

## Exploring Literary Perspectives on Environmental Education for Sustainable Development

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**Abstract** *The focal thrust of this paper is to explore literary perspectives as expeditious in environmental education for sustainable development. Niyi Osundare's 'They Too Are The Earth', Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, and John Keat's 'Bright Star, If I Were...' are painstakingly interpolated pursuant to the pedagogical treasure in Literature necessary for environmental education. The gory implications of environmental degradation are highlighted and some suggestions articulated.*

**Keywords** Environment, Education, Environmental Education, Development, Literature

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### Introduction

Today, the world is understandably frantic in view of the rather gloomy prognostication of the implications of an impending collapse of environmental order; regrettably, consequent upon the inordinate ambition of humanity to competitive advancements particularly in the sciences and technologies.

**Dakur and Dangyil** (2006:248) assert that:

It is axiomatic that human beings, have come to grip with the reality of continuous degradation of the environment resulting from development activities. Hitherto, during the pre-industrial era, when human population was small and man had not developed sophistication in science and technology, he was rather oblivious of the changes that occur in his environment, perhaps because such changes were insignificant. Today, the story is never the same.

**Saleh, Mandungs and Bitrus** (2006:53) corroborate that:

Man, in his quest to improve his standard of living and make the world a more comfortable place to live, has caused diverse structural and biological changes in the environment which, if not checked, in the long can cause a total breakdown of the environment and complete collapse of the ecosystem.

This paper not only takes considerable interest in the appalling implications of the gradual degradation/depletion of the earth or the environment, but explores literary concerns as a pedagogical facility instructional to environmental education for sustainable development.

### Conceptual Consideration

The key terms 'environment', 'education', 'development', and 'Literature' shall be accorded some consideration in order to lend interpretation within the contextual parameter of this discourse.

**Hornby** (2005:490) defines 'environment' as 'the natural world in which people, animals and plants live.'

**Dimka** (2008:362) asserts that

the **environment** includes water, air, land and physical properties and the inter-relationship that exist among and between them and human beings, other living creatures, plants and micro organisms. The environment is, thus, the sum total of all physical, biological and ecological factors.

The **environment** is, therefore, a consideration of the properties and the interplay of all the elements the make up the earth: the hydrosphere, the lithosphere, the biosphere, and the atmosphere.

**Robinson and Davidson** (2007:419) define 'education' as ' 1. the process teaching, 2. instruction received, 3. the process of training and improving...'

Dajal, Saleh and Atawal (2006:63) quoted the International Workshop on Environmental Education (1975) definition of 'environmental education' as education aimed at developing a world population that is aware of and concerned about the environment and its associated problems, and which has the knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivations and commitments to work individually and collectively towards a solution to current problems and the prevention of new ones.

Thus, **environmental education** can be conceived in terms of its functionality as a pedagogical facilitation for teaching, instruction and learning with a view to elicit desired positive responses for mutual environmental interaction/disposition.

Dakur and Dangyil (2006:249) describe the term '**development**' as 'an on going process of transformation of social and economic factors towards achieving specialization, equitable distribution of resources and increasing the material welfare of people.'

Dangyil and Dachomo (2006:225) quote Nwana (1995) on '**development**' as 'a multi-dimensional process that involves changes in structure, attitudes and institutions as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality and reduction of poverty.'

**Development**, in this context, is the systematic process of positive change that cuts across all aspects of human interaction, and with other endowments of nature.

The term '**Literature**' fundamentally designate fictional and imaginative writings (poetry, prose fiction and drama) that are especially distinguished in form, expression, and emotional power. It serves a myriad of positive functions that generally sharpens and shapes humanity's consciousness to such a lofty latitude that appreciate nature's endowments. (Abrams 2005:152/3, Ibitola 2005:1, Amaechi 2005:1-3)

#### THEY TOO ARE THE EARTH (by Niyi Osundare)

They too are the earth  
 the swansong of baggers sprawled out  
 in brimming gutters  
 they are the earth  
 5 under snakeskin shoes and Mercedes tyres  
 They too are the earth  
 the sweat and grime of  
 millions hewing wood and hurling water  
 they are the earth  
 10 muddy every fore like naked moles.  
 They too are the earth  
 The distant groan of thousands buried alive  
 in hard, unfathomable mines  
 They are the earth  
 15 of gold dreams and blood banks  
 They too are the earth  
 the old dying distant deaths  
 in narrow abandoned hamlets  
 they are the earth  
 20 women battling centuries of *mal*eficient slavery  
 Are they of this earth  
 who fritter the forest and harry the hills  
 Are they of this earth  
 who live that earth may die  
 25 Are they?

