ANALYSIS OF *EKE – UNE*: AN ECOCRITTCISM APPROACH

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ABSTRACT
The study was carried out to analyse the text Eke-Une looking at the ecocriticism approach. Eke-Une is an Igbo epic poem written by Emmanuel Obike but without specific date of publication. Poetry is known to be a genre of literature that exposes the aesthetic use of language and portrays captivating themes. The text was analysed, identifying the reasons behind the war and dispute that marred the peaceful co-existence between the people of Isiekwe community and the boa constrictor (Eke une). However, the paper created awareness and broadened the knowledge of the people on the importance of living peacefully in any environment one finds oneself. The literary theory adopted by the researcher as a base for the study is ecocritism theories of Cheryll Glotefelly and Lawrence Bull in 1980 which sees to the relationship and interaction of nature in any given environment especially how they are represented in literary works. The methodology was literary analysis.

Introduction

Literature is a written work of creativity that expresses an author's imagination, experience or thought to raise one emotion or the other. According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (5th ed) 1999, literature is written works, especially those regarded as having artistic merit. Okodo (1992:20) defines literature as the artistic manipulation of word or language producing oral or written work that could be drawn from facts or imagination. As creative imagination, literature can be structured in form of drama, poetry or prose (fiction and non-fiction)

Specifically, poetry is an integral part of literature with some prominent distinguishing factors from other genres of literature. Poetry itself is concerned with aesthetic use of language to express deep imagination, thought or experience. To make these things (imagination, thought or experience) unique, they are structured in lines and stanzas, that they may be sung as songs and hymns. Akporobaro (2012:34) sees it as the imaginative compositions distinguished by their beauty of forms and expressions (language). All these mean that, poetry is not just imagination, thought or experience put down in a paper but more on the aesthetic use of language which Akporobaro (2012) calls "beauty of forms of expressions".

Literature Review

Literature is used to describe any written work of creativity that expresses an author's imagination, experience or thought which can raise one emotion or the other. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary define literature as written works of artistic merit. Okodo (1992:20) defines literature as the artistic manipulation of word or language producing oral or written work that could be drawn from facts

or imagination. Nwadike (1992:11) defines literature as works or arts that express one aspect of life or the other. In a larger perspective, Anakoro (2021:134) says that literature as a whole provides diverse avenues towards the preservation and transmission of man's cultural values and history. This can only be done by choosing these cultural values as themes in any genre of literature – drama, prose or poetry.

However, poetry is all about poems structured in lines and stanzas, a distinguishing factor from other genres of literature. Prominently, poetry itself is concerned with aesthetic use of language to express deep imagination, thought or experience. Ajani (2008:34) sees poetry as expression of feelings and animation of emotion. Nnabuihe (1999:37) states that, it is the central idea that form the content and theme of a poem. Okoye (2005:2) sees poetry as a piece of writing where deep feelings or experiences are expressed through the medium of language. The use of language in unique in poetry writing because, the emotion, message and aesthetic value is exhibited by the way the poet is able to manipulate his language (words and sentences) and manipulation here is nothing but artistic style of writing as Okodo (1992) says. Again, the message embedded in the theme of a poem may be the poet's imagination, thought, experience or ideas which he/she wants to share with the general public, either to create awareness, teach or correct, as the case may be. These thoughts, imaginations, experience, etc. may be on nature (the creator and the created, life and death, peace and war, folk and follies, etc.). All these put together determine the type of emotion that will be evoked in the poem as the Oxford Minineference Diction (1995:311) says that poetry is the poet's word of quality that touches and pleases the mind. All these definitions reveal the interwoven state of poetry and the mind of the reader that makes Mbah and Mbah (2007:398) advices poets to have anticipated the workings of the human mind while writing their texts. To mention the working of the mind as Mbah and Mbah says, Nwibe (2009:3) enumerates things of the mind as emotional outburst, thought, beauty, imagination, etc. which poetry is all about.

The Synopsis of the Text Eke-Une

Eke-Une is an Igbo epic poem authored by Emmanuel Obike. It is the longest poem in the history of Igbo written anthology. The book is made up of one thousand, five hundred and two lines which are divided into ten chapters, printed by G.S.S Press Port-Harcourt but published by University Publishing Company, Onitsha. Unfortunately, it has no date of publication. The lines are numbered for easy identification and appreciation. The story line is based on some natural phenomena in the Isieke Community in Ibeku Umuahia, Abia State of Nigeria. The story is on the relationship and interactions between the Chief character boa constrictor 'Eke une' and the entire people of Isieke community. The community was benefitting from the boa as it supplies them with water sufficiently in the lake – 'une' that they have their rainy season, the time of farming and other activities best done during rainy season. When the lake retracts (dries up), it leaves behind other smaller animals (fossils) that serve as food to other higher animals, and this time, the community has their dry season. Secondly, the boa constrictor vomits venom called diamond which gives light to the Isieke community and there is peaceful and mutual co-existence and relationship between the two parties (boa and the entire community of Isieke).

