

Mining Activities' Socio-environmental Impacts as Fictionalized in Wole Soyinka's Play *The Swamp Dwellers*: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Discourse¹

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ABSTRACT

*This paper investigates into Wole Soyinka's play **The Swamp Dwellers** to provide an account of how this writer highlights the negative consequences of irresponsible mining exploitation. At the same time he suggests possible solutions for the advent of a sustainable development. Although the mining industry is heralded by economists and politicians as the main source of wealth and income for African countries, environmentalists and ecologists voice a concern about its irreversible impacts on the environment and the population such as deforestation, displacement of population, climate change etc.*

It is argued that since literature is seen as « a social discourse » (Fowler 1981), it plays the ideological role of 'raising people's awareness and consciousness on social, economic, political and environmental issues. By jointly using postcolonial ecocritical analysis and critical discourse analysis, this study tries to reveal the contribution of fiction to the solution of actual ecological problems. It stresses ideological polarization (ecologists and the local population versus political authorities and multinationals) via positive self-presentation versus negative other-presentation.

Key concepts: *Ecocriticism, Postcolonial ecocriticism, Critical Discourse Analysis, ideological polarization, climate change.*

1.0. Introduction

The mining industry is heralded by economists and politicians as the main source of wealth and income for African countries, and hence, of their development. The economies of these countries basically depend on the prices of raw materials (minerals and oil particularly) as reflected in the high proportion of the income from this sector in the national budgets. Unfortunately, these prices are fixed and regulated by the international market which does not care about national realities. This situation of uncertainty puts African countries' economies at risk.

By contrast, environmentalists and ecologists voice a concern about its irreversible impacts on the environment and the population: deforestation, displacement of population, climate change etc. The mining industry implies among others, extensive use of huge quantities of chemicals, transformation of the landscape through upheaval of soil strata, destruction of hills and rivers as well as the changes of the courses of rivers, etc. It is a long and complex network of activities extending from mining exploitation, transformation of oil and minerals (e.g. refineries, melting process) to the stocking of industrial wastes (e.g. nuclear wastes). Every step implies specific pollution which is an ecological or environmental damage. Hence, there is the “us/them” ideological polarization opposing ecologists and local people to multinationals and political authorities, viz. positive self-presentation versus negative other-presentation.

This paper investigates into Wole Soyinka’s play *The Swamp Dwellers* to provide an account of how this writer highlights the negative consequences of irrational and irresponsible mining exploitation. At the same time he suggests possible solutions for the advent of a sustainable development. Through a joint use of postcolonial ecocritical analysis and critical discourse analysis, this study tries to illustrate the contribution of fiction to the solution of actual ecological problems. In line with the main theme of this scientific day, this paper aims to highlight the ideological role of fiction to raise people’s awareness and consciousness on their daily problems.

It is argued that since literature is seen as « a social discourse » (Fowler 1981), it plays the ideological role of ‘raising people’s awareness and consciousness on social, economic, political and environmental issues. Hence, like the preacher who summons people to adopt an appropriate behaviour in specific situations, through fiction, the writer also incites people to celebrate the shared values of the community which can lead to the solutions of actual problems in their society. Mutatis mutandis, what is said about the Nigerian context can also apply to the Congolese setting and elsewhere. That is, by analogy one context, whether fictional or real, can help to illuminate another.

As to its structure, after the introduction which sets the scene, are presented the methodological considerations and the theories which serve as the background to the interpretation of the play. That is, Ecocriticism and Post-colonial Ecocriticism for fiction but Critical Discourse Analysis to study ideological polarization between characters.

Next, the analysis of the play *The Swamp Dwellers* will help discuss the excerpts on environment. Such passages will be scrutinized through the lenses of Ecocriticism, and our argumentation will be backed up by additional extrinsic examples for the sake of intertextuality. In fact, socio-environmental damages are not specific to Nigeria; ecocriticism remains a global issue.

Then we will turn to discursive features to illustrate ideological polarization which opposes the ecologists and the population to the political authorities and the multinationals. Accordingly, we will single out some themes, particularly deforestation and displacement of people, and their respective stereotypes.

Finally, the discussion and conclusions section will try to recapitulate on the results and will also try to highlight the epistemology of the rhetoric of literature,

particularly the ‘consciousness raising mission’ of the latter. That would be a proof enough of the Literature - Discourse Analysis interface and an instantiation of translation of fiction into reality.

2.0 Methodological considerations and key concepts

To investigate into the literature-discourse analysis interface, we have opted for the joint use of Postcolonial Ecocritical Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis. We briefly survey each of them to highlight its relevance to our topic, and we also define the key words of our research.

