

## Global Ecological Degradation and English Nouns

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### Abstract

In reaction to the impact of literature, or language use, on the environment, this paper examines the role that English nouns play in present global ecological degradation. It examines in addition possibilities of a re-assessment of the formal attributes of English nouns as a solution to the problem of decline in biodiversity. Adopting ecocriticism as both method and theoretical framework of study, the paper argues that categorisation of plants and natural organisms (other than humans) as “common” significantly accounts for degradation of the natural ecosystem. Findings from various sources reveal a significant correlation between linguistic and ecological metaphors that account for present global ecological degradation. It thus proposes a re-appraisal of structures that inform categorisation of English nouns, as well as practical elevation of values attached to categories of the common noun.

### Introduction

The state of global physical environment calls for a re-appraisal of inherited human literary and linguistic cultures. With the publication in 1989 of Judith Plant’s *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, Glotfelty and Fromm’s *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996, and other collections of essays and books that express concern over the physical environment, much attention has indeed been drawn to the need to re-examine human beings and their cultures, in relation to the environment and non-human creatures in it. It is to this end that the collective theories, principles and methods of ecocriticism has become the major anchor of “critical texts which address the connection between ecology, culture and literature” (Coupe 2000, ii), and indeed the theory on which this paper is based.

### Ecocriticism

The term ‘ecocriticism’ may be defined as a method, theory and even a principle, which helps to explain the inextricable affinity which literature shares with the physical environment. It may also be seen (1) as a field of literary study that deals with the relationship between a literary/artistic work and its physical setting; (2) as a field of literary study that examines literary representations of human cultures in relation to the non-human species in their various physical habitats. As in most schools or fields of study, it is difficult to ascribe a single definition to ecocriticism. There are in fact as many definitions of the term as there are adherents of the school – some more restrictive, others more inclusive – but all within the realms of literature and criticism. Of significance is its earliest definition by William Rueckert as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature”, quoted by Cheryll Glotfelty who herself opposes that

definition as restrictively ecological, and proposes a definition that “includes all possible relations between literature and the physical world” (xx). For Glotfelty, a chief proponent of the school, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii).

Historically, as a recognised domain of literary enquiry and as a method, modern ecological writings and criticisms, otherwise known as ecocriticism, dates back, in the United States of America, to the early 1990s, when the ecological writings of a crop of literary critics and theorists gained academic prominence, but particularly with the constitution in 1992 of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). Much earlier than this period, as Glotfelty notes in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, lone and individual writers have been experimenting with literary ecological themes in their works (xviii). The field of ecocriticism is championed by other notable critics as Harold Fromm, Scott Slovic (first President of ASLE), Lawrence Buell, author of the *Environmental Imagination*; Patrick Murphy and a whole lot of others whose works are represented in the ecocritical handbook, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, co-edited by Glotfelty and Fromm.

Later on in Europe, and other parts of the world, ecocriticism has gained grounds as a significant deviation from the earlier and foundational steps of romantic literature. Timothy Clark, Lawrence Coupe, Greg Garrard, Jonathan Bate and others, who probably recognising the huge difference between eulogising, or feeding from nature, and creating opportunities for remedying the degrading consequences of years of its exploitation, have also been assiduously engaged in critical ecological writings, with a view, according to Coupe, to addressing “the connection between the domination, pollution and threatened destruction of the planet and the oppression of human beings. In the Asian world, following the global recognition of ecocriticism, the movement has been championed by such critics as Kumari Shikha, Parta Das Sharma and others.

Here in Africa, in the last seven or so years, a number of ecocritical writings and criticisms have bourgeoned. With the 2007 publication of the *African Literature: Anthology of Criticism and Theory* featuring such critics as William Slaymaker, Byron Caminero-Santangelo, Juliana Makuchi Nfa-Abbenyi, Rob Nixon, and others whose works are found in various journals and other anthologies, ecocriticism may well be said to have gained a worldwide appeal as both a method and a theory of literature for deciding the position of human cultures, their treatment of the physical environment and the flora and fauna, which is the subject of this paper.