However, the cordial interaction and co-habitation was marred when a hunter from the community stole away the boa's diamond. The boa through the openings of the hunter's bag traced the diamond to the community and started swallowing the people. This caused war and disunity between the boa constrictor and the people of Isieke. When the boa started to swallow the people, the community fought back by employing the services of French war fighters who bombed the boa with their war plane, fortunately the bomb did not get the boa, so he retreated to the deepest level of the lake and the people were also tired of fighting, and tried to appease the boa with some items according to the tradition of the land. After that, they evoked the boa to the surface level of the lake and the normal and cordial interaction was restored.

Theoretical Framework

The model used to guide this study is the ecocriticism approach. The theory started in the later part of the 20th century all through the early part of the 21st century. It goes by many names – literary ecology, eco poetics, environmental literary criticism, green cultural studies and finally literature goes green. Joseph Meeker in 1972 call it literary ecology. In 1978, William Rueckert called it literature ecology which he defined as the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. Lawrence Buell defined ecocriticism

as the study of the relationship between literature and the environment while Cheryll Glotfelty defined ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. So, bringing all these definitions together, Lawrence Buell and Cheryll Glotfelty in 1980 concluded that ecocriticism is the study of the relationship and interaction between nature and the physical environment especially, how they are represented in literary texts. In other words, ecocriticism aims to evaluate how humans interact with other nature world with the goal of improving how nature treats the environment.

Generally, what made ecocriticism to stand apart from other literary criticisms is that, rather than concentrating on literary works alone, it goes further to examine literary works and the environmental interactions/relationships that appear in the literary works. It pays much attention to non-human objects/issues that have traditionally been pushed to the background, those marginal elements and how they are represented in a given literary work. So, ecocriticism according to Buell begins with high interest in real presentation and examination of how nature is depicted in literary works thereby raising public awareness of attitude towards the natural world.

Natural Phenomena in the Text

The major natural phenomena that appear in the text includes the boa constrictor 'Eke Une, the green lake 'Une' and the 'Ntụrụkpa', and the effect these natural phenomena have on the people of Isieke community and the entire environment generally.

The 'Une' Lake

The poem gives insight on the attribute of the lake, especially how it emerges in the rainy season and dries up in the dry season. The width and breadth of it increase to an overwhelming level with some effects on the people and environment. The community hold it in high esteem in that, they refer to it as 'god' – a deity they worship, reverence and believe in. the reverence accorded to this lake is because they believe that it is the lake that holds the water the boa constrictor' 'Eke' vomits and they are able to have rainy season for their farming. When the boa vomits water, the lake will be filled with water (rainy season) for the people to embark on serious farming period.

Ewoo Une nne m!
Ewoo my dear Une

Nke na-ata n'ọkọchị
That dries up in the dry season

Na-erukwa n'udu mmiri
And erupts in rainy season

I ji Isieke mere mbara
That has Isieke as base

(Page 1, lines 18 – 21)

The myth surrounding 'Une' lake is said to be enigmatic because the water erupts so sufficiently to encircle the entire Isieke community in the rainy season.

Towe iyi une nne m
Increase waters of Une my dear

Sọpụta Ojezuru Igbo
Overflow touch the entire Igbo

(Page 1, lines 8 & 9)

The mysterious seasonal eruption and retraction of water of the lake makes the people to consecrate the lake and worship it as a deity by performing some rituals and sacrifices into the lake. They perform sacrifice and ritual through the service of a priest that takes care of such traditional practices based on the people's indigenous knowledge and wisdom emerge as their experience/experiment to make sense of the workings of their communities or individual, and the interactions with the social and natural world which they live (George, 2004:10). The 'Une' water is useful to the community for farming and other domestic activities at home. Though nobody drinks the water, but when the water retracts, it leaves behind some fossils which serve as food for lower animals around the lake, and to the people of Isieke community as a diety.

