

The Aesthetics of Place and Displacement in Ushie's Eco-Poetics

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Abstract

This paper examines the portrayal of environmental exploitation and destruction in Joe Ushie's "*Hill Songs*". Focusing on the African context, the poet sheds light on the detrimental effects of natural resource exploitation by leaders for personal gain. Through vivid imagery and metaphors, the poems illustrate the relentless and destructive behaviour of the exploiters, symbolized as African mosquitoes and scavengers. The analysis explores the underlying themes of human indifference, the complex relationship between humans and nature, and the consequences of unsustainable practices using ecocritical literary theory. In *Hill Songs*, Ushie employs the metaphor of mosquitoes drilling and sucking the peasant blood (natural resources) to depict the exploitative nature of the well-to-do individuals. The poem highlights the exploiter's consistent and unapologetic actions, disregarding the suffering of the victims and leaving the land empty and depleted. The imagery of a persistent horn sounding in the persona's ear emphasises the exploiter's disregard for human welfare and their insatiable greed. Furthermore, the poem suggests that nature serves as a refuge from human interference, but it also conveys the consequences of human actions on the environment. The persona's cautionary tone warns against the destructive impact of exploitative practices and emphasizes the need to protect the environment. The poems highlight the urgent need to address environmental crises and advocate for the preservation of the natural world. This study underscores the aesthetics employed by Ushie, including vivid imagery, sensory language, metaphors, and irony, to convey the destructive relationship between humans and the environment. The exploration of these themes and literary techniques provides valuable insights into the consequences of environmental exploitation and serves as a compelling call to action to protect and preserve the environment for future generations.

Keywords: Place, Displacement, Destruction, Ecocritical theory, Joe Ushie, and *Hill Songs*

INTRODUCTION

The theme of environmental destruction has become increasingly urgent in contemporary literary discourse as the effects of climate change become more apparent [6] and [9]. Reflecting this growing concern, poets have begun to explore the impact of human activity on the natural world, using their art to raise awareness and inspire action [15] One such poet is Joe Ushie, whose collection *Hill Songs* offers a powerful and evocative exploration of environmental destruction in his native Nigeria.

Previous studies have explored the role of literature in raising awareness of environmental issues. Some critics argue that literature has the power to engage readers emotionally and ethically, prompting them to consider the impact of human activities on the environment. Others have noted the ways in which literary techniques such as metaphor, imagery, and personification can help convey the scale and complexity of environmental issues.

This study will utilize a close reading approach to examine the literary techniques used by Ushie in this collection. The study will pay particular attention to the poet's use of language, imagery, and metaphor to represent the natural world and its destruction. The study will also examine how the poet address the ethical dimensions of environmental issues, including questions of responsibility and agency.

The Poetry of Joe Ushes

Joe Ushie is a Nigerian poet who has received critical attention for his concern with the problems that plague his country, including poor leadership, corruption, environmental degradation, and the exaltation of nature. Ushie's poetry has been described as erudite, prolific, and polemical, with his writing reflecting his unshakable determination to liberate his people from plundering sociopolitical arrangements in Nigeria and Africa as a whole (Aboh, 107).

[5] submits that in "*Hill Songs*," Ushie consistently refers to the hills as a place of refuge, a symbol of attainment, and the source of life. This can be seen as his attempt to speak out against the negative actions carried out by humans on the hills and to advocate for environmentally conscious individuals (Bassey 13). This perhaps is the reason [1] describes Ushie's poetry as a potent form of rebuke and purification, drawing a distinction between those who use poetry to support the excesses of government and those who use it to reflect and refract the ills in society (Aboh 108). However, Aboh's study does not pay attention to Ushie's relationship with his environment and how he uses language to reflect that bond.

