the number of factories, indiscriminate mining activities, oil exploration, and technological advancement have accentuated the abuse and corruption of non-human forms, depleting the ozone layer, and forcing other life forms into extinction. Green campaigns have flooded the main stream in literature to draw attention to the negligence and lack of respect for the environment and the attendant environmental issues. Such activities that destabilize the environment have featured conspicuously in global literature in the last three decades.

Suprpto et al describe the features of the new normal world as “restricting the number of crowds, limiting the distance, having to wear masks everywhere and getting screened for temperature in every office or mall or school” (419). They argue that these features which are positive values and make for better societies, should not only be engrafted in the new normal policies of nations but also promoted to become the lifestyle of people to help them become normal forever (424). Some other scholars have appraised the disposition of people to literature during the peak of the pandemic period and as the world glides towards the new normal patterns. The disposition towards the poetry of the pandemic period and suggests that many of the pandemic poems highlight the horror, death and painful experiences that subsisted as people endured the deprivations of that period (Jeroen Dera, 2021). Dera’s study concludes that the average poetry reader read more poems during the pandemic but a great number avoided poems that reflected the impact of the crisis.

In representing the relationship between literature and the environment, many eco-sensitive scholars have defined environmental abuse as a consequence of human activities. These human activities, which have facilitated technological advancement, have accounted for direct and indirect forms of ecocide, ozone layer depletion, destruction of the flora and fauna and other forms of environmental red-flags. With the advent of the pandemic, there have been significant restrictions to human activities and imposed patterns of social relations. Many poets have presented the pandemic period as a time of healing when the natural environment recovered from the pangs of human activities while humans healed by unlearning nihilistic ideologies that sustained environmental injustice. Others like Silvest and Ganapathy have presented the scope of human suffering and the resilience of the survivors. Scholars have examined various aspects of pandemic poetry like the disposition of readers, themes, styles, etc but have not attempted an eco-critical interpretation of this evolving genre. Hence, this study, which is

framed on ecocriticism, is set to examine the extent to which selected post-COVID poems have represented the tempo of human-nature interaction in the new normal world.

The Representation of Human-Nature Relations in Pandemic Poetry

Pandemic poets depict the realities of living at a time when the emergence of Corona virus has completely altered life processes and relations. Some pandemic poems are lachrymal, bemoaning the victim-hood status of humans who lose their vibrancy, social connections, and movement liberties. Other pandemic poems describe the deadly nature and dynamics of the Corona virus. Yet other poets represent the extent to which the pandemic and new patterns of human existence have redefined the interactions between man and nature. It is to this third category that many of the poems selected for this study belong.

For instance, in the poem, “An Imagined Letter from COVID-19 to Humans” Kristin Flyntz describes the human-nature relationship before the pandemic as chaotic and directionless; hence the call to stop the trains, the schools, the malls, the meetings and other forms of human activities that generated one form of strain or the other on the environment (ll. 1-12). The persona reprimands humans for ignoring previous indications of environmental pressure like ‘the firestorms that scorched the lungs of the earth’ and ‘the fevered climates in Japan and India’ which are metaphors for human activities like bush burning, careless deployment of technology, gas flaring and other activities that have worsened global warming (ll. 28-35). The persona further threatens to transfer the heat which had ravaged the earth as a result of human activities to the bodies and lungs of humans until they mourn the loss of their health (ll. 43-48). Hence the new normal is that humans will feel the heat of fever, flu and experience breathing problems just as the earth suffered the heat waves as a result of environmentally-unfriendly human activities. The persona further asks humans to do the following:

To look up into the sky streaked with fewer planes and see it,
To notice its condition: clear, smoky, smoggy, rainy? How much do you need it to be healthy so that you may also be healthy?
To look at a tree, and see it, to notice its condition: how does its health contribute to the health of the sky, to the air you need to be healthy? (ll. 53-59)

The persona encourages humans to utilise the ‘sanity’ that has been restored by the new normal to reassess their treatment of the environment noting that there is a strong connection between the health of the environment and the health of the humans living in it. The poem, which is presumed to be an imaginary letter written by COVID-19 to humans, draws connections between the illnesses humans have suffered and their treatment of the natural environment.

Similarly, in the poem, “In the Time of the Pandemic”, Catherine O’Meara highlights the extent to which the natural environment will benefit from the patterns of existence that have become the new normal. The first four lines capture the transformations and reinventions that have taken place in humans as a result of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The persona explains how men and women ‘stayed home’ and ‘began to think differently’. Lines 5-8 show how the restrictions helped the people to heal and subsequently ensure the healing of the earth.

The references to danger, grief and adjustments are allusions to the fatalities recorded when Corona virus spread unchecked, the pain of losing loved ones and means of livelihood and the torturous process of embracing the reality. But the poem implies that the pains brought forms of psychological and emotional healing that have made humans reinvent themselves and become earth-lovers.

As if to support Flyntz and O'Meara, Haroon Rashid in the poem, "We fell asleep", highlights the strong restrictions that have pulled humans away from places that used to be beehives of human activities, like Disney Land, New York and Mecca to the confines of their homes (ll. 1-4). The persona argues further that even the relationships among humans have been reinvented and power has been redefined as that which is no longer the exclusive preserve of humans. Hence, as the persona quips:

The world continues its life and it is beautiful
It only puts humans in cages
I think it's sending us a message:
You're not necessary,
The air, earth, water, and sky without you are fine. (ll. 7-10)

The persona finally claims that when humans 'come back' (perhaps referring to the new normal world) they will need to alter their orientations about human-nature interactions and see themselves as 'guests' rather than earth-masters (ll. 11-12). As the title implies, the new normal is a new world, probably one where both the earth and the human inhabitants will be healed.

