



Environmental Pollution and Degradation in Bode Sowande's Mammy Water's Wedding

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Abstract

Original Research Article

The monumental hazard on the environment is what cannot be overlooked in any society as natural disasters keep escalating in different nations of the world. Nigeria as a country cannot be indifferent to this global phenomenon of environmental discourse. This study examines the representation of the environment as embodied in Bode Sowande's drama and how ecological issues are projected in it. The qualitative study approach is adopted in this work as it allows an in-depth study of the subject. The research is essentially textual analysis. Thus, the research materials used include texts by different authors on the subject matter, journals, magazines, Internet sources, and relevant unpublished works. The theory of eco-criticism is also applied in this study. With this theory, the researcher is able to discover the contributions of the literary artist to environmental discourse. The researcher discovers at the end of the study that Bode Sowande is one of the Nigerian artists that write to help protect nature. He projects the impacts of environmental degradation on the nation, Nigeria, in particular.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, environmental degradation, Nigerian drama, Bode Sowande, environmental discourse.

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Introduction

Pollution is one of the challenges with which Nigeria and many other nations of the world are battling. Man met the environment in form of air, water and land clean and uncontaminated. Gradually, man has succeeded in changing all these with his nefarious activities. The reasons behind these are not far-fetched and eco-critics are campaigning against any form of pollution and degradation of the earth. This is because man ploughs curiously through the earth without regard to land, air and water which are the three components of the environment (Sajini Faith Iwejingi, 2011). Bode Sowande, like the rest of

the environmental writers, uses his work to explore the activities of man as they corrode the earth. This study explores how Bode Sowande explores environmental thematic in his play Mammy Water's wedding.

Synopsis of the Play

Bode Sowande's *Mammy Water's Wedding* (2014) is a marriage of two elements: water and earth. It is a theatrical externalisation of a folktale that centres on the fashioning of a unique marriage between the earth and water. In his remark on the play, Sowande notes that the idea of the play is based on his childhood experience



and superstitious belief about mermaids who are hybrid of humans and fish. The play accounts for a man named Akinla, who is trapped in the sea and finds himself in the midst of mermaids. Akinla, and the mermaid, Tarella, soon get enchanted and plan to get married, a symbolic union between earth and water. However, human activities in the environment are their only obstacle. What Sowande does is to use the metaphysics of the Yoruba world to preach unity between the earth and water. He notes that the tale dwells on 'green balance' that the world needs at this crucial age.

Folktales among the Yoruba, as well as other African societies, are means of passing over tradition and customs from one generation to the other. Basically, folktales are grouped into myths, legends and fables. They are told colourfully with philosophical proverbs, songs and historical allusions. Bode Sowande deploys the Yoruba myth and folktale medium to express his concern about the environment to the Nigerian nation, using Lagos as a setting. Sesan Azeez Akinwunmi (2014) argues that while modernisation seems to be eroding the performance of folklores, Yoruba folktales are still evident in music, drama, prose fiction, poetry and film. Agboola, *et al* (2023) say that oral narratives are of great benefits to modern storytelling and agree that orature is a very viable tool that can be deployed in solving ecological issues. The use of the style by Sowande is of great importance to the preservation of the Yoruba rich cultural heritages. It has also helped him to convey the powerful message of what it takes to keep the environment pure.

The Bond and Conflict between Land and Water

Scientists generally hold the belief that the earth has a higher percentage of water. The human body consists of over 90% of water. Water is the source of food for man, and man himself is a product of water. Man, in general, depends on water. Malin Falkenmark (2010) argues that water is a key substance to life in both human and societal life. Water, to her, determines where people build houses and locate cities. Water is the key operator in human body, vegetation and

landscape generally. In pursuing the relationship between man and the environment, Sowande creates a bond between the physical and the spiritual. The physical is the earth and it is the world of Akinla. The spiritual is the sea and it is the world of Tarella. Both must marry in order to unite the relationship between earth and water. Sowande argues that water is pleased if treated well as is seen when the song of Akinla attracts the mermaids, and sad when treated badly as seen in Adagun-Odo's later experience in the play. The bond of the earth and sea is the call of the eco-critics as they write to demand that man should please manage the environment well and not damage it. This is because whichever the source of pollution, man is always at the receiving end.