[2] examines the aesthetics of place in *Hill Songs* from an eco-critical perspective, observing that Ushie uses place as a discursive tool to project the functionality, spirituality, and mysticism of nature while mediating for those whose existence is tied to the preservation and humane exploration of its components. Ushie's deployment of the aesthetic of "Place" can be seen to be performing two functions: as a framework for an exploration into how contemporary poets perceive and utilize nature in their creative ventures, and as a political tool to champion the quest for proper handling of the environment and the people affected by it in the face of capitalist and industrial demands for resources Aliyu (78).

Again, [3] delves into the poetry of Joe Ushie and Albert Otto, two poets profoundly influenced by the contemporary realities of the Niger-delta region and its environmental degradation. Aliyu submits that the works of these duo serve as poignant reflections and engagements with these pressing issues, reshaping our understanding of the causes and responses to the environmental crisis in the Niger-delta. The authors'

poignant exploration of environmental degradation is vividly captured through their nostalgic recollections of a pre-crude oil era, which starkly contrasts with the harsh imagery of despoliation prevalent in the current crude oil era. Aliyu holds that, Ushie, in his collection "Hill Songs," employs lyrical and emotionally charged descriptions to convey the once-harmonious coexistence of nature and humanity in the region, only to be disrupted by the introduction of human exploitation tools, symbolizing the disruptive power of greed and mechanistic worldviews. He says Ushie grapples with the brutal consequences of human domination over nature, shedding light on the urgent need for environmental awareness and change.

[11] link the nexus between social concerns and style in some poems of Joe Ushie, showing that the social situation upon which the poems are based, such as poverty in the midst of plenty and environmental degradation, provides the metaphor for the language of the poems and hence the style.

Joe Ushie's poetry has been analyzed from various perspectives, including its concern with sociopolitical issues, its use of place as a discursive tool, and its link between social concerns and style. These studies suggest that Ushie's writing reflects his commitment to creating a well-balanced system in Nigeria and Africa as a whole from eco-critical standpoint. This study on *The Aesthetics of Place and Displacement in Ushie's Eco Poetics* add to the literature on environment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Eco-criticism is a literary theory that attempts to explore the relationship between literature and the environment. It emerged in the late 1980s in the USA and early 1990s in the UK, and Cheryll Glotfelty is considered the founder of this academic movement. The theory celebrates the beauty and sustenance of the natural environment and addresses man-made and natural disasters that conflict with the disinterested nature of our environment.

Ecocritical theory is located within the framework of eco-criticism, [4] and it has become increasingly important due to an enlightened consciousness and concern about the state of the global environment (Barry 245). The theory has shifted focus from broad areas to the relationship between neo-colonial interests and an eco-critical perspective. The scramble for modernization has enticed developing countries like Nigeria into the destruction of their own environments, making the destruction of the environment one of the most damaging aspects of Western Industrialization.

The local application of eco-criticism in Nigeria will reveal the peculiarities and similarities of the natural environment and its impact on poetic creativity. [16] believes that literature and poetry do not grow or develop in a vacuum; they are given impetus, shape, direction, and even area of concern by social, political, and economic forces in a particular society. Poetry is used to encode and communicate certain nature-related ideologies. [13] argues that ideology permeates every level of human endeavor such as language and social situations.

Mathew Arnold, an English educator and poet, believed that poetry in particular, would one day come to help resolve all human-generated conflicts. He foresaw a crucial semi-religious role for poetry. According

to Arnold, without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. He argued that mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us and even to sustain us.

Eco-criticism provides a crucial framework for exploring the relationship between literature and the environment. It reveals how literature reflects and shapes our relationship with nature, and how literary works can be used to encode and communicate nature-related ideologies. The application of this theory in Nigeria can provide insights into how the natural environment impacts poetic creativity and the ways in which writers can use their work to address environmental issues.

Ken Hiltner (2002) in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* provides a comprehensive collection of seminal essays and key texts in the field of ecocriticism, providing an overview of the major debates and approaches in the discipline. The book covers a wide range of topics, including environmental justice, postcolonialism, animal studies, and ecofeminism, and includes contributions from some of the most influential scholars in the field.

