

Depletion of Nature on the Auspices of Faith: Inter-Religious Crisis in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*

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Abstract

The rise of ecocriticism has accorded the study of environmental concerns in literary texts more prominence and this has led to a reading and re-reading of literary texts from an ecocritical perspective. Among the prime issues that led to the emergence of ecocriticism is the exploitation of nature, the degradation of nature and the need for sustenance of nature. Since the inception of the theory, ecocritics have been united in pointing to the teachings of religion (Christianity) as the direct foundation for the exploitation of nature leading to its degradation. This is because man is taught to dominate all the creations of nature, hence he has continued to advance and seek ways to align nature to meet his needs. However, there are more ways that nature and its elements is degraded via the support of religion and not just through a direct exploitation of nature. The activities of man, whether directly or indirectly impinges

on nature and it becomes imperative to consider other media by which nature is dwindled. On this note, it must be noted that Christianity is only one of several religions that exist in the society and this entails that there is an interrelation between these religions. Since Christianity is a religion, whose adherents interact with the followers of other religions (in the case of this study, Islam), there should exist another factor for the depletion of nature that this interaction unravels. Therefore, this paper examines the selected novel to discover other ways through which nature is depleted and to discover if the selected novelist can be termed an environmental activist in the light of the popularisation of ecocriticism.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Nature, Inter-Religious Crisis, Environmental Activism

Introduction

Every literary artist belongs to a definite natural environment and whether he employs his art in the service of overtly portraying environmental dialectics is a matter of individual inclination. One thing is evident, the natural environment has held a prominent role in shaping literary concerns from antique epochs to modern times and this role, until recently, was sparingly discussed. However, the rise of ecocriticism in the sphere of literary studies has led to the popularisation of the depiction of environmental issues in literary texts. This spread of ecocriticism has led to a reading of contemporary literary texts using an earth-centred perspective as well as a re-reading of the works of previous eras also from an environmentally inclined

perspective. For instance Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which has often been celebrated as a canonical work that celebrates the African culture by correcting the misrepresentation of Africa by Western thinkers and writers, has been re-examined using the lens of ecocriticism. Coral Wu (2016) views Achebe as a writer who used his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, to portray that the African culture is dependent on nature and its elements (34). Similarly, Gitanjali Gogoi (2014) explains that Achebe is a pro-nature writer who expressed that the coming of western material culture divorced the peaceful union between the culture of the African people and nature (4). Hence, studies in ecocriticism made it clear that the coming of Europeans contributed to the decline of the natural landscape of Africa. In addition, the works of Gabriel Okara, Cyprian Ekwensi and Buchi Emecheta have all been given environmental coloration.

To form a foundation for examining nature in literary texts, ecocritical thinkers have continually

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sought to present the foundation for the exploitation of nature by man. From the several thoughts put forward by ecocritics, the foundation for the depletion of nature and its elements is religion, especially Christianity. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) in her observation of Lynn White's essay, "Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" remarks that White critiques the church for its cultural arrogance and hegemonic attitude towards nature (xxvii). Lynn White (1996) opined that man was by nature agrarian, that he tilled the ground and that he engaged in subsistence farming but would later change to become an exploiter of nature (8). He credits this change to the Christian teachings of the need for man to have dominion over all of God's creations. These Christian injunctions hence made the effective monopoly of man on nature lucid. From then, man began to seek for ways to adapt nature to suit his unending needs, hence the elements of nature and its embedded resources have continually faced depletion. As man's need for advancement increases, so also the depletion of nature.

Christopher Manes (1996) takes the argument further by explaining that Christianity eroded man's sturdy attachment to nature. As presented by him:

... animistic societies have almost without exception avoided the kind of environmental destruction that makes environmental ethics the explicit social theme with us... the tension between nature and culture never becomes acute enough to raise a problem. In the medieval period, animism as a coherent system broke down in our culture, for a variety of reasons. Not least was the introduction of two powerful institutional technologies: literacy and Christian exegesis... (Manes 18-19)

Hence, Manes posits that the interpretation of the doctrines of Christianity severed the ties between man and the pre-medieval society, where man believed that every tree, stream, spring and hill had a guardian spirit hence should be protected. Christian teachings expressed that the spirits that such natural elements possess are evil, hence missionaries hack them down (Manes 12). Once the attachment to these elements of nature is cut, exploitation of such

elements is pursued without reservations.