Other poets present the new normal world as the healed world where humans who had destroyed the earth have been judged by nature and are becoming more disposed to negotiate human-nature relations on eco-friendly terms. In the short poem, "He Kills in the Silence", Noor Aisyah notes that nature in the guise of the deadly virus comes with unbridled ferocity to terminate humans and their systems without warning (ll. 1-6). In lines 7-9, the poet notes that it is a healing process for the world. Perhaps because of the restrictions which minimised human activities and enabled the healing process, happy birds can now sing and the natural environment can enjoy some tranquillity (ll. 10-11). Then the persona mocks humans who now serve the punishment for their acts of environmental despoliation. The thoughts are captured as follows: Meanwhile/ Humans are hiding/ Trying to escape from him (ll. 12-14). The poems presents the pandemic and the new normal which has come to tame human dissidents, force them to recognise the power of nature and perhaps eventually enable environmental justice.

Similarly, in the poem "Mother Earth Had Enough" Mahaletchumy Krishnahmoorthy et al portray the pandemic as a positive occurrence which came to normalise man's relations with nature. The first stanza highlights the recklessness of mankind with regard to the treatment of the environment. This spate of environmental despoliation must have informed the 'fury' and "Mother Earth's ire" captured in stanza 2. According to the persona:

The corona virus came in the scale of a pandemic,

It had so many crowns it was just epic,
COVID-19 spread as fast as fire,
With the vengeance that would befit Mother Earth's ire (ll. 5-8)

The subsequent stanzas further show that Mother Earth only needed one virus to erupt and become her weapon to execute the much desired vengeance. Hence, mankind's activities and social relations like 'shaking of hands or smiling at each other' were halted just to show that Mother Earth could no longer condone the ill-treatment of non-human nature.

Interestingly, Geetha Davenci et al's "Letter to Corona" appears to be written by a man (perhaps one who has been healed and reinvented by the entire pandemic experience) to the virus, highlighting the positive impact of the pandemic on non-human nature. The persona suggests that the pandemic has healed the earth by restoring environmental justice as the new normal. The poet argues as follows:

Because of you, we are staying with our family more than two months
Ozone's depletion and preservation miracle happened...
The Holy river Ganga which is cleansing all the sin
Is pure now! It's all because of you only (ll. 3-6)

In line 8, the persona concedes that although mankind may be dying, yet nature was getting cleansed and reborn. The persona, speaking for man, eulogises Corona as an 'Angelic Devil' and requests for kind dealings with man as it purifies the natural environment.

In "Nature's Revenge" Asmaa Dhannoon suggests that the earth, in a bid to take revenge for the spate of environmental injustice that had prevailed, sent humans 'an invisible virus' that left everyone, including the high and mighty scared and helpless (ll. 1-7). Lines 8-10 further portray the destructive force of the virus which never leaves anyone or anywhere the same. The persona further explains that human activities like forms of pollution hindered convivial human-nature interactions but nature has turned to avenge injustice done to her. Thus mankind must pay by halting all activities until they fully realise that the natural environment deserves to be treated aright. According to the persona:

If you wanna know why corona is here
Well, we're all to be blamed
We disrespect this earth, and we never feel ashamed
I hope now everyone realise
That this is the Mother Nature revenge (ll. 15-19)

The poet summarises with the hope that mankind will learn from Nature's wrath and redefine the interactions with nature. The poet probably hopes that the rage of the virus will stop when mankind makes peace with nature.

Furthermore, in the poem, "Covid Lessons", Anusha Alex et al depict the helplessness of mankind in the face of the deadly virus. Lines 1-12 mock the mental disposition of humans

who thought that they were in charge of and had the solutions to every problem but has been punctured by the virus. The poem further highlights the extent of damage done to man's ego, pride and power, revealing the humanity in man. According to the persona:

Corona is invisible to our naked eyes
Yet troubling the entire humankind
It taught us to value our lives
It made us to care for all at all times (ll. 17-20)

The poem reveals that in the new normal world, man has been transformed to promote justice and equity. Thus, the humankind of the new normal world will no longer despoil the natural environment but will most likely enforce environmental sustainability and the attainment of an egalitarian society.

CONCLUSION

The selected pandemic poems from two different poetry collections show that the thrust of literature in the new normal world is to draw connections between the mistakes and challenges of the old world and the peculiarities of the new normal world. These connections are quite relevant because they advance the social commitment function of literature. The present study reveals that the selected poets are unanimous in relating the deprivations and suffering associated with the new normal world to the ill treatment of the natural environment by mankind. Adopting their various presentation formats and stylistic peculiarities, these poets have presented images of Corona virus as an emissary of Mother Earth and the full embodiment of her wrath against mankind. Man is presented as weak and helpless before the raging force of nature. Most importantly, the poets seem to argue that humans in the new normal world have reinvented themselves for better relations with nature after the excruciating processes of the pandemic period.

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