Augustine Nchoujie in his 2009 ecocritical reading of *Things Fall Apart*, aptly points out that “the world’s physical environment is threatened by a legion of natural and man-made catastrophes observable in such phenomena as global warming, ozone layer depletion, unimaginable pollution, etc (106). John Enemugwem on his part identifies man-made factors of environmental degradation as “deforestation, waste dumping ... oil spill, and gas flaring” (55) and points out that destructive as natural disasters in the Nigeria’s Niger Delta region may have been none has been as devastating as the impact of oil exploration in that region. Yet, conspicuously absent from this and other analysis of the ecological problems of the area and the world at large is structural underpinnings of language and its classifications.

Recognising the importance of language and literature as tool for engaging the growing environmental issues of our fast changing world, Glotfelty, ably supported by Fromm,

took the first bold step to organise into one book, various individual writings that treat the issue of the environment, particularly its degradation; many of these writings, as earlier noted, predating the *Ecocriticism Reader* by as many as twenty years (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). Not to be forgotten is the 1989 anthology of ecofeminist writings and criticisms edited by Judith Plant in which ecological degradation is largely attributed to global gender inequality; contributors to that effort including: Plant, Ursula LeGuin, Vandana Shiva, Sharon Doubiago and a host of others.

### **Environmental Degradation: Causes**

Beyond identification of the problem of degradation of the physical environment is the task of underpinning its causes as a step towards stemming it. In all of the anthologies and books by single authors noted above, literary artists and critics have undertaken a study of the global environmental phenomenon of degradation and despoliation, attributing it to various factors. Susan Griffins in an essay titled “Split Cultures”, for example, blames global ecological degradation on collective human inherited structures of aversion to and alienation from nature. In her words, “religion told us that the earth was a corrupt place, that our true home was heaven, that sensual feeling was not to be trusted and could lead us to hell and damnation ... science, too, told us not to trust our senses, that matter is deceptive, and that we are alien to our surroundings” (9).

Lynn White Jr., in a historical study of human development, from the prehistoric age to the modern age of science and technology, posits a number of views. He asserts that “quite unintentionally, changes in human ways often affect nonhuman nature” (4). Thus, in part, he attributes modern ecological crisis to changes in human cultures. But this is only ‘in part’ since White invariably attributes global ecological crisis to other factors: science and technology, the colonizing impact of Europe on the rest of the world, and the Judeo-Christian religion; this last view leading to an explosion of a wide range of religious ecological discourses.

In a similar historical sort, Harold Fromm, in his essay: “From Transcendence to Obsolescence” contends that the root of modern global ecological woes lies in a religio-cultural shift (in human mentality) from a reverential perception of the natural world to a feeling of superiority over non-human nature, an aftermath of discoveries in science and technology.

But nowhere in any of these positions is any hint of inherited global linguistic structure as a factor against the physical environment made. Yet, not to be overlooked is the impact on ecological reasoning that the naming system of English language, with its layers of meaning has on the world; and chiefly so, in consideration of English as a language with which philosophies and practices of major world religions, science and technology, are conveyed to the world.

Christopher Manes on his part blames global ecological degradation to a repression of the animist heritage of the Orient and a consequent silencing of the natural world by the more voluble Occidental cultures and mentalities. Emphasizing the influence of language in the entire scheme, he says that “for human societies of all kinds, moral consideration seems to fall only within a circle of speakers in communion with one another” (16). Thus, the perception of the Western mind, according to Manes, is that since these other natural elements and organisms do not necessarily speak to us (not in communion with humans), we do not accord any honour or dignified treatment to them. They are “common” and by

extension insignificant. And the English language originates from the cultural West. Yet, these are but a few of the perspectives regarding the negative influences of human cultures, particularly of the Western world on the global ecosystem.

Oriental perspectives on causes of ecological degradation as projected by people like Leslie Marmon Silko, Paula Allen Gun, and Kumari Shikha reveal extraordinary regard for the natural worlds of animals and plants – the cow, the antelope, mountains, rivers, etc. Silko speaks specifically of:

The love the hunter and the people have for the Antelope people. And the love of the antelope who agree to give up their meat and blood so that human beings will not starve. Waste of meat or even the thoughtless handling of bones cooked bare will offend the antelope spirits ... Thus it is necessary to return carefully the bones and hair, and the stalks and leaves to the earth who first created them. The spirits remain close by. They do not leave us” (265)

Imagination could easily be drawn towards the original language and cultural system that inspire this love between human beings and non-human organisms. But this is a bond not found in Western consciousness, and which is altogether lost in English translation; so that animal bones and other remains are carelessly dumped in refuse bags and bins, and sometimes just openly litter street corners of our city suburbs. Yet, in all of these positions not a single emphasis is made on the specific impact that the English language, and her naming system may have created in the human consciousness and how this affects people’s treatment of creatures considered to be “common” according to that word’s connotations and denotations in the English noun classification.