2.1. Ecocriticism

To quote Caminero-Santangelo (2007: 699), ecocriticism is a literary theory which emerged from Anglo-American literary canon and which “embraces the ethical position that humans need to do away with ‘anthropocentrism’ by rejecting the nature-culture dualism which objectivizes nature and places the category of culture/humanity at the center of thing.” It is commonly known as the multi/interdisciplinary studies of literature and the environment (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Buell, 1995, 2001, 2003; Garry, 2004...). These scholars among others recognize that this new literary critical approach happens to resort to more than a theory which indeed may have nothing in common in order to address environmental issues from the literary standpoint. For this reason, Buell (1995) prefers even the concept of “environmental criticism” to cover more than a domain to which ecocriticism resorts. Barry (2009: 259) does not object to the nature of ecocriticism when he posits that “ecocriticism is itself a diverse biosphere”. He implies that ecocriticism, as an environmental criticism, is multi/interdisciplinary for it uses a range of theories from many disciplines in order to address in forefront ecological problems. It is in this respect that very quickly the marriage between ecocriticism and postcolonialism is heard though in equivocation.

It is true that the rise of ecocriticism as an Anglo-American luxury has raised more than a controversy since its inception. Some regarded it as a true humanist response to climate change crisis that has been on the lips of all nations, but others regarded it as a postcolonial weapon to perpetuate the colonial discourse. Such an ambivalent status of ecocriticism besides its inter/multidisciplinarity pushed its margins toward all environmental related works of arts.

Although Buell (2003) and Garrard (2004) do not at this stage define a true ecocriticism’s engagement with postcolonialism, both acknowledge the need of ecocriticism to enlarge its concerns: to move from a mere national earth centered approach to embrace worldwide impacts. Nixon (2005) attempts to sketch a rudimentary marriage between ecocriticism and postcolonialism in African literature. This attempts appears as a response to Slaymaker (2001/2007) who called African ecowriters, ecocritics and ecoactivists to embrace ecological studies in African literature. Such a call implies that the latter, who had dealt much with postcolonial issues, ought to associate them to ecological ones to effectively rejoin to social and ecological concerns.

2.2. Postcolonial ecocriticism

The coming together of postcolonialism and ecocriticism gave rise to what is commonly known today as “postcolonial green” (Roos & Hunt, 2010), “postcolonial ecology” (Deloughrey and Handley, 2011), “postcolonial ecocriticism” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010), or “green postcolonialism” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2007). Above all, these different expressions denote the same reality. As Huggan and Tiffin (2010: 12) strongly assert: “What the postcolonial/ecocritical alliance brings out, above all, is a need of a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationships between people, animals and environment...”. Thus, social justice formerly claimed only by postcolonialism joins environmental justice formerly addressed only by ecocriticism. Both preoccupations mingle in the search for social and environmental justice as a core claim of green postcolonialism or postcolonial ecocriticism (Mwepu 2019).

It is in this vein that Oppermann (2016) assumes that “Embodying ecocriticism’s basic ecological commitments, postcolonial ecocriticism has expanded the postcolonial foci towards more nuanced explorations of ecological conditions, ecological others, and environmental injustices in postcolonial cultures.” She considers “...postcolonial and ecocritical issues as a means of contesting ecological imperialism, bio-colonization, environmental and social injustice, and environmental racism, speciesism, and anthropocentrism” (p. 412). Oppermann lets discover that postcolonial ecocriticism becomes a weapon to combat with social and environmental injustice, a complex phenomenon that the world is victim of today. It is especially in this context that we are going to use it in the discourse analysis of Soyinka’s *The Swamp Dwellers*.

2.3. Critical discourse analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context (van Dijk 2001a: 352). van Dijk (2001b: 96) further argues that Critical Discourse Analysis views itself as a ‘critical’ perspective of doing scholarship which can be combined with other approaches. Its main characteristics are: (1) language is a social practice, and (2) there is a relationship between language and power. It is used in this analysis because “Like critical social science generally, Critical Discourse Analysis has emancipatory objectives, and is focused upon the problems confronting what we can loosely refer to as the ‘losers’ within particular forms of social life”. (Fairclough 2001: 125). Stated differently, the ultimate aim of Critical Discourse Analysis is to empower the losers with enough knowledge to surmount their difficulties and to find a solution to their problem.

