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Afrofuturism and Degradation in Adaobi Onyeakagbu's When the Sun Comes

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Abstract:

The study seeks to establish the relationship between afrofuturism and ecocriticism using Adaobi Onyeakagbu's short story, When the Sun Comes. It goes further to highlight the futuristic effects of degradation in the ecosystem with the main focus on Ozone Layer depletion. Afrofuturism which is speculative in nature exposes weather predictions, life expectancy forecasts, and economic predictions and how it can affect nature, man, government, science and the eco system at large. The short story under study however shuttles between the past and the present to show the damage the depletion of the ozone layer and the removal of the sun has on the atmosphere and man in the future. The study exposes the hazardous effects of man's carelessness towards caring for his environment. The study highlights the extent of psychological torture these ecological changes have on the characters in the short story. The aim of this paper is to express the outburst of concerns eco-critics and futurists have about the continuous degenerating level of the ecosystem.

Keywords: *The paper addresses the growing concerns about Degradation of the atmosphere by Ecocritics and Afrofuturism. Adaobi Onyeakagbu's When the Sun Comes exposes a possible futuristic implication if the human species does not respond fast*

1. Introduction

Over the centuries, literary criticism has evolved; critics have employed approaches and theories to tackle societal issues. Some familiar theories and approaches include; formalism, psycho-analysis, Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism, post modernism, deconstruction, post-structuralism and reader-response. In recent times, more novel theories have developed. Some include ecocriticism, spatial theory, geocriticism and afrofuturism.

However, the adoption of a theory or critical approach depends on the critic's choice and the literary work of art under study. Adaobi Oyeakagbu's short story, *When the Sun Comes*, can be studied under the afrofuturism approach to criticism as it engages speculative subject matters and shuttles between the present and the past.

Science fiction is another name for speculative fiction and has drawn attention in the late 20th century and early 21st century. African Americans became concerned about their subject matters in the world of literature as most early works of Afro fiction focused on the four hundred years trans-Atlantic experiences with the main themes on slave trade, freedom, civil rights movement and in Black Africa, pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial theories and approaches. The globalization of the world in recent times has made science fiction blossom. This has led to the shift from earlier themes to more exciting and adventurous ones that are spatial, apocalyptic and technological in nature.

However, African Americans and Black African having flogged the issues of racism, Marxism, bad leadership, felt the need to delve into science fiction but with a touch of reality found in prose fiction. The term Afrofuturism most times is attributed to Mark Dery, as his first usage of the term in an interview with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose in the early 1990s. Dery describes afrofuturism as a form of 'Speculative fiction that treats African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno culture and, more generally, African- American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future' (180).

Sanford Biggers defines Afrofuturism as 'a way of re-contextualizing and accessing history and imagining the future of African Diaspora via science, science fiction, technology, sound, architecture, the visual and culinary arts and other more nimble and interpretative modes of research and understanding' (qtd. in Castro 124).

Biggers definition of Afrofuturism exemplifies the science fiction movie 'Black Panther' which set out to promote Black excellence in technology, art mixed with conventional cultural values of the Black Diaspora. The movie tries to paint a picture of the New Africa which has been exposed to science and flourishing well on its own without interference from the Western world.

Koshwo Eshun's assertion on Afrofuturism throws more light on Biggers' definition, as he says that 'Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projections as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken' (289).

Eshun's assertion points to the fact that Afrofuturists speculate a future for Africa with the absence of the transatlantic experience which is an African world devoid of Western influence yet characterized with technology and cultural posterity.

Afrofuturism in Black Africa has been accepted with certain reservations. There has been a belief that Afrofuturism seeks to focus on African-Americans and not the Africans in Africa. An Afrofuturist like Nnedi Okorafor, a Nigerian based in the United States of America expresses such concerns. Okorafor takes a stand in her recent Native interview, where she reveals that she writes 'African futurism not afrofuturism' (qtd. Okolo et al. n.p.). Her short story *Magical Negro*, engages Afrofuturism mixed with American culture through a criticism of racist conventions. While *Mother of Invention*, her second short story involves a strong imposition of Africanfuturism based on the geography and culture of the Black African continent, one can conclude that Nnedi Okorafor places emphasis on geographical and cultural setting while writing Afrofuturism or Africanfuturism.

This study focuses on the relationship between Ecodegradation and Afrofuturism and the possible effects of degradation of the environment in the future. Lisa Yazek's proposition of Afrofuturists' focus backs up the framework of this paper. She proposes that:

Afrofuturists artists are profoundly interested in identifying those histories of the past, present and yes, even the future that deny the black Atlantic experience. They are also profoundly interested in the power of the Afrofuturist artist to generate counter histories that reverse connections between past, present and future in a new practice of technoscientific storytelling. (298-299)

This study highlights how the continuous disastrous atrocities committed against nature and the collapse of nature. Since Afrofuturism is speculative fiction, it exposes weather predictions, life expectancy forecasts, and economic predictions too. Environmentalists continue to announce the hazardous effects of industrialization, bush burning, felling of trees, oil spillages which however, affects the ecosystem in several ways.