(Nwachukwu-Agbada, Bangbose and Atere 2003:270)

## Setting

The poem has four ordinary locales. First, the despicably appalling ghetto/slum milieu that harbours the underprivileged and the destitute (lines 2,3,...); Second, the drifters scheduled to unskilled menial labour (lines 7-10); Third, the miners and such other manual excavators, (lines 12-15); Fourth, the bane of the privileged/rich who busy in destructive construction projects (line 21). The **extended setting** cuts across all geo-political demarcations to depict not only the inordinate adventurism of humanity into advancements in science and technology but of man's inhumanity to man in terms of inequality and unequal opportunities and distribution of wealth.

## Background

The poem is in the category of **modern pro-life socialist** affiliation that strives to underpin undue class distinction and its derogatory implications. It also reveals the suicidal tenacity of humanity who in the inordinate quest for superiority/advancement in science and technology disturbs the mutual interaction of nature's endowments.

## Themes

The poet esteems/explores the theme of collectivism in the ownership/membership of the earth/environment. In other words, all interactive participants/elements that constitute the earth; the hydrosphere, the lithosphere, the biosphere, and the atmosphere all share relative rights/privileges to mutual existence (the title, lines 1,4,6,8,11,14,16 and 19).

Second, the poet subtly laments and condemns in totality the pernicious tendencies/adventurism of humanity, particularly the privileged, to plunder/destroy and degrade natural environmental order/balance by the brazenly incongruous application of results/outcomes and products of scientific and technological experiments; sophisticated heavy plants and machinery, and assorted chemical substances.

'The fact that man since time immemorial has been interfering with his environment and has led environmental change cannot be contested'. **Dashe and Daniel** (2008:354).

Man's quest for modern industrial civilization has led to misuse of the environment to the point that a global tragedy appears more imminent than ever... Millions of people throughout the world are exposed to hazardous wastes from industrial plants, refineries, tanneries and agricultural fields/activities. **Dajal and Atawal** (2006:61).

This paper highlights ahead the gory implications of humanity's degradation of the environment.

Third, the poet explores the theme of oppression and lack of care on the one hand, then poverty and survival on the other (lines 2,3,5,7,8,10,12,15,17,18 and 19).

## THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN (by Ayi Kwei Armah)

### Setting

The geopolitical, socio-economic and cultural setting of the novel/ prose text The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born is ordinarily the disillusioned post independence, neo-colonial Ghana in the eras of **Nkrumah**. The extended setting covers most, if not all, of the nations on the African continent where the post independences experience(s) leave a sour taste in the mouth since corruption in its ramifications is celebrated as the rule rather than the exception.

## Background

The background is **the lamentable betrayal of trust** informed by the brazen post independence **corrupt tendencies** of particularly government officials in most African countries. This corrupt tendency is hugely administrative, political, infrastructural and environmental.

## Themes

Theme dominate theme is **environmental degradation** as a result of corruption/mismanagement of the wealth of nations with impunity (the very first chapter introduces this theme aptly).

Was there not something in the place and about the time, everything, in fact that sought to make it painfully clear that there was too much of the unnatural in any man who imagines he could escape the inevitable decay of life and not accept the decline into final disintegration? (The man, 47-48).

The full import of this expression conveys a gloomy prognostication of the imminent collapse of a system occasioned by the self-destructive course of humanity in a way that disregards the principles of collective determinism and mutual interaction amongst all environmental elements.

Women, so horribly young, fucked and changed like pants, asking only for blouses and perfume from diplomatic bags and wigs of human hair scraped from which decayed white woman's corpse?

Again, apart from the apparent literal implication of gross disregard for **gender** consideration, the **metaphorical interpretation** should not be lost. First, women as symbols of fertility and procreation, subjected to sexual abuse is not only pervasive but a deviation from our sense of collective responsibility and determinism. Second, the concept of the woman as a symbol of fertility is metaphorical for the earth/land or environment. In this context, the environment suffers wanton destruction/degradation informed by the 'larger than life' disposition of humanity. Needless to add that most third world nations strain to copy, transfer and or borrow technologies that are not only counterproductive in the long run but (they) are not ready/prepared for.

The song cautions that:

Those who are bless with power  
And the soaring swiftness of the eagle  
And have flown before,  
Let them go.  
I will travel slowly,  
And I too will arrive. (p51)

The expressions 'more haste, less speed' and 'slow and steady wins the race' admonishes particularly third world nations to allow growth and development at their own pace; Rome was not built in a day!

## Environmental and Resource Problems and their Causes

The human imprint is everywhere on earth, from the highest mountains to the deepest ocean depths; from dry deserts to lush tropical forests; from frozen Arctic ice caps to the cloudless atmosphere.