The views of White and Manes above, while they are succinct as they present the foundation for the depletion of nature to be the exploitation of nature, as encouraged by Christianity, do not offer other means by which nature and its elements are depleted. It is not only in the quest for meeting his need that man depletes nature. The activities of man, whether directly or indirectly impinges on nature and it becomes imperative to consider other media by which nature is dwindled.

The several religions that exist in the world have their accepted norms and codes of operation, and this entails there would be points of convergence and surely points of divergence among these religions. If this is the case, then the interrelation of these religious, especially in areas of divergence would have certain effects on the environment – both human and non human. Therefore, since the activities of man have a direct or indirect bearing on nature, this paper investigates Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2002), to discover how the interrelation of several faiths account for the reduction in the quality of nature. This is borne out of the purview that Habila belongs to the Nigerian society that is home to two of the most popular religions of the world, Christianity and Islam. These two religions constantly shape the thoughts, convictions and perceptions of its adherents. Since Christianity is a religion, whose adherents interact with the followers of other religions (in this case Islam), there should exist another factor for the depletion of nature that this interaction unravels. Hence, this paper examines how the interrelation of these two faiths leads to the depletion of nature and its elements.

Theoretical Framework

This study is predicated upon the literary theory of ecocriticism. Since the rise of this ecologically-oriented body of ideas used in the interpretation of literature, ecocriticism has provided ecocritics with the model for the analysis of literary texts. This study employs the idea of William Rueckert, one of the prominent figures in ecocritical studies. In his article "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", Rueckert (1996) defines ecocriticism as the "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology

(as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world" (107). Ecocriticism therefore takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature and in the light of this, Jelica Tosić (2006) expresses that "as a combination of natural science and a humanistic discipline... the domain of ecocriticism is very broad" (44). Ecocriticism, hence, is a literary model of analysis that centres on investigating the relationship between the human and non-human elements as represented in literary texts. The current environmental crisis that the world is experiencing has led to a re-examination of what literature should focus on and among other preoccupations; ecocriticism can be regarded as a campaign to awaken environmental consciousness towards redefining the role of the natural world towards continued existence.

One of the issues threatening the continued existence of man is environmental exploitation and according to Rueckert (1996), the issue of exploitation of nature ultimately leads to the depletion of nature. He writes "the problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community away from destroying the natural community and with it the human community" (107). Inherent in this assertion by Rueckert are three maxims. First, humans engage in activities that affect the composition of nature. Second, the depletion of nature would, in the long run, drastically affect the human community and third, there is a need to bring the exploitative activities of man to a halt so as to check the suicidal activities of man for the utmost benefit of nature as well as man.

With the aforementioned maxims, an ecocritic therefore investigates how a literary artist has used his text to portray the activities of humans that impinge on nature. In addition, the critic examines how the depletion of the natural environment affects humans. Finally, how the literary artist proposes a rethinking of exploitative tendencies also attracts the critical attention of an ecocritic. Armed with these paradigms for analysis, this study explores Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* to discover the specific human activities depicted in the text and how these activities directly or indirectly affect the natural set up.

An Overview of Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*

Habila's *Measuring Time* is a story that recounts the experiences of twin brothers, Mamo and LaMamo, in their quest for fame. Their mother dies while giving birth to them and they are raised by their aunty, Aunty Marina. Mamo and LaMamo's father, Lamang, is a prosperous cattle farmer who is bent on achieving an enviable niche in politics. However, rarely does he interact with his children neither does he show them the care befitting of a father.

The twin brothers decide to join the army after witnessing the heroic reception that one of their uncles, Uncle Haruna, received after returning home from the Biafran War. The sorry state of Uncle Haruna (looking derelict, traumatized and corpse-like due to the war) does not deter the brothers. After leaving home, the extrovert, assertive and adventurous LaMamo makes the journey out of the village of Ketu to join the army but the introspective, frail and weak sickle-cell-anaemia ridden Mamo returns home as he could not complete the journey beyond the outskirts of the village, due to his sickness. Mamo resorts to constant studying and finally makes it to the university, where he is unceremoniously withdrawn due to failure. He failed because he was rushed to the hospital during examinations due to the sickle cell anaemia attack and none of his course mates informed the examination office of the attack.