Anantha, *et al* (2014) observe that the relationship between the elements of land and water has become so complex and man is ill-equipped to handle the situation. The central conflict between land and the sea is the abuse of the sea by man. The Pristine Sea Magazines Scientists (2011) did a study of the ways man pollutes the ocean. It observed that people assumed that no matter how much trash and chemicals humans dump into the sea, the effects would be negligible. Their findings reveal that pollution and degradation have increased dramatically in the past three centuries due to industrial discharge and waste from farm produce. The damaging effect of these is the battle between man and water.

This is the thesis of Sowande in this play. The play has five parts: each part has its meanings. Sowande begins the play by showing us the pristine nature of the sea, or what we might call the sea life. He describes Tarella's Pageant as where we have the beauty of the environment in its naturalness. The environment is described thus: 'Tarella's courtyard is moon-blue in colour motif. We have a feeling of space and elegance. We see lights fading on and off without any harshness...' (1). This pictures the sea in its purest form and this is the original state of the sea. Akinla, the protagonist, has just become conscious of his new and strange environment. In wonderment, he cries out:

'Did I really make it to heaven?

When did I arrive?

Are you celestial creatures of unending
happiness?

What have I done to deserve this red carpet
treatment?

Red carpet?

Red?

I see no colour red on this floor' (3)

The amazement in which he finds himself makes him behold the beauty of nature as if he is in heaven. Sowande succeeds in showing us how beautiful our world is. Not until he is told that he is not in heaven that he soon begins to entertain fear of his whereabouts. We are intimated of Akinla's support for nature immediately and the niceties of the beautiful sea creatures. It is the song of Akinla that attracts the sea creatures:

Tarella: The moon was at play and we were at play. It was a mighty frolic and then I heard you sing. I came closer with my friends but I forgot to shut my roof windows and you fell through (8).

The celestial bodies are happy to have a representative of land among them, even one who cherishes the sea for that matter. But Akinla would want to leave for earth immediately. Tarella, while convincing Akinla to stay with them for few more days, makes him see reasons why he should. Akinla himself could not deny the love he has for nature:

Tarella: Can't I ask you to stay here much longer?

Think of your rough road.

Then consider our marvel pavements.

Think of your din of voices, then consider our melody of tunes.

The lavender of all seasons is better than the scent of decay.

You talk of fruits of earth,

But remember where the orchards draw their mixtures from.

Rivers, springs, streams, lakes, and lagoons under deserts,

Our gifts to the earth that came from us.

Before you came we have always been.

From us you came

Even now our outer fringes you spoil with things that destroy.

What is in the world that you are afraid of this one?

What is in the world that you hold this garden scorn? (22)

Akinla: Wine I love, and I admire the magic of the sun in the grapes

Is that not enough joy in the fruits of the earth?

I live my world. I love the earth.

.....

Yes it is true that from water we came,

But why should I go back to the womb of the past? (23)

After much persuasion not to leave the sea, Tarella who is already in love with Akinla, offers a union by going into the earth. This pleases Akinla, but he is cautious of his own world:

Akinla: You will come to my world?

Is our smoke not the plume of poison?

While yours is incense

You will come to my world?

Tarella: Ours is the marble.

Akinla: And mine is the granite.

And my world calls you?

Tarella: It is not your world that calls, it is your song. It is you friend (28)

As Tarella hopes for a better world or union, she says:

Tarella: A song from a man so different

With his pride for his roots!

I must for a moment know his world, which I already sense.