Nevertheless, notions attached to names and their formal structures may just have some very significant implications to the way human beings treat the physical environment and non-human organisms. Indeed, of great significance in modern ecological discourses is attention paid to a plethora of factors causative of global environmental crisis, including a number of cultural elements. Yet, not much attention seems to have been accorded the place of nomenclatures as they affect human relationships with other species in the environment. Considering the enormous influence of English culture on the rest of humanity, it is hardly impossible to ignore the role that her language, an element of that culture, has played over the years in present global environmental culture and crisis. Information regarding developments in science and technology could never have been effectively disseminated round the world without the English language. However, the interest of this paper is not on a study of the language as a whole. Rather, it lies with the impact that the naming system of English has had, and continues to have on the way people look at the animal, plant, and other non-human species in the global ecosystem. To this extent, the paper undertakes a study of the contribution of English nouns to present ecological crisis echoed all over the world.

Every environment, according to Patrick Murphy, has its own peculiarities; and the particular way in which natural issues affect people in different parts of the world differ from place to place; so that it is difficult for one universal principle or approach to be accepted as the sole basis for analysing modern ecological problems (14). Taking the Eleme area of Nigeria’s Niger Delta as a case study, causes of environmental

degradation, according to Odoemelam and Omoro, are attributable to capitalist infiltration and oil explorations. They point out for instance that:

The pre-capitalist Eleme society had very extensive forests that were favourable habitats for different species of plant and animals. These species became extinct due to increasing level of the destruction of the forest eco-systems. This phenomenon was precipitated by oil and gas exploitation by industrial organizations operating in the area (149).

Now, considering the endemic nature of the problem, it is equally quite natural that the problem may be adduced to a plethora of other causes. Lending voice to this issue, therefore, this paper argues that: underlying structure of English nouns and their categorisation have significantly contributed to reckless exploitation of non-human nature, which has in turn led to an overwhelming despoliation of the physical environment by human beings.

### English Nouns

The English noun, in its simplest definition, is identified by Ekwueme-Ugwu (2013) as the naming part of a grammatical unit (27). Nouns, according to her, various web and other reference sources, are generally classified into two broad categories – Proper and Common – to distinguish, respectively, that which is *good, appropriate, suitable, right, apt, apposite, accurate, fitting, modest, decorous, genteel, respectable, courteous*, etc. from that which is *ordinary, nothing special, unexceptional, familiar*, etc.; and although several sub-classifications abound, notions of the “proper” and the “common” remain prominent. Besides, but for collective and gender categories, all other classifications are subsumed under the larger classes of the *proper* and the *common*. Concrete, abstract, count, non-count, singular and plural names are essentially sub-classes of the common noun, while compound names may be *proper* or *common*; so that in the final analysis, it is always either *proper* or *common*.

The very popular web publisher Richard Nordquist defines the proper noun as “a [noun](#) belonging to the class of words used as [names](#) for unique individuals, events, or places” From Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), we understand that proper nouns are specific, or definite names of people, places, months, etc all of which “are written in initial capital letters” (76). J.D. Murthy (1998), while holding on to that same view of the *proper* as denoting the “particular”, limits his examples of the proper noun to persons and places only, but with capitalisation of initial letter of each word equally prominent (10). Ezugu (2001) identifies the proper in names to include “particular country, people, persons, places, things, days, feast days, events, etc.” and emphasizes as well that as opposed to that which is common, “all proper nouns begin with capital letters” (11). Seemingly in an attempt to accord the common noun some of the dignifying prominence associated with the *proper*, Anko (2004) explains that “some common nouns with unique reference” (71) may assume initial letter capitalisation, but fails in his various usage examples to include that of an initial-letter capitalised common noun. This is to prove that it is out of place for *the common* to share the dignifying initial-letter capitalisation of *the proper*.