Mamo, however, becomes a teacher of History at the community school in Ketu. After writing an essay about the history of Ketu, the Waziri of the palace offers Mamo a job as the palace secretary and commissions him to write the biography of the Mai (the traditional political leader of Ketu). Mamo later discovers, however, that the Waziri is only using him for personal gains. Lamang's political career is not fruitful and after he tries to rig an election to become the chairman of the Victory Party which is unsuccessful, he leaves politics psychologically traumatised, a state in which he remains until his death.

Mamo meets and falls in love with Zara, a beautiful young and inexperienced writer. However, she also leaves him, just like his brother, in the search for something better in South Africa. While reeling in the pain of losing his brother and his lover, a riot breaks out between fanatical

religious adherents who had gathered to pray for rain because famine had hit Ketí. LaMamo returns home to the sight of burnt hills, groves, religious homes and the fields of the once beautiful Ketí he left. Disillusioned by this pain and also the trauma of all the wars he fought while with the army, LaMamo leads a group of angry youths to the palace to protest the unavailability of social amenities. It is in crisis that ensues that LaMamo is shot and he later dies at home. Mamo decides to write the biography of all the people he encountered among which the lives of Lamang, Auntie Marina, LaMamo, Zara, the Mai and Waziri will feature.

Inter-Religious Crisis and the Depletion of Nature in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*

The human society has been bedevilled by several upheavals and this has conditioned several writers to engage with this subject in their literary works. Inter religious crisis is one of such crises that the society has grappled with overtime. Habila treats the issue of inter religious crisis in relation to its negative imprints which affects the aboriginal composition and stability of nature.

To make lucid the impact of inter-religious crisis on nature, Habila presents a simple and rustic society in his novel. It is such a society that the aftermath of inter religious crisis threatens to tear apart. In the novel, the fictional town of Ketí, is a small fictional village blessed with enormous natural features where nature exists at its flourishing peak. Ketí is depicted to have natural features such as hills, grooves and hills. Mamo, the protagonist of the novel, happily and rhetorically expresses to Bintou, his brother's wife thus: "No, let's leave the window open. Come, see the hills from here, aren't they lovely?" (270). In addition, Ketí is rich with trees, grasses, fields and fresh air and these point to a setting where nature beamed at its best.

The society of Ketí is also an agrarian society in addition to being a setting for occupations that link man to the natural environment. The village is known for being a farming village. Marina, Mamo's auntie is a proud farmer and in the text she "had a huge field of sorghum, which had started life as a small rocky patch of clan land" (30). In addition, nearly all the inhabitants are farmers and this occupation has served the clan for ages. This is

captured thus: "... all open spaces in the village had been solidly planted with corn and sorghum; it was what the village survived on. This reveals that the need for survival is the main reason why the villagers in Ketí engage with the natural element of land and not to exploit it as westernisation purports to do. In addition, another major occupation of Ketí is cattle rearing. Lamang, Mamo's father, became famous by being a major livestock farmer of cattle which he had inherited from his father in-law, who was simply called "Owner of Cattle" (13). It is this cattle rearing business that forms the basis of the wealth of Lamang. Engagement with nature and its elements by the people of Ketí was in a bid to get the basic needs of life: food, clothing and shelter. Ketí, hence, represents a society that revers nature. It is such reverence that ensured the characters in the text have a close affinity with nature. The narrator presents this thought thus:

... they knew every medicinal herb and tree, every ritual and magic necessary to avert evil. Though blind, Kopi could wander the maze-like village pathways and even climb the hulls alone and without asking a stick. He said the wind spoke to him, and the trees on the hills, and that the very earth on which he walked guided his steps. (259)

The above is a portrayal of a character who knows the leaps and bounds of his natural environment. The close tie with the natural environment is further buttressed as the indigenes of Ketí derive pleasure in working on their lands. This is narrated thus:

through the window Mamo would watch the men as they returned from the farm, tired and dirty and hungry, but glowing with the happiness of honest manual labour. They would sprawl out under the trees and on their veranda, their hoes at their feet, exchanging anecdotes from incidents at the farm (31).