My world a smooth carpet,

Your world the unbeaten track,

It's future, a harvest of good dreams. (29)

Sowande implores that if there is a good understanding between the earth and sea, then the world will be a better place. Akinla is so fascinated that he wishes he could travel between the two worlds. Both Akinla and Tarella agree that Tarella visits the earth as a new born and both shall meet to marry when she is 24 years old on earth. However, the battle of the earth and sea continues on land as man begins to degrade the sea by dumping garbage into it. This has been the battle Akinla has been having with Adagun-Odo. This commences when we see Mama Eleja, Akinla's mother, who for four weeks, is at the sea and everyone thinks she is mad including her husband, as she is being persuaded to go home. The picture of the mother's love for her child is so great and she would not succumb to the sea and let it take her only child. She vehemently insists that she must be left alone at the sea shore. The hired men that are paid to help carry her could do little. Akinla appears from the sea and it shocks everyone. The three hired men flee for their lives. Mama Eleja soon convinces herself that the person she is seeing is not a ghost and soon there is celebration.

People see Akinla as no ordinary human anymore. A neighbour begs him to grant her a child. Adagun-Odo comes to inform him of the successful delivery of his daughter. It is accounted that the mother has been in labour for long, and on the arrival of Akinla, there is a swift delivery. Akinla and Adagun-Odo are always at loggerheads. From their interactions in the play, one is not in support of the other's argument:

Adagun odo: Akinla, my champion debater

Akinla: It is not a debate, Adagun-Odo

Adagun-Odo: Not a debate, did you say? Not a debate?

Listen my people, if you see money will you refuse it?

Others: No!

Adagun-Odo: Good.

And so I told Akinla to join me in my enterprise.

A young man like him....

Akinla: And your business? Do you still do it?

Adagun odo: If people do it, I still do it.

You see my people, I am a waste disposer.

Solid waste and the sea is my dump

Akinla: Then you must leave (51-52)

This has been the bone of contention between the two of them. Sowande uses the face of Adagun-Odo to represent those that pollute the ocean by throwing refuse into it. His intention is to call attention to the activities of water pollutants in their bid to make money. Yet, they do not see the damage they are causing the society. Little wonder when Akinla says 'It is no small matter'. Adagun-Odo's thinking is totally different:

Adagun-Odo: How can it be a small matter, drowning and reappearing after one month!

Akinla: I mean waste disposal into the sea (54)

In a bid to make Adagun-Odo stop his negative attitude towards the ocean, he deliberately gives the daughter of Adagun-Odo a name that would prick his heart:

Your baby's name-call will wrestle that conscience of yours without end if you continue to disrespect the sea. (57)

Akinla is not in support of Adagun-Odo's waste disposal business as it pollutes both land and sea. Sowande portrays to the society the damaging activities of those who pollute the sea. He is not slow to add that Adagun-Odo is in business with others who are in power or much more powerful than he is. The fact, again, is that Sowande presents Adagun-Odo to us as somebody with conscience. However, he is more concerned with the money he makes from his waste disposal business despite the detrimental environmental effects.

The metaphysical world reveals to us the importance of the elements of Fire, Earth, Air and Water as each chants its usefulness and effect to the world. This is all in Akinla's dream. The earth provides a sound warning to the people of the world that they can enjoy nature, but in doing that they need to be careful for she is the womb and tomb. Here, Sowande uses the

traditional riddle form as each of the elements posts to Akinla the riddles about itself. To these questions or riddles, Akinla provides answers. Sowande is able to show us the importance of each of the elements to the world and, at the same time, their other side. The dance of the elements is highly symbolic to the development of the play as it brings to the fore the other side of the elements. It also gives the warning that if the elements are not well managed, man would feel the effects.

It is at this moment that Adagun-Odo passes by. He has just gone early in the morning to deposit waste into the sea as his usual. However, Adagun-Odo refuses all reasons as he is bent on making more money. He goes ahead to offer bribe to Akinla who is against his idea of polluting the sea. Adagun-Odo gets the right response:

Adagun-Odo: Haba, Akinla, I am not that bad. I am only a business man, up very early in the morning, going to the market where money makes many profits. Why don't you always trust me, Akinla? And now answer truly, Akinla, my friend, how are you this morning?

Akinla: those boxes are nothing but waste. Special types of waste.