2. Environmental Degradation and Afrofuturism

Kusam Rani explains that 'environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources such as air, water, and soil; the destruction of ecosystems and the extinction of wildlife. It is defined as any change or disturbance to the environment perceived to be deleterious and undesirable'. (92)

The effect of degradation this study sets out to focus on is the ozone layer depletion. The Ozone layer is responsible for protecting earth from harmful ultraviolet rays. The presence of chlorofluorocarbons, hydro chlorofluorocarbons in the atmosphere is causing the ozone layer to deplete. As it will deplete, it will emit harmful radiations back to the earth.

A critical reading of Adaobi Onyeakagbu's *When the Sun Comes*, reveals a futuristic setting, Wuse, Abuja, Nigeria where the protagonist Iheomadiri narrates in the first person, therefore, exposing the current psychological and physical states of the humans and the world in the year 2351. There is a significant shuttle in her narration between the past in which she learns about through historical books and the present day 2351 AD.

The writer through the lens of Iheomadiri brings to light the possible futuristic effect of Eco degradation as a result of the depletion of the ozone layer and how it can affect the Earth in the next centuries. Depletion of the ozone layer is a problem which will affect the government, religion, science, history, nature and culture.

First, nature is life and man's continuous interaction with the natural habitat have led to several cases of wildfires, killing innumerable numbers of species, oil spillages, ozone layer depletion, gas flaring and indiscriminate disposal of industrial effluents. Nature continues to undergo negative and hazardous changes therefore, boomerangs are expected. Hence, man begins to suffer and pay for his carelessness and selfish attitudes towards nature.

In Onyeakagbu's *When the Sun Comes*, the sun is the main subject of focus. The title is drawn from the sun and is somewhat alarming as a result of the fact that the sun is as old as the earth and can always be seen smiling from the sky. In the story, we can deduce that the sun after a period of time becomes unbearably hot as result of the depletion of the ozone layer which Iheomadiri's historical tutorials informs us about. In the year 2351, the sun is last seen in the 22nd century. The continuous depletion of the ozone layer makes the radiation of the sun very high as the protagonist narrates; 'From history classes, we had learnt that the sun had been gone since the 22nd century- not that it disappeared but rather it was taken away.'

Iheomadiri's explanation above implies that the radiation from the sun becomes dangerous and life threatening which eventually leads to the removal of the sun and consequently affects the climate. Man's activities in the environment causes danger to the ecosystem and in order to fix the damage done, another aspect of nature has to suffer. Hence, prevention becomes better than cure. The sun which is responsible for so many natural phenomena like blooming of flowers, rains, plant growth is removed to prevent the survival of the man specie.

Adaobi Onyeakagbu's short story is an afrofuturistic eye opener to the dangers of ecodegradation and the psychological dangers and effects of the lack of sun as it affects the main characters and the world at large. She exposes this in her words 'people are going mad from the lack of sun...as if he knew what the sun felt like.' The government tries to mitigate the rates of suicide by creating several ministries to tackle the incessant cases of depression. Iheomadiri exposes the high level of depression and suicidal calls as she explains:

Like most of the people in the province, Odera hated his job. Our province had a terrible knack when it came to job placements. He worked in media when he felt he was more equipped to work in Education. Nonetheless, he came home most nights... As for me, I worked with a small department in wellness. My department had only been created as a result of the steady rise in suicide rates, which had doubled over the last few years. So, instead of cutting the people some slack, our

newly communist government decided to curb this by creating a phone bank that would attend to suicide calls... Needless to say; I hated my job too.

The second instance in which the transition from the present to the future materializes is religion/ scientific factors. Onyeakagbu, through her fictional character Iheomadiri explains how religion phases out in the year 2351. She explains that religion becomes a part of history as a result of a rise in science and technology after the sun leaves.

From the story, it is observed that the continuous rise in science and technology in the 21st and 22nd centuries lead to severe consequences which garnered immediate responses. Iheomadiri reveals how a Chinese factory releases very large amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere which worsens the depletion of the Ozone Layer. The effects however become damaging to human life. She narrates;

Apparently, humans had gotten tired of living in perpetual fear of being burnt up by the sun due to global warming... skin cancer, and sun-bites – a creative name for infectious sores- became very common, after a Chinese factory released very large amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. (1)

People had to wear Bedouins whenever they went outside, which were really robes made out of polychlorotrifluoroethylene materials. Bedouins were these big and Numpy, ugly pieces of clothing- that the fashion industry consciously failed to reinvent. (1)

The passage above, reiterates the incessant cases of skin cancers, as a result of greenhouse gases particularly from China which leads to the invention of Bedouins, sunscreen which scientists resort to produce to reduce the intense heat from the sun. Also, cosmetologists begin injecting people with supplementary melanin (Botox) to avoid aging and skin scarring. Iheoma highlights the stages before and during the ‘the bothering of the sun’.