### The “Common” in English Nouns and Degradation

Special note must be taken of the fact that the above definitions and categorisations clearly dissociate names of plants, animals, creeping creatures and the natural elements such as air, fire, wind and earth from participation in the “unique” values attributed to the proper in proper names. And of course we all are familiar with the very brilliant notions attached to something “unique”. Ideas associated with “Proper” in proper names/nouns are those of superior entities, whereas notions of “Common” in common nouns (added to their denial of initial-capital letter status accorded proper nouns) remain those of entities of lower or inferior status, commonplace, demeaning, etc. And even though certain very esoteric linguistic theories may indeed abound to discountenance this overwhelming attachment of importance to the “Proper” in proper nouns, the notion hangs as heavily as does that of inferiority attached to the “common” in common nouns. This is to the extent that all those entities, which have been denied participation in the “Proper”, are regular objects of degradation, regularly perpetrated by these same “Proper” entities – Persons in Places: Countries, Cities and Towns, and particularly during special “Events”.

To further buttress this perfect or near perfect status of the English proper noun/name is its self-sustaining category, which renders it non-susceptible to further categorisation. The common noun, as earlier pointed out, is on the other hand subject to additional classifications and sub-classifications as indicative of its deficient status.

The traditional capitalisation of the first letter of English proper names/nouns is, in addition, a significant manifestation of its superiority over the common nouns. In the Wikipedia online encyclopedia, it is stated that: “In English, it is the norm for ... proper names to be capitalized”. Irrespective of position within a grammatical unit, the first letter of a proper noun, to register its importance, must be written in the upper case/capital letter. The common noun by virtue of its demeaning status does not enjoy this privilege.

Note must equally be taken that these “Proper Noun” ‘special honours’ are only reserved for specific names of human beings, some animals (pets only), and some places, but not for the names of the large array of other life species – plants, animals (non-pets) and the natural elements.

Human beings and some very few domesticated animals, apart from their generic appellations – man/men, woman/women, boy/boys, girl/girls, dog/dogs and animal/animals – which generally begin with the lower case letter, have acquired the transcendent PROPER status of having their specific designations encoded with an underlying structure of the CAPITAL in their initial capital letter. So that the Brunos, Bingos, Jacks, Majors, etc. of the domesticated (pets) animal family, just like their human counterparts, enjoy that ‘uncommon’ privilege of having the first letters of their names written in the upper case, irrespective of their position within a grammatical unit – initial, middle, or end.

Plants and animals are, as earlier emphasized, generally denied this ‘proper’ status, not even when they, like ‘pets’ form a part of the human family. A great many plants, especially of the flowering types, often find themselves as not just outdoor members of human families, but are in (especially the affluent) human homes made to occupy vantage positions: in the sitting rooms, lobbies, toilets, and the coolest points of the home. These plants play no fewer roles in public places: parks, offices, hotels, and restaurants. Yet,

they remain ‘common’ and subject to the whims and caprices of human beings – possessors and custodians of the “Proper” names.

Applying two of the Stoic dialectical and logical positions, according to Baltzly (2010):

“either p or q; p; therefore not –q”

“either p or q; not p; therefore q”

it can safely be argued that following the earlier two broad categorisations of the English noun, out of which sub-classes are found,

a noun is either proper or common; if proper; therefore not common

a noun is either proper or common; if not proper; therefore common

If a noun is not a proper, unique, appropriate, self-sufficient entity, then there is the tendency to equate it with the opposite – common, unimportant, inappropriate, ordinary, general, and all other inferior qualities that the word “common” conjure: bearing in mind people’s peculiar linguistic and metaphorical environments. Lawrence Buell, stressing the power of language succinctly observes that “we live our lives by metaphors” (3) and are often inclined to pass judgements in words and acts based on our generally perceived metaphors; so that if in human minds “common” conjures the image of the ordinary or unimportant, especially with a lifetime association of that “common” with the visual aid of the non-capitalised, the tendency is that we continue to live in an endless cycle of degradation of those physical and natural entities so classified as “common”.

### **Global Linguistic and Ecological Implications**

Added to implication of inherited linguistic culture on the environment expressed above are other obvious implications. Inherited notions about the “common” in common nouns, even in their individual and specific considerations – fish, flower, insect, plant, tree, river, sea, earth, shrub, elephant, and the millions of creatures of this category – render them inferior to the large human “Proper” species; thus making the “commoners” objects of abuse and degradation.