2.4. Ideological polarization

Fairclough (1989: 84) defines ideology as an ‘implicit philosophy’ in the practical activities of social life, backgrounded and taken for granted, that connects it to ‘common sense’. In the confrontational discourse “us versus them”, participants tend to fall into two categories with respect to their ideologies. Accordingly, they do not share the same viewpoints and are more inclined to find faults with the other rather than with themselves. Ideological polarization is summed up in *positive self-presentation* versus *negative other-presentation* as in “we are ecologists” versus “they

are environment activists”. Herein, it will consist in identifying the reciprocal stereotypes for stigmatization of environmentalists and political authorities.

2.5. Climate change

According to Wikipedia (2018) climate change is a change in the statistical distribution of weather patterns when that change lasts for an extended period of time (i.e. decades to millions of years). It may also refer to a change in average weather conditions, or in the time variation of weather within the context of longer term average conditions. As to its sources, climate change is assumed to be caused by factors such as biotic processes, variations in solar radiation received by Earth, plate tectonics, and volcanic eruptions. Above all, the main cause and which is the most decried remains the human kind or certain human activities such as pollution. It is often then referred to as ‘anthropogenic climate change’ or ‘global warming’ and is materialized among others by desertification, inundations, etc.

3.0. Post-colonial ecocritical analysis of *The Swamp Dwellers*

Before proceeding to the analysis proper, let us supply the synopsis of the play. *The Swamp Dwellers* is a play about Igwezu who went to the city but did not feel at ease there because his own twin brother Awuchike became so indifferent to him and to their whole family. He decided to come back home in the Swamp to see his crops. Unfortunately, upon his arrival, he is informed that the Swamp is full of polluted water which has damaged the crops. He feels depressed to see whole his harvest damaged by polluted water from unmanaged oil waste.

While whole the Swamp is affected by the heavy flood, Beggar arrives at Makuri’s house, Igwezu’s father. Beggar recalls nostalgically how life was beautiful and enjoyable in Bukanji village before the arrival of locusts which came to invade all the crops, making Bukanji residents beggars. He complains about how the excessive drought in Bukanji village has made the area unlivable. He asks for some portion of arable land from Makuri but the latter refuses, claiming that all lands belong to the Serpent of the Swamp.

Both Kadiye, the priest, and Makuri firmly believe that the heavy flood is a Godly will. Yet, Igwezu who is disappointed by his crops’ damage despite offering traditional sacrifices reveals to them that the flood is a logical consequence of the water that is polluted. Such a declaration sounds as a sacrilege to the holy man who is about to curse him. His father, Makuri, tells Igwezu to go back to the city for a while to avoid punishment from Kadiye. He agrees and departs from the Swamp. However, Igwezu tells Beggar to remain and cultivate safely the soil because he will surely come back home later.

As one can understand, the play depicts a paradoxical situation wherein both inhabitants of the Swamp and Bukanji village are affected though differently by climate change issues. Both the heavy flood in the Swamp and the excessive drought in Bukanji are seemingly lived as consequences of mining and industrial activities, even though these are not visible in the vicinity.

Climate change features are described in the play in the following passages:

(1) Conversation between Igwezu and Makuri:

Igwezu: [Awuchike is] healthier than you or I. And a thousand times as wealthy.

Makuri: ...How did he make his money?

Igwezu: In timber. He felled it and floated it over the seas. He is wealthy, and he is big. (p. 104).

Through the image of Awuchike the play shows how many Africans in complicity with strangers over-exploit natural resources notwithstanding socio-environmental damages. It is such exploitation, as stated earlier, which is at the basis of sound drought in Bukanji village and heavy flood in the Swamp.

(2) Beggar sorrowfully recalls:

It is true that the land had lain barren for generations, that the fields had yielded no grain for the lifetime of the eldest in the village. We had known nothing but the dryness of the earth. Dry crumbs of dust...” (pp. 98-99).

Because of this drought, there is scarcity of foods and water. Therefore Beggar, like his co-habitants, decides to leave the village for anywhere else in search for water. The Nigerian name ‘Beggar’ itself is purposely chosen because in English it means ‘someone who asks for assistance’. It is like a prophecy about the life that the child would face later on.

Beggar’s displacement toward an unknown place can be compared to today’s ecological migrants. He finds refuge in the Swamp.

(3) Conversation between Beggar and Makuri

Beggar: Was there much damage to the farm?

Makuri: Much damage? Not a grain was saved, not one tuber in the soil...And what the flood left behind was poisoned by the oil in the swamp water. [Shakes his head] ...It is hard for him, coming back for a harvest that isn’t there (p. 92).

The old Makuri discloses not only the pollution of water and earth with all its impacts on food production but also Igwezu’s disappointment. The presence of water oil in the Swamp is a proof of the presence of an oil company in the area. It also presupposes the unsafe management of hazardous wastes. All these are taking place with implicit or explicit complicity of national and local political authorities.