**Key Environmental Problems.** We face a number of interconnected environmental and resource problems. Four of these problems: possible climate change from global warming, acid rain, depletion of stratospheric ozone, and urban air pollution: results from the chemicals we have put into the atmosphere (mostly from burning fossil fuels). A fifth problem, the continued poisoning of the soil, water, and air by pesticides and numerous other toxic wastes, is primarily the result of not relay on pollution prevention.

Another six problems – depletion of nonrenewable minerals (especial oil), depletion and contamination of ground water, deforestation, soil erosion, conversion of productive crop land and grazing lands to deserts (desertification), and species lost (biodiversity depletion) – results from exponentially growing depletion and

degradation of Earth's capital. Population growth (more consumers) and environmentally harmful forms of economic growth (increasing resource depletion, pollution, and environmental degradation) can intensify these problems.

### Root Causes of Environmental Problems

The first step in dealing with the environmental and resource problems we face is to identify their underlying causes. According to environmentalists, these include:

- Rapid population growth.
- Simplification and degradation of parts of Earth's life support systems.
- Poverty, which can drive poor people to use potentially renewable resources for short-term survival and also often exposes the poor much high health and environmental risks.
- Widespread use of relatively cheap and environmentally damaging fossil fuels (especially oil and coal).
- Rapid and wasteful use of resources with too little emphasis on pollution prevention and waste reduction.
- Overuse and degradation of global common property resources, which are owned by none and available to all.
- Failure to encourage Earth-sustaining forms of economic development and to discourage Earth-degrading forms of economic growth.
- Failure to have market prices represent the overall environmental cost of an economic good or service. This promotes the inefficient and wasteful use of resources by concealing the true cost of the products we produce and buy.
- Our urge to dominate and manage nature for our use.

### Global Warming/ Projected Effects

**Global warming** is the increase in the [average temperature](#) of [Earth's](#) near-surface air and oceans since the mid-[20th century](#) and its projected continuation. According to the 2007 [Fourth Assessment Report](#) by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC), global surface temperature increased  $0.74 \pm 0.18 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  ( $1.33 \pm 0.32 \text{ }^\circ\text{F}$ ) during the 20th century.<sup>[2][A]</sup> Most of the observed temperature increase since the middle of the 20th century has been [caused](#) by increasing concentrations of [greenhouse gases](#), which result from [human activity](#) such as the [burning of fossil fuel](#) and [deforestation](#).<sup>[3]</sup> [Global dimming](#), a result of increasing concentrations of atmospheric [aerosols](#) that block sunlight from reaching the surface, has partially countered the effects of warming induced by greenhouse gases.

S/No	Country/Region	Projected effects of global warning
1	Africa	a. The most vulnerable to global warning with adaptive capacity. b. By 2020 between 75-250 million will be exposed to water stress. c. Agricultural production will be severely affected with increase in drought episodes. d. Low lying coastal areas will be severely affected by the end of the 21 <sup>st</sup> century.

	Asia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Himalaya's ice cap projected to melt cause flooding, avalanches from slopes and water resources affected.</li> <li>b. Fresh water to decrease by 2050s due to climate change thereby affecting a billion people.</li> <li>c. Crop yield increase up to 20 percent in east and Southeast Asia and decrease by 30 percent in central Asia by mid 21<sup>st</sup> century.</li> <li>d. Hydrological cycle changes with increase flood and death due to diarrhea disease.</li> </ol>
3.	Australia/ New Zealand	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Water security problems intensify by 2030 in both countries.</li> <li>b. Lost of Biodiversity in ecologically rich areas by 2020.</li> <li>c. Increased risk of rising sea level and increasing frequency of storm and flooding 2050.</li> <li>d. Production from agriculture and forestry decline due to increased drought frequencies.</li> </ol>
4.	Europe	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Heat waves increase retreating glaciers, shift in species ranges</li> <li>b. High temperatures and drought will be experienced Southern Europe.</li> <li>c. Summer precipitation to reduce with corresponding decrease in forest productivity in Central and Western Europe.</li> </ol>
5.	Latin America	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Productivity of some crops and livestock projected to decrease thereby creating food insecurity.</li> <li>b. Increased risk of flooding in low lying areas due to projected rise in sea level.</li> <li>c. Changes in precipitation and disappearance of glaciers.</li> </ol>
6.	North America	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Aggregate yields of rain-fed agriculture increase by 5-20 percent.</li> <li>b. Coastal communities will be increasingly stressed by climatic change impacts.</li> <li>c. Heat waves increase with adverse health impacts.</li> <li>d. Warning in Western Mountains is projected to decrease snow pack, more winter flooding and reduced summer flows.</li> </ol>
7.	Polar Regions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Reductions in the thickness and extent of glaciers, increase coastal erosion.</li> <li>b. Reduced traditional ways of life and reduced heating caused by human communities.</li> <li>c. Specific ecosystems vulnerable to barriers and species invasion lowered.</li> </ol>
8	Small Islands	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Sea-level rise will threaten vital infrastructures.</li> <li>b. Reduced water resources by the mid 21<sup>st</sup> century.</li> <li>c. Deterioration in coastal conditions such as erosion of beaches, reduced tourism trade.</li> </ol>