Osahito Miyaoka observes that “In recent years, linguistic diversity and its decline have been compared to the decline of biological diversity-particularly in tropical regions, where observers have pointed out the correlation between biological diversity and linguistic diversity and their coevolution”. Decline in linguistic diversity implies a reduction in the plurality or number of languages used around the world. As more and more nations lose their native languages to the overwhelming power of English, with the overwhelming status that science, technology, politics and religion has accorded it, so do they lose their cultural ecological values to the incongruous naming system of the English language. Equally revealing is the position by Ursula K. Heise that there are a lot more essays of the Anglophone than in any other language (513).

Current studies by UNESCO reveal, in addition, that: “there is a fundamental linkage between language and traditional knowledge (TK) related to biodiversity. Local and indigenous communities have elaborated complex classification systems for the natural world, reflecting a deep understanding of their local environment. This environmental knowledge is embedded in indigenous names, oral traditions and taxonomies, and can be lost when a community shifts to another language” ([www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)). There is thus no gainsaying the fact that owing to the enormous influence that the English language, with

its naming system, has had on the world, the globe is gradually losing its biodiversity. The hegemonic hold of the English language and its cultures on the world has meant consistent and unrestrained despoliation of the earth and non-human species, and this is quite attributable to its noun classifications, with their notional and denotative attachments.

With UNESCO's prediction of 96% of the world's linguistic population going into extinction, leaving just about 4% of the major languages (English having the largest share) spoken around the world, Miyaoka is of the view that "if nothing is done, half of 6000 plus languages spoken today will disappear by the end of this century. With the disappearance of unwritten and undocumented languages, humanity would lose not only a cultural wealth but also important ancestral knowledge embedded, in particular, in indigenous languages". And this includes ecological wisdoms and cultures embedded in these other languages.

While it is out-rightly impossible to reverse the global hegemonic hold of the English language, with whatever benefits this may portend, it is also inappropriate to overlook its negative influences on global cultures. To ignore them would be to equally ignore present ecological crisis as an enigma that defies solutions. Ongoing arguments reveal that there are solutions to the problem of ecological degradation and related challenges. It will only be a matter of time.

### **Recommendation and Conclusion**

With the awareness created of the negative influence of decline in global linguistic diversity on biodiversity, it is quite clear that a number of actions may be taken to stem the tide of ecological degradation, one of such is for literary artists and writers generally, to counter the destructive force inherent in undue elevation of the traditional English "proper" nouns over their "common" non-proper counterparts. These writers should, through the method of *deconstruction*, project in their writings other species not hitherto considered "proper" as equally important to the survival of all in the ecosystem by writing their initial letters in the upper case. Thus, irrespective of their position in sentences, for example, the first letter of any word that denotes a natural species should be written in the upper case (capital letter), just like the traditional proper names. For example:

The crowd waited impatiently under the ancient Ador Tree. Though barren, she had sheltered generations of the people from the Sun and his harmful rays.

It was not the first time the people had gathered under the Tree's shade to hear others speak. The Tree had in fact served as a natural canopy under which the people had held public debates for generations. Birds made their homes in her branches. Wild Rats equally made their homes underneath her base. And the people had once found and killed a dangerous Snake lodged within some fissures in her massive trunk.

It was also not the first time that some politicians had come to speak to the people. But this one was different. The public office seeker this time was one of them. He was from their town, and even though not

from that village, some of his village and clans persons lived among them. One or two from his father's house were married into the village.

As shadows shortened to a point where the men, women and youths stood almost squarely under the prehistoric Tree's shadow, some began to argue that the meeting should have been held inside the recently completed community hall. But this dissenting view was soon muted by the superior argument that the people needed the natural Air.

It was mid-August when the Rains observed temporary cessation and the Earth experienced dryness on her surface. However, from within, she was yet saturated with the Waters of the previous months.

For their nourishment and vigor, Trees, Shrubs and other Plants only had to dig deeper. The stronger a Plant's roots, the deeper her penetration into Earth's nourishment precincts, and the greater the survival of such.

The Ador, though old and barren had stood for years, not simply owing to her strength, but also because of her utility.<sup>1</sup>

Short and imperfect though the above composition may appear, it does contribute towards an elevation of the status of the underlined natural species. This measure, added to the argument by some scholars that natural elements be featured as subjects of literary compositions as has been done in the above sample composition, will go a long way in stamping into human consciousness the very important place of nature and non-human organisms in the ecological world. This would invariably contribute towards a reduction in the rate of global ecological degradation and the unjustifiable destruction of other lives by human beings.

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