(4) Conversation between Beggar and Makuri:

Beggar: Is there land here which a man can till? Is there any land to spare for a man who is willing to give his soul to the soil?

Makuri: [shakes his head] No friend. All the land that can take the weight of a hoe is owned by someone in the village. Even the few sheep and goats haven't any land on which to graze. They have to be fed on cassava and other roots.

While Beggar considers the land as an outside reality that one can till only, Makuri expresses his attachment to his land whose belonging goes back even to the beginning of the world. Furthermore, land is no longer a common propriety that people used to exploit for their living; wealthy people and multinationals have already bought plots so that poor people are left empty-handed. They are destined to the life of beggars because they have no land to till.

Ken Saro Wiwa, the Nigerian ecologist, is right to denounce the national despotism which favors Westerners' colonialists to overexploit natural resources without any consideration for local people and the nearby environment. He was hanged for activism. Kaputu (2013) does not hesitate to depict the triangle: local population-their leaders – international agencies, such as United Nations, World Bank etc. as a deadly one. While national leaders pretend to conspire with international lobbying in the exploitation of their natural resources seemingly at the expense of the population, the socio-environmental damages that this exploitation engenders kills more than a person, including the conspirators.

Given that ecology is a global issue, let us extrapolate from the play *The Swamp Dwellers* in order to address some themes and how they are treated in other literary works or actually lived in other societies.

3.1. Deforestation

At the outset, it is worth pointing out the importance of the forest in traditional African societies and cultures. It is the setting for performing mystic and religious ceremonies such as initiation of the youth into different stages of life. In African novels, here and there we find boys led into the forest for circumcision (e.g. Camara Laye's novel *The Dark Child*) or to prepare rebellion against the system (e.g. Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *Two Thousand Seasons*), etc.

In traditional African societies, the forest was also the place where people could collect food (e.g. mushroom, fruits, honey), medicinal plants etc. Above all, forests were protected because springs used to originate there. They were thus surrounded with mystery and spirituality as the venues of supernatural forces, a link between the human kind and the world beyond. Witchcraft and other mystic powers were supposed to have their home therein.

Therefore, for Africans, particularly for those still faithful to tradition, deforestation is not a simple concrete action of destroying the landscape, but it is even more an attack on African people's beliefs, spirituality and culture. In conclusion, the theme of deforestation should be appreciated on both material and spiritual levels. The mining industry does disrupt not only the landscape - with the ensuing consequences - but it also causes damages to African traditional spirituality.

3.2. Displacement of populations

In the play *The Swamp Dwellers* as well as in the novel *Two Thousand Seasons* we find that people move away either to flee from the consequences of climate changes or to leave their villages to new owners, viz. multinationals. They have no power to demand any compensation from the latter or from their local authorities.

The mining industry has really bad press when it comes to its impacts on the people's displacement. All over the world, whenever minerals or oil are discovered, political authorities are inclined to give their consent almost automatically. They are more concerned with finding cash for the national budget than with people's interests and environment. As illustrative cases, on the American continent, throughout history native Indians have been removed from their homelands in order to make room for mining exploitation. Contrary to his predecessors, the American President Donald Trump recently allowed the building of pipelines across Indian homelands, with the ineluctable displacement (with or without relocation and compensation) of the populations.

In conclusion, literature is not always fictional; at times it depicts some real issues so as to suggest solutions that real societies can use in their specific cases.

3.3. Critical discourse analysis and ideological polarization

At the discourse level, we can point out the ideological polarization and how it is enacted in ecological discourse. In such oppositional discourse, the fault is found not with oneself, but with the other. Along Clark (1992) who has identified and contrasted stereotypes on the belligerents in the Gulf War, we do the same for ecologists and the population versus political authorities and multinationals:

Us (ecologists and the community)	Them (political authorities and investors)
- We are ecologists	- They are activists - They are rebels
- Ecological migration	- Rural exodus
- We protect the environment; they destroy it	- We use the land (soil and the undersoil) to create job opportunities; we use natural resources to develop the country;
- We care for the future generations by using natural resources responsibly;	- We use natural resources for the well-being of the nation;
- They overuse natural resources to selfish and personal enrichment without caring for future generations;	- We exploit more and more resources because the economy of the country must remain competitive on the global level.
- The land (soil and undersoil) belongs to the community	- The land belongs to the State; it can be privatized for better

and cannot become a private propriety;	exploitation
- Mining industry destroys the environment and causes deforestation	- The mining industry creates works and contributes to the development of the country
- The mining industry has bad impacts on the climate, particularly it causes climate change.	- There is not enough proof that the mining industry impacts on climate change (President Donald Trump)

Political authorities and investors or multinationals should avoid their anthropocentrism because the nature does not belong to the human kind alone – and even less to rich people; plants, animals, birds, fish and insects also have every right to exist and to live in a healthy environment.