The close tie with nature is also evident in how the characters in the novel understand how to conserve nature's features for posterity. In the text, Bintou frowns when the leaves of a tree were cut. Mamo, however, explains to her that:

They are not cutting it down; if they were, they would be hacking at the trunk, not the branches. They are trimming it – we do this to all trees in the dry season, it helps them conserve water. New branches will sprout with the first rain, you will see...” (308)

The above excerpt reveals that the indigenes of Ketí are not exploiters of land rather conservers of nature. The fact that Bintou is sad, in the first instance, about the branches of a tree being cut shows an eco-conscious character, who does not want nature to be depleted. Hence, in constructing the natural environment and how it influences the lives of the people of Ketí, Habila presents a natural setting that is in close relationship between non-human and human elements of the environment. LaMamo, Mamo's twin brother, in all of his adventures, while away from Ketí still reminisces about the natural landscape of Ketí. In one of his letters to Mamo he explains: you can see the hills and the trees, and the small house at the back. I have made the sketch to show you how this place reminds me of the hills at home” (140). This reveals that Ketí is a succinct example of nature at its peak.

However, the peaceful and nature-oriented Ketí becomes a dark alley when the claws of inter religious crisis step in. In the simple and rustic life of Ketí, nature is revered and conserved while in the colonised, modernised, “christianised” and “islamised” society of Ketí, humans are distanced from nature and its elements. The society may have advanced and has continued to do so, but this has come at the expense of nature. Nature, hence, has become endangered, battered and diffused due to the several crises that modernity carries along.

The inter-religious crisis recorded in the novel is a major form of altercation that ruined the beauty, form and endowment of Ketí. It has been expressed by ecocritics such as Christopher Manes and Lynn White that religion is the major factor that has empowered man in his quest to dominate nature. Lynn White, for instance, explains that Christianity teaches that all elements of nature were made by God for man's benefit; hence he should dominate them (10). While this view is pithy since exploitation of nature inextricably leads to the

depletion of nature, Habila uses his novel to present that it is not just the exploitation of the natural environment directly that leads to the depletion of nature. For the narrator, the cycle of depletion results from other activities beyond the act of exploiting it. As presented in *Measuring Time*, religious intolerance accounts for the continuous depletion of nature. The village of Ketí is portrayed to house two opposing religions – Christianity and Islam. Habila remarks that the village of Ketí was “divided along tribal and religious lines by the former colonizers” (133). These two religions, as depicted in the novel, are not hospitable to each other, with each trying to outwit each other. Despite living in the same village, the Christians and Muslims “never really assimilated” (276) into each other.

The intolerance on the part of these two religions comes to the fore when Ketí witnesses a dearth of rains. The Christians, in a bid for divine intervention, assembled on hills to pray for the village of Ketí to witness rainfall. Since it had become a battle for supremacy of religions, the Muslim community of Ketí refused to be left out. This intriguing episode is narrated thus:

The singing drew the Muslims out of their mosques and beds, and when they discovered that the Christians were going to the top of the hill to pray for rain, they decided not to be outdone. They went back to their houses and mosques and brought out their mats and beads and chanting “Allahu Akbar” they also made for the hills. For many hours later the trees and rocks rang with the shrill sounds of Christians and Muslims praying, and so great was their rivalry that neither group was willing to quit before the other; the morning changed into afternoon, and the afternoon changed into evening, but they still prayed, without eating or drinking. Some fainted, all grew hoarse; the skies darkened, thunder rumbled, lightening flashed, but no rain fell.

Then in frustration, the two groups began to jibe at each other, and the Christians said to the Muslims, “Pray harder, perhaps your God has grown hard of hearing!