Adagun Odo: And when did you develop the taste of the pig that must show an interest in every waste dump... (68-69)

He is so lackadaisical that he adds:

What do I do wrong if I use oceans as the burial ground for industrial waste! Look at the sea as big and as it is unafraid. The sea is unafraid to swallow the waste. What is your own headache in this matter? (70)

Akinla is forced to a silence. He has no other option than to plead as Adagun-Odo reveals his level of ignorance:

Akinla: Don't kill the sea with this waste dump

Adagun-Odo: Kill the sea? Whoever can kill the sea? Akinla, are you alright? Or how can you accuse me of killing the sea. Do I look like the fool who boasts of killing the sea? I don't know where the sea comes

from and where it is flowing to. How can I kill the sea? Has anybody ever heard such foolish words? Kill the seas with a small waste dump. (72)

It is not until 24 years later that the community begins to reap the reward of the activities as we move to the marriage of Tarella and Akinla. It is the regatta (a boat-fishing competition) and people are getting set for the festival. The festival is called to an abrupt end as dead fishes have been washed ashore. The sad news is from the mouth of a fisherman: 'Baba Eleja, the sea has put a bad spell on us all..... the sea water, Baba Eleja, is now washing dead fish ashore' (86). Despite the sign, Adagun-Odo, for his selfish interest, would not consider the reasoning of others since his greed for money has blocked his sense of reasoning. What he considers is his investment to the growth of the community. Akinla faults him in the presence of her daughter, Okuntoro.

'Young lady, I have always known how your father first made his money. He was paid secretly to dump poisonous waste into the sea. And our jetty, he used to carry this out at night. (91)

The exposition reveals the atrocities of Adagun-Odo and shows that all his philanthropic gestures are at the detriment of the society. The dead fishes are as a result of the poisonous substances or industrial wastes him, Adagun-Odo, dumps into the sea a long time ago. While Adagun-Odo learns his lessons, the message is clear: there is a need to strike a better understanding between the earth and the sea. Sowande symbolises this with the union of Akinla and Okuntoro. In other words, he strives to strike a balance between the earth and the sea so that the world would forever remain pure.

Tarella: In your world will my tone be flat.

Akinla: If your tone is flat in my world, I shall supply the sharp tone.(97)

Thematic Concerns and Theatrical Devices in the Play

The thematic preoccupation of the text is the need to manage the environment and eschew the

temptation of polluting it. Sowande decides to pursue the ideal of the eco-critics by highlighting the consequences of polluting the earth. It is a text that is set to reveal some of the ways man does pollute water with industrial wastes in a modern world. Many research findings have proved that man, in so many ways, has endangered many species of the sea due to his unquenchable quest to explore the earth. What remains obvious is that man constantly pollutes the earth and this could lead to many animals becoming extinct. Another fact is that the constant flooding man is experiencing is as a result of his waste dumped into the sea.

Sowande wants us to see that the best way to shield the sea and the earth is to unite them. This is a picture of the promise Akinla made to Tarella about visiting once in a blue moon. The love for earth is to make it pure and devoid of any form of contradiction. Aside, he cares to warn on the impending danger that might befall the earth if no action is taken to curb man's activities and to collectively correct one another. The damage is done and the regatta could not hold. Adagun-Odo has literally blinded the people's eyes with gifts of school, mosque and church.

Akinla cautions the people that gifts should not let them allow the earth to be damaged. And as seen in the text, when the damage is done, there is little man can do to rescue the situation. He sounds it clearly that the four elements are more powerful than man to the extent that their fury would make the world disappear. However, Sowande brings to the fore the collective responsibility about man protecting the earth as our source of livelihood. He also calls for a strong resistance so as to curb the excesses of earth and water pollutants.

Sowande does not just tell the message. He deploys the most artistic techniques needed to convey a message of such, one of which is music. The music employed allows us to enjoy the flow of the play without mincing words and the clarity of the messages was embedded in its music. Sowande's music elevates the theatrical performance and enhances the success of the play. His use of music helps to tell the story in such a way that we flow from the physical to the

spiritual realm.