4.0 Discussion and conclusions

Throughout this paper we have tried to sustain the interface between literature and discourse analysis by arguing that both disciplines can illuminate each other. Although literature is a theoretical or conceptual research rather than an applied one, its results can all the same help to solve social problems in the community. Hence, Fahnestock and Secor 1988: 438) assess the function of literature in the following terms:

The arguments of literary criticism are fundamentally epideictic, celebrating the shared values of community. [...] They do not usually move directly into the fourth stasis, that of procedure or policy; no recommendations or legislations follow [...]

However, later on they recognized the mobilizing role of literature concerning raising consciousness: “Literary arguments do judge past performances, they do imply future policies. [...] Reading a literary argument ... may be like hearing a sermon on a familiar theme.” (Fahnestock and Secor 1991: 94)

Accordingly, instead of considering fictional works as mere wishes and reveries, the message which is conveyed through them can influence readers and guide their course of action in the same way as do sociology and philosophy. Literature draws readers’ attention on an issue and provides at the same time a response, even if the latter is unreal. Isanusi, the prophet and the people’s soul leader in Ayi Kwei Armah’s novel *Two Thousand Seasons*, has this instruction to give to the freedom fighters (or rebels according to one’s viewpoint): “See the disease and understand it. It is important” (p. 314).

Given that ecological problems are perceived at the same time as social and environmental, they are first of all fictitious. In other words, the problems in ecology that the human kind denounces today stem from the irrational exploitation of natural resources on the one hand, and on the other, from the process of transforming and using them. Above all, their main source is the psychological distance that the

human kind has created between itself and the nature (Mwepu 2019). Such a materialist and selfish exploitation of minerals is suicidal for the human kind because it makes poor people poorer but rich people more than wealthier.

From fiction to reality

To come back to mining exploitation and its impacts on our society - the topic of this scientific day - throughout our country there have also been many real cases of impacts of the mining industry on the environment and the population. For the sake of illustration:

- In Kolwezi, there is an ad hoc conflict between the population and Kamoto Copper Company (KCC). The displaced people are not happy with the proposed compensations because the amount of money does not correspond to the true value of their houses. Not surprisingly, the government hardly side with them because it counts more on the investors to maximize its revenue.
- In the Province of Kasai Oriental, a college of agronomy (namely Institut Supérieur des Etudes Agronomiques de Mukongo) had been displaced from a well-equipped campus in Mukongo to Lukalaba, a village devoid of any school building, once it was disclosed that quantities of diamond were lying underneath. The MIBA Company decision makers found it more important to exploit diamond rather than to protect this campus of higher education.
- Similarly in the Province of Haut Katanga, Lycée Lubusha in Lwisha, a prestigious secondary school with a long history of achievement, is under the same threat since copper and cobalt ore minerals have been discovered under the site.
- The discovery of oil in Virunga Park is a source of a pending contention opposing ecologists to investors. The former fear for the unavoidable damages to this natural gift whereas the investors argue for the best ways to exploit oil without damaging the site. Undoubtedly, political authorities care more about finances and how natural resources can increase the income of the nation.

On the discursive front there is the “us” versus “them” divide. The ecologists (the Civil Society and environmental NGOs) fight for the rights of the population to live in a healthy environment (Kabuya 2004). By contrast, political authorities are entangled with investors in corruption in search for fortune stemming from the mining industry.

Wole Soyinka’s message is thus to warn swamp dwellers and their contemporaries, who are beggars of everything (asylum, polio vaccine, Ebola vaccine, corn flour, scholarship, political support, economic assistance, even sports assistance) to fend for themselves, to change their attitudes towards themselves and towards others; to reconcile themselves with their own land and culture, and hence, with the universe or the world as a whole. By so doing, Wole Soyinka achieves the emancipatory function of Critical Discourse Analysis: to make the human kind avoid its anthropocentrism but to care for ecology to the benefit of humans and non-humans who colonize the nature.

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Endnote

¹This paper is a revised edition of our lecture at the Scientific Day of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (2018), University of Lubumbashi, on the theme: "Mining exploitation and the future of the Democratic Republic of Congo." It has also been informed by Mwepu's (2019) doctoral dissertation on postcolonial ecocriticism.

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