Chi ndị ala ma, Isieke
god of the land of Isieke

Ọ bụ gị mere ka mkpekere
you made the fossils

Ghara baghara vughuru
spread everywhere in plentiful

N'ugwu Ameke
on the hills of Ameke

(Page 2, lines 28 – 31)

Eke Une

This is a boa constrictor which is responsible for the seasonal eruption and retraction of the water of 'Une' lake. The Boa constrictor is a very dangerous species of snake which ordinarily inhabits in the jungle. It is capable of depositing a substance (venom) loosely, referred to as a diamond, which illuminates its path as it searches for food at night. The hard skin of the boa serves as protection to it as Nnabuihe (2004:207) says that the boa's skin is so hard that no arrows from any archer no matter the dexterity can pierce it.

Eke na-ehi egwurugwu
'Eke' that forms rainbow

Nke na-agbọpụtakwa diamond n'abalị
That vomits diamond in the night

Chi ndị ala ma, Isieke
The god of the land of Isieke

(Page 1, lines 26 – 28)

Eke na-ehi egwurugwu
'Eke' that forms rainbow

O highasịala ikpa nri abalị
It comes to catch night prey

(Page 2, lines 50 – 52)

Eke na-ehi egwurugwu
Eke that forms the rainbow

Akpụrụla nwa ọnwa ya
Has dragged his moon child

Wee sọrọ isi
And moves here and there

Hiri ọhịa
Inside the forest

Fuu kpum n'une
From there to the lake

(Page 3, lines 71 – 75)

All these show that the boa is capable of causing the rainbow to appear through its emission of its saliva, and the Igbo people believe that rainbow is coined from the boa and its saliva 'eke' and 'egwurugwu' giving us ekenegwurugwu. The boa is also a nocturnal creature that is why it vomits diamond to illuminate its environment in the night so as to be able to catch some prey and the diamond is referred to as the moon (ọnwa) in line 72.

Ntụrụkpa

This is an ordinary Igbo edible plant which its leaves are used to prepare native soup. The tree is symbolic in the Igbo culture in the sense that, it is used as medicinal plant both spiritually and physically, it is also used to mark boundaries between one portion of land and the other, may be due to its long-life span. In the poem under study, the people of Isieke community used this ntụrụkpa tree to mark the boundary between 'une' lake and the neighbouring villages. Both the people of Isieke and this boa recognize and honour this boundary, the people cannot cross over to the other side for any reason and the boa on its side cannot cross over to the side of the community, that becomes a kind of covenant between the Isieke community and the boa.

N'ụtụtụ ndị ichie ala m In
the morning the elders of my land

Wee were ntụrụkpa gaa n'une
Used ntụrụkpa to fence the lake

Werekwa ụdọ
Also used wire

Na ọji gbara asaa
And kolanut of seven pieces

Ọgbụgba ndụ adaala
There comes the covenant

(Page 6, lines 151 – 153)

The poem shows that the boa keeps to this boundary covenant because, in its subsequent appearances, he always drops its daughter

(atụmabalarịa) at that ntụrụkpa tree for Ulku (the husband) to meet her there and the daughter does not pass the ntụrụkpa tree to the other side of the community.

Kokororo ro! O wee highasịa
Very early! It wakes up

Wee kwọrọ ada ya n'olu
And carry its daughter on the neck

Ọ kwọsakwara ya n'alaka ntụrụkpa
Drops her at the branch of ntụrụkpa

(Page 22, lines 605 – 607)

So after the interaction, it is revealed that the daughter (atụmbalarịa) goes back to the lake 'une', from that point.

Ọ laghachiri n'ogbu mmiri na-asị
He goes back to the river saying

Ada mezirinụ!
Daughter that did well

Anya bịa lere! bụ
Eyes should come and see

Atụmbalarịa nke tukwu na ntụrụkpa
Atụmbalarịa that stoops on the ntụrụkpa

(Page 22, lines 611 – 614)

Ecocriticism and Eke-Une

As said earlier, *Eke-Une* is the only known epic poem in the history of Igbo anthology. The book/poem is divided into ten chapters of one stanza, and with one thousand, five hundred and two lines. The story is all about the boa constrictor (eke une) that lives in the green lake (une) and his activities/interaction with the environment in which he lives. The poem portrays this boa constrictor as having a mutual relationship with the other occupants of that environment, till there was a dispute that led to war which both the boa and the people of Isieke community paid the costly prize. The people of Isieke benefit maximally from the boa, for instance, the boa vomits water to fill the lake and water the land so that the people of Isieke will have their rainy season, a time for farming. This aids their planting activities so greatly as they are mainly farmers.