And the Muslims responded with “No,

you pray harder, perhaps your God has gone to the market, and you must shout harder for Him to hear you! (276-77)

The quest for prayers degenerated into mockery of the God of the other religion. The prayers turned into a jibe-throwing enterprise. The supposed supplications became an avenue to show off the "superiority" of one's religion over that of the other. One is forced to imagine that the need to pray was only a smokescreen to assert that the other religion was the reason for the drought explained in the text. For instance, if after the Christians prayed and rain eventually fell, they may rejoice in the fact that their prayers brought back rain. The same also goes for the Muslim community and which explains why they commenced prayers. As a result of the mockery, jibes and show-offs, the prayer session on the hills of Keti becomes a session of bouts and this is reflected thus:

But who cast the first stone – one of the jagged, fist sized stones so plentiful on the top of the hill? No one knew, but soon they were whizzing through the air and connecting with faces, arms, legs, and chests... the fighting descended into the village, into the streets, before the riot police came, Churches and Mosques are on fire... (277)

The fight between the Christians and Muslims which started on the hills spread to the entire village and both mosques and churches in Keti are razed down. This is in addition to the dead human bodies that littered the streets. Herein lies the aftermath of a simple or deliberate refusal to accommodate the religion of the other. When one religion always views its religion as superior over the other religion, consternations are bound to occur. Most adherents of religion fail to understand that there is only one religion but several ways of practising it.

The implication of the inter-religious riots is the depletion of the elements of the natural world. In the novel *Measuring Time*, the narrator explains that "the police had set the hills on fire to flush out rioters who were still hiding there from capture and brutalization by the police. Mamo was seated on the veranda, watching the hills burn" (285). In

addition, "all the mosques and churches and most of the shops and bar-rooms are still on fire" (280). LaMamo returns to encounter "buildings burned down" and the church "still smoking" (286). This explains why LaMamo laments "this wasn't what I dreamt of coming back to. I told Bintou about the green hills and farms and valleys..." (286).

The fire and the smoke that result from the crisis impact negatively on the quality of nature. The grooves, the hills, the lush grasses of Keti which are the representations of nature and its elements are destroyed. Hence, man is not portrayed to engage in exploiting nature for resources but due to his relation with other men on the auspices of religion, nature is depleted. However, nature alone is not alone in suffering this depletion, by contaminating the atmosphere of Keti with smoke, the natural environment is endangered for humans.

Galvanized by the burnings of inter-religious crisis, LaMamo joins an angry band of youth to march to the palace, to let out his frustration and pain of the burnt grove and hills. This is where the negative effect of depletion of the environment is explained. For instance, in narrating about Mamo after the crisis, the narrator explains "the dust blinded him and blocked his nostrils... He slowed down and moved to the outside of the crowd, coughing, breathing through his mouth" (292). This shows the contamination of nature by smoke, an instance of air pollution, can lead to respiratory infections which affect, not nature but, man. In addition, farming, which is the staple occupation of Keti, may no longer be as successful as it was before the crisis because "the ground around them was covered by ash and soot and charred branches from the bush fires" (308). Once the land becomes infertile, a bleak shadow is cast over the future of food production in the village.

In the light of the inter-religious crisis and its several effects on nature and subsequently on humans, the narrator remarks "this is sheer folly" (281). Furthermore, he avows "this is senseless violence" (293). As a result of the burnings and killings, the indigenes of Keti cared less which religion they are affiliated to and only wanted to see their loved ones being released. This is explained thus:

When they got to the station they were

surprised by the size of the crowd waiting to hear word of their families. Suddenly, there were no Christians and Muslims, just anxious people eager to see their loved ones (279)

Therefore, the religious crisis began due to the need to express the superiority of one religion over another, but the death that prevailed did not choose which adherents of religion to kill and the one to spare. At present, the crisis leads to the depletion of natural elements and, in the future, the endangering of the natural environment which becomes unsafe for man.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it is lucid that man is inextricably linked to nature and its elements. In this regard, the literary artist, including the novelist, is conditioned by the relationship between man and nature because the survival of man depends on the quantity and quality of resources of nature available to him. Habila has used his novel to express that certain aspects of the interrelation between forms of religion in the society impacts on nature and its elements. This aspect is the inter-religious crisis, during which time there is a destruction of the natural environment. Such crises frequently arise due to intolerance on the part of religious zealots. The aftermath of such is always destruction. The irrationality behind these inter faith chaos is laid bare because the depletion of nature, the deaths and the trauma that trail such crises affect the entire society, directly or indirectly, without any consideration for religious affiliation. The depletion of nature, in the long run, endangers

man also, leading to an unsafe natural environment. On the strength of this, Habila is an environmental activist that calls for a stop to any form of crisis that would impact negatively on nature both for the good of the natural environment and for the continued healthy existence of man.

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