The first scene opens with music as he recounts the beauty of nature:

*'As the moon appears in the sky
Sea waves pick a dance
Both day and night
We rejoice in water
The moon is there forever
Water surrounds the entire world.
The sea the lagoon
All the rivers of the earth
Human tears
The drizzle and the storm
From water we came to life
Divine inscrutable wisdom.....(2)*

The song captures the aesthetics of the earth and unveils the beauty of nature to us. From the songs, we could capture the unending benefits of water to man and the faces of the changes we go through with water. We begin to see that the song is being used as a means of narration as the play progresses. It is the music of Akinla that attracts the mermaids as he paddles his canoe and the music is what attracted Akinla to Tarella. Music itself signifies nature as Tarella is forced to say: 'Would you not rather sing? Music is the atmosphere of our world, with it you will grow stronger (11).' Mama Eleja would not let the sea take her only son like that. She was forced to convey her grief in songs to the sea:

*Limitless grief
When I went to Ogun
River for my laundry
Yepa!
It was to the lagoon I went
Yepa!
To Ogun river I went
And in my homecoming
My child was missing
My eyes now flow with tear drops.(13)*

Her dirge conveys the loss she has suffered from the sea and nature. He is her only child and the sea has drowned him and would not release the body. Sowande uses music to unveil to us how the elements unleash their good and bad sides. Akinla performs this while in a trance to be able to answer the riddles posed by the elements. Finally, music is used to unite the earth and the sea.

Her voice: It's a lie, a big lie, sonny boy, Akinla

You can't love me like your mama

Sonny boy, Akinla

You're mama's little darling

And you will make me jealous

You can't love me like your mama

Sonny boy Akinla

His voice: Wait a minute my angel, Tarella, lassie girl.

I will love you like my mama,

Tarella, lassie girl

My wife is my angel, my angel is my mama

You're my sister, mama and my wife, lassie girl.
(98-99)

What emerges here then is that, Sowande engages his audience artistically with the beauty of songs and dance. Aside this, his use of humour, mutation, riddles and symbolism all enhance the play. By mutation, he is able to create a dream world and the real world. The spatial setting of the sea and earth is created in such a way that the sea serves as the dream world of Akinla and Tarella. The earth is the physical world and only the spirit world remains a mystery to them. So, the marriage of Tarella and Akinla are conducted in the spirit. The significance of this is that it enables us, the audience, to see beyond the physical, to feel the pain of nature, to care and show concern for nature. We are also able to see the bond between man and nature, the prevailing conflict and the resolution being sought. Yet, he is able to realistically define the spatial limit between the two worlds. He also uses humour to lighten our

moods such that the serious issues of environment being treated in the play would still be portrayed at the same time. The conversations between Mama Eleja and her husband, Adagun-Odo and Akinla are all laced with humour. In the dramaturgy of Bode Sowande then, the beauty of literature is not only to enhance our understanding of the environment; we are also enriched by observing how it proffers solutions to the problems of environmental pollution and degradation.

Conclusion

Bode Sowande's *Mammy Water's Wedding* pictures ways man is polluting and degrading the earth he lives on. It informs the audience the danger in this. Sowande's dramatically unites the earth and sea, preaching the gospel of unity and wanting man to treat nature well and vice versa. He warns about the lackadaisical attitude man is showing to nature. He also warns about the collapse of the earth and reveals the damage man's is already doing it and how nature is gradually retaliating. He wants man to stop degrading and polluting the land and sea. He preaches the union of the land and sea and encourages man to treat his environment with respect. The result is that nature will smile back at man. The play, employing the African oral tradition of storytelling, myths and superstition, is clearly didactic as its focus is to enlighten the audience on the impact of man's activities to his environment. He highlighted the issue of water pollution as one of the major source of environmental degradation pollution of all forms, including deforestation and flooding. If man can stand firm and correct his fellow human, definitely, the country will surely stand tall against pollution and earth's degradation. This why, the world would be safer.

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