Abadaba iyi ukwu
Long vast river

Nke na-aku otuto
That attracts glory

Eleghe igwe na-akụ
As the sky does

Nke na-ego uzo
The one that is greenish

Eleghe ahịhịa ndụ *As the green grass*

Nke na-alọ ụwa
The one that has come back to life

Mgbe ji na-eru
When the yam is growing

Towe iyi une nnem
increase my dear une river

Sọpụtara o jezuru Igbo
Overflow the entire Igbo

(Page 1, lines 1 – 9)

This shows how excited the people are whenever the boa vomits/releases water to the lake which eventually water the whole land and for their farming and whenever this is done, the people of Isieke community worship and make some sacrifice to the boa constrictor (eke) because they take it as a deity that takes care of farming season in their land. Not only that, that lake when retracts leaves behind some living organisms which serve as food to the lower animals. The boa secretes a substance called diamond which serves as a source of light to the entire community.

Eke na-ehi egwurugwu
The boa that makes rainbow

Nke na-agbọ pụtakwa dịamọnd n'abalị
That vomits diamond in the night

(Page 1, lines 26 – 27)

Eke na-eyi dịamọnd ahụ
The boa that lays the diamond

N'etiti ndaeri
In the midnight

(Page 3, lines 98 – 99)

Ugbu a, e mere ka dịamọnd a
Now that the diamond has been made

Ghọọ ọkụ na-enwuru ọha n'ama
To be the light that shines in the way

Wee wekwaara igwe na mbidi
And shines to the sky and land

Ghaa ya okirikiri rue n'igwe
And goes it round to the sky

(Page 6, lines 177 – 180)

This is evidence that there is peaceful co-existence and interaction between the boa constrictor and the people of Isieke community. But the peaceful atmosphere is disrupted when the hunter steals away the diamond and the boa follows the glimpse of light from the hunter's perforated bag to trace him to the community and starts swallowing human beings.

Ọnwa a sị gị apụtala apụta
moon, you were asked not to come out

Asị gị maa gugururu kpụrụ
Were you asked to stretch yourself

Lee i ghoole ọnụ
See, you have opened your mouth

Ndị añụmañụ eriela ọsọ
Drunkards ran away

(Page 9, lines 212 – 215)

Anu ụrụ nke na-eyi diamond
Fleshy animal that lays diamond

Akwa gị awaala,
Your boundary is broken,

Hapụrụ anyị ụmụ mmadụ
Leave the people alone

Mara gugururu zuru ike
Rest and stretch no more

(Page 9, lines 216 – 219)

This ugly situation continues until the community appease the deity by making some sacrifice according to the custom and tradition of the land.

However, before the reconciliation/appeasement, the poem reveals how the Isieke people invite the French fighters who bombs the boa these three times, forgetting all they have been benefitting from the boa and the reason why the boa passes the boundary (the ntụrụkpa) to swallow the people.

Mgbe ihe a tụrụ ha n'ọnụ
When they were confused

Weere ọsọ kpọkue France
Speedly call on the France

Ha rịọrọ ka ha weta ụgbọ elu
To bring their airplane

Ka e were bombua eke ahụ
And bomb that boa

Ha kpebiri na ndị French
They agreed that French people

Na ndị Isieke ga-eme
And Isieke people will connive

(Page 10, lines 243 – 247)

On the other hand, the boa releases saliva to the war plane and the atmosphere is filled/covered with smoke which destroys the plane and hazardous to human lives and the entire ecosystem.

Eke akpujue asụ n'ọnụ
The boa gathered saliva in the mouth

Chiriririm, igwe ahịola anwụrụ
Pour it out, smoke filled the sky

Ugbo elu ezekasịa
And the plane destroyed

(Page 10, lines 275 – 277)

The conflict made the boa unable to release water again to fill the lake and so the waters of the lake retracts and leaving the whole environment so filthy as to cause severe inconveniences on the people.

Ma mgbe une tasịrị
But when the lake retracts

Ọnụọba tasịkwara
The depth also dries

E wee hụ nkwọ ntadị ọtụtụ
The small fossils were seen

Ka ha na-erugharị n'ebe
As they move around

Ahịhịa ndụ na-eto
Green leaves grow also

Na-achọ iburu awọ
Want to cover the frog

N'ebe mmiri une diburịị
Where the water of the lake was

(Page 17 & 18, lines 469 – 475)

Despite the troublous times, the poem shows reconciliation which follows immediately after the conflict and the normal interaction and co-existence in the environment quickly restored.