In *When the Sun Comes*, Iheoma expresses the initial reactions the humans have when the sunscreen gets in the way of the sun; ‘The day the sun was finally screened was known as the Day of Black Sun- a day which used to be grandly celebrated, but eventually faded away over the years as its significance was quickly forgotten.’ However, it is ironical that a day which is set aside to celebrate man’s liberation from the burns of the sun becomes a source of depression. More so, more scientific innovations are put in place to allow man adjust to the dark atmosphere. Positively, there is improvement in the power sector, artificial vitamin D supplement for plants and man. Tubeys- test tube babies and other innovations. Despite these inventions, the people are suicidal and still find themselves in depressive situations. Iheoma explains:

It is either that, Iheoma, ‘he would say, ‘or people are going mad from the lack of sun’ I would always laugh whenever he said this, not because it was funny, but because of the way he said it- as if he knew what the sun felt like. We had both been born in the time when there was no sun. So, there being no sun, in fact, our reality, saying there was a lack of sun implied that he had ever felt its presence in the first place... Anyone who had been alive when the sun shined down was long dead. (1)

The above extract explains further how man as a specie and nature need each other. Nature is God’s gift to man and no matter how advanced science becomes; nature is still an important factor to facilitate our existence. Science is artificial and not pure like nature. Hence, the people feel something that makes them whole is missing.

AdaobiOnyeakagbu’s and other environmentalists seek to address the issues of ecodegradation in the atmosphere and the possible dangers and effects which are manifesting in the 21st century. She adopts to express these concerns through afrofuturism, exploring possible after-effects of man’s continuous dangerous practices in a bid to advance precautionary and preventive measures rather than replenish-able and solvable measures. The government of the day worsens the psychological state of the people by being hard on them rather than help them adjust. The author presents a communist and dictatorial government amidst the darkness which tortures the citizens. In her words, she reveals: Like most of the people in the province, Odera hated his job. Our province had a terrible knack when it came to job placements. He worked in media when he felt he was more equipped to work in education. Nonetheless, he came home most nights, like this one, brimming with various theories about how the system was failing. (1)

As for me, I worked with a small department in wellness. My department had only been created as a result of the steady rise in suicidal rates... Our newly communist government decided to curb this by creating a phone bank that would attend to suicide calls. (1)

Odera had two running theories about the increasing rates of suicide. First, and most obvious, was the extremist government. There was no need to dictate what type of job people did or the kind of life people lived. Even though we weren’t exactly sure how things were done years before, he believed that life would have been easier then, when people were allowed to lead their own lives. (1)

The extract above captures the fact that governments from previous centuries were not dictatorial in nature. The removal of the sun with time brings frustration to the government and its citizens. The daily view of the black sky produces psychological pain to the citizens and the dictatorial and communist government only worsens the state of the minds. The government establishes the wellness ministry to curb the increasing rates of suicide. In previous centuries, the government allows citizens led their lives. Career choices were to be made by individuals and not the government. These situational changes worsen their psychological states.

The re-exposure of the sun seems like a glimmer of hope for the 24th century humans; as they look forward to embracing something new as opposed to the darkness they feel psychologically and physically. Although, there is a sigh of relief for Iheoma, Odera and the other humans, fear of the unknown creeps in as they do not know what to expect after the sun has been revealed. However, they make up their minds to enjoy the moment while it lasts. They express their ‘Carpe Diaem’ philosophy of life. The writer expressed these ponders as Iheomadiri says, ‘Excitement of perhaps anxiety, did not let us sleep for so long.’ (2)

The sun reveal comes with some form of positivity as the rate of suicidal calls reduces, as Iheoma puts it: 'My otherwise busy line had hardly received any calls at work today, which was very unusual. I figured it was because people didn't know how to act or what to do on the first day with the sun.' (2)

The writer also reveals the fact that the government shows some positivity towards the reveal. This can be seen when the dictatorial government grants Odera the opportunity to 'put a cartoon in the papers that I had sent in for publication months ago. Do you know how often they let you put in your own cartoon? Never!' (2) This brings a level of optimism to the main characters in the story.

The sudden change in the actions and psyche of the government and citizens express how important nature is to man. Hence, the eco-critics call to protect the environment from further danger is re-emphasized. Man has to make tremendous efforts to prevent further depletion of the ozone layer, death of important species in order to prevent disasters. Afrofuturism in this study, have helped to give a glimpse of what the ecosystem can become in the coming centuries if drastic preventive measures are not undertaken.

3. Conclusion

Numerous researches carried out on the subject of degradation have shown that the ecosystem is in great danger. These findings have been ravaging the earth for decades with speculations about the degenerating level of the ozone layer, polluted waters, and indiscriminate disposal of industrial effluents and how it is affecting the lifespan of the man specie. Adaobi Onyeakagbu's *When the Sun Comes* is one out of many works of literary art which have expressed serious concerns for the wellbeing of species in the ecosystem. Afrofuturists reveal predictions which have shown to be that the earth might gradually reach the deadly phase of degradation if nothing is done to prevent or salvage these issues. *When the Sun Comes*, draws a futuristic picture of the earth in the next two centuries to come and further exposes the psychological torture that it comes with. The study highlighted the advancement of science and technology and hammered on the ultimate role of nature in the environment. This paper calls on man to re-evaluate his activities in the environment to reduce the rate of the ozone layer depletion, indiscriminate disposal of industrial effluents, oil spillages.

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