### Control Measures for Sustainability

Here are the major strategies many environmentalists and scientists believe are needed to have a sustainable society:

- Reduce the waste of matter and energy resources.
- Place more emphasis on pollution control and waste reduction.
- Compost, recycle, and reuse at least 60% by weight of matter the resource we use.
- Make things that last longer and are easier to reuse, recycle, and repair.
- Shift to more dependence on locally available renewable energy from the sun, wind, flowing water, and biomass.

- Help sustain Earth's biodiversity with emphasis on protecting vital habitats for wild species.
- Use potentially renewable resources such as water, soil, plants, and animals no faster than they are renewed.
- Use or modify economic and political systems to develop a mix of economic incentives, taxes, and regulations that reward Earth-sustaining behaviour and that discourage Earth-degrading behaviour.
- Slow rate of population growth.
- Reduce poverty.

(Rowntree, Lewis, Price & Wyckoff 2000; Miller 1996; Dachal & Guse 2008)

### BRIGHT STAR, WOULD I WERE... (by John Keats)

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art-

Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night  
And watching, with eternal lids apart,

Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,  
The moving waters at their priestlike task

Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,  
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask

Of snow upon the mountains and the moors –  
No- yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,

Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,      10  
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,

And so live ever - or else sworn to death.

### Setting

John Keat's '*Bright Star, Would I Were...*' and '*Ode To Autumn*' in the likes of William Wordsworth's '*Daffodils*', '*Lines Written in Early Spring*', S.T Coleridge's '*Elegy*', '*On Revisiting the Sea- Shore*'; and D.H Lawrence's '*Snake*' all belong to the prestigious category of romantic poems that celebrate and esteem with verve and vitality the subtle, solemn and simple truths of nature's attraction and beauty. This consideration is amidst the chocking hustle and bustle of ordinary material advancement which ultimately robs humanity of not only the serenity but the therapeutic facilitation of nature's seemingly ordinary endowments.

### Background

The poem is a subtle protestation to humanity's inordinate tenacity that tends towards materialism and competitive advancements in science and technology galvanized hugely by the industrial revolution. This frenzy was such a pervasive seductive distraction that stole the heart of humanity from appreciating the mutual interaction and balance necessary in nature's dynamism.



## Themes

The preoccupation of poet is gentle entreaty for humanity to desist from the destruction of the environment and appreciate the self-sustaining capacity of nature and celebrate its beauty.

- Nature shares a strong mutual affinity with humanity.
- Nature imbues humanity with aesthetic considerations.
- Nature is therapeutic.
- Nature is serene, gentle and accommodating.
- Nature guarantees spiritual upliftment.
- Nature entertains.

## Some Benefits of Teaching / Learning Literature

- Literature reserves a fundamental educative function as it strives to improve the lot of humanity through exposure to knowledge in every facet of life.
- Literature makes constructive commentaries and criticism of society/life thereby informing society of its drift towards development or destruction with a view to balancing society's focus.
- Literature is celebrated for its entertainment potential; it enhances leisure and relaxation.
- Literature is a formidable tool for the propagation of history, politics and culture.
- Literature provides a diagnostic, analytic, preventive and prescriptive commentaries on/to life.
- Literature facilitates language acquisition and language learning.
- Literature broadens one's mental horizon.
- Literature is didactic in orientation.
- Literature is a tool for the preservation of culture.

(Amaechi:2005, Ibitola:2005, Fom, Mandong, Ogundare & Chirman:2002)

## Suggestion / Recommendation

- Literature as an interdisciplinary subject area is a treasured vehicle for sustainable development through environmental education.
- Literature should be accorded a core/ compulsory status as English and Mathematics at primary and secondary school levels.
- Literature should be incorporated, as a course in the General Studies Department of all tertiary institutions of learning.
- Literature should be accorded a Double Major course status in tertiary level of education.
- Literature/ Literary facilitation bodies should be established to enable the teachers to attend and contribute to workshops, seminars and conferences.
- There should be adequate motivation and material facilitation to the teaching/ learning of Literature.

## Conclusion

The appalling fact of the catastrophic extent to which, particularly, humanity have contributed to environmental devastation/ degradation necessitates/demands urgent decisive commitment to environmental education. This paper has positioned the utilization of the latent potentials of Literature in this unavoidable task.



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