Eke wee malite ịgbọ agbọọ
The boa starts vomiting

Koho, koho, ghoo gho
Koho, koho, ghoo ghoo!

Mmiri une wee si ya n'ọnụ na-apụta
Waters of the lake coming out his mouth

N'echi ya une agbajue
By tomorrow the lake is filled with water

Wee na-ebugharịkwa ndị nọ
Turning the people

N'ụgbọ ogwe osisi
In the wooden boat

(Page 19, lines 529 – 534)

In a peaceful environment, the occupants really enjoy their living. During the war between the Isieke community and the boa, the water in the lake dries up because the boa refused to vomit water into the lake, and the people of Isieke on the other hand were unable to farm nor carry out some of their domestic activities because of lack of water, and that's why ecocriticism advocates for mutual relationship and interaction in any given environment. The poem equally depicts the food chain among the occupants of the environment. In ecology, it is through this food chain (processes by which food is produced and consumed) that some inhabitants of the community live. When the lake is full, the people farm and produce food and when the lake retracts, it leaves behind some smaller organisms which serve as food to the higher animals.

Bịa hụrụ ha
Come and see them

Ma oko ma ugo
Both eagles and other birds

Ka ha na-avụkpo
As they are gathering together

Ha weere nwayoọ na-atụtụrụ
They are quietly picking

Ma ụmụ ha ma idide, laa n'elu
Both their children, the earthworm, on top of
the tree

It is good to note that every level of war or dispute leaves many casualties, even some innocent people as victims. Those that are alive will start building up themselves with little or nothing in their hand.

N'ikpe azụ igwe nnụnụ lọghachiri
At last the birds came back

N'elu ikwule wee na-ele
On top of high place looking

Ụmụ na-añụ ara: ha na-akpaịrị ha
Sucking children insulting them

Anya ufu na-ele ọkụkọ
As the hawk looks at the fowls

Nke a mere ka "ja banu"
This brought lamentations

Na-ada n'ọnụ nne na nna niile
From all the parents

This pain and lamentation may continue for a long time before the people will pick up with life activities again and that is the reason why the ecocriticism believes in mutual co-existence in a given environment so that lives and properties, even the entire ecosystem will be well preserved. The adverse effect of war and conflict cannot be overemphasized. War brings lamentations, mourning, crying and weeping for lost and destruction of lives and properties, at times, people are forced out of their dwelling places, communities or countries to be refugees in an unknown place.

O sịwakwa n'ọnụ ọbaa
He is from the caves

Wee laa mba ebighị ebi
To a land eternal

Wee lakpuo n'osimiri ime ala
To the depth of the sea

Na ndụ na-abụghị n'ọnwu
In life not in death

(Page 51, lines 1488 – 1491)

The poem shows how the suckling children are abandoned, the owl and hawk pursuing the chicks (proverbial) for prey and lamentations by the elderly ones (fathers and mothers). That is the reason why this school of thought advocates for a peaceful co-habitation among all living organisms both small and large in any environment.

Conclusion

The write-up concerned itself with the Igbo epic poem called Eke-Une, written by Emmanuel Obike. In view of the study, various definitions of literature were made and later narrowed it down to poetry which is the centre of this study. The analysis of the poem was done from the ecocriticism point of view, showcased some prominent natural phenomena like the boa constrictor 'Eke Une' which is believed to be the only source of water to the green lake 'Une'. Whenever it vomits, the lake will be filled with water and that results in rainy season and when the boa swallows back the water, the lake will dry up (retraction) resulting in dry season and that is how they (the Isieke community) get their dry and rainy seasons. The study revealed that the Isieke community in Umuahia Ibeku, Abia state serve and worship the boa and the lake as a deities. The next feature is the 'Une' lake which its width and breadth increases to an overwhelming level and causes some discomfort to the inhabitants of the community. The lake is said to be so deep as to house the boa constrictor, it emerges and retracts according to time and season. Finally, the poem explains the 'Ntụrụkpa' tree as a tree which is used as a boundary between one portion of land and the other. It indicates boundaries and land demarcation (that is a point which one area ends and another begins).

The poem was analysed and looked into from the perspective of the ecocriticism approach whose concern is to examine the relationships and interactions that exist amongst humans and other nature in a given environment, especially, as represented in the literary works of authors. Various areas and aspects of these interactions and relationships were brought out and analysis showed that it is better to maintain a peaceful co-existence in a given environment than disagreement and quarrelling. It is only when this is done, that the inhabitants of the community/environment (both small and large) will benefit from one another.

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