Similarly, Greg Garrard (2004) in *Ecocriticism: An Introduction* provides a broad overview of ecocriticism, tracing its origins and development from its roots in Romanticism and Transcendentalism to its contemporary forms. Garrard examines the key concepts and themes in ecocritical theory, including wilderness, bioregionalism, and deep ecology, and explores the relationship between literature, culture, and the environment.

This similarly effort is recorded in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* edited by Louise Westling (2013). This collection of essays brings together leading scholars in ecocriticism to provide a comprehensive overview of the field. The book covers a wide range of topics, including the history of environmental thought, the representation of nature in literature, and the role of literature in environmental activism. The contributors also explore the intersections between ecocriticism and other fields, such as animal studies, ecofeminism, and posthumanism.

Equally important is *Greening the Maple: Canadian Ecocriticism in Context* edited by Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley (2013). This collection of essays focuses on the development of ecocriticism in Canada, highlighting the unique perspectives and contributions of Canadian scholars and writers. The book covers a range of topics, including the representation of the Canadian landscape in literature, the role of indigenous knowledge in environmental thought, and the impact of climate change on Canadian literature and culture.

Moreso, in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication* edited by Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and Vidya Sarveswaran (2019) an interdisciplinary overview of ecocriticism and its intersections with environmental communication is provided. The book includes contributions from scholars in fields such as literature, communication, media studies, and environmental studies, and covers topics such as environmental justice, climate change communication, and the role of storytelling in environmental activism. These reviews provide valuable insights into the development of

ecocriticism as a field of study and offer a wealth of resources for scholars and students interested in this area.

This paper examines the aesthetics of environmental destruction in *Hill Songs*, exploring the ways in which the poet uses language and imagery to convey his message. It is anticipated that this study will demonstrate how Ushie uses literary techniques to convey the urgency of environmental destruction. By examining the aesthetic strategies employed by this writer, the study hopes to provide insights into the ways in which literature can be used to raise awareness of environmental issues and to promote ethical engagement with the natural world.

Exploring the Aesthetics of Environmental Destruction in *Hill Songs*

Exploitation of the natural environment has become an integral part of poetry especially on the African continent. In Nigeria, poets have shifted attention to the natural exploitation and rape of resources by leaders to achieve their selfish ends.

In Joe Ushie's *Hill Songs*, the poet uses the image of the mosquito to present a vivid picture of exploitation which is prevalent among the well-to-do individuals "the scavengers and parasites" who drill and suck the peasant blood (the natural resources). In the words of the persona:

Every night you drill on my land
 You pike in my peasant earth
 And you leave with wells of my peasant blood
 Indifferent to the wails and weals you plant (p.13)

The exploiter as seen in the above lines is not someone who comes once to exploit nature, but a consistent individual who is bent on drilling the land and rendering it empty. The exploiter who is given the image of the African mosquito is such a disturbing fellow as the persona noted:

Every night you sound your
 In the hollow of my ear
 Demanding a graft;
 Well or weary, pay I must,
 Sometimes you land as I nurse
 The wounds of your last raid
 Sometimes you perch when
 My hearth has long lain fallow (p.13).

The exploiter does not care whether its victims are suffering or not. And as been his usual practice, the exploiter loots the resources and goes away like a prodigal son on a squandering mission. This is echoed by the persona when he laments: "And into some grove or cranny / You flee, far far from hear / Across the hills and loaded with the loot (p.13). The persona's lament is typical of the pain and grieve created in the nation by the exploiter. Lament over economic hardship caused by this mindless, heartless and careless exploiter. The speaker describes the thief, who is disrupting human society, as fleeing into a grove or

cranny in the natural world, far away from human hearing. This suggests that the natural world is a safe haven for the thief, where they can escape the consequences of their actions.

However, the lines also hints at the consequences of human actions on the natural world. The phrase “loaded with loot” implies that the thief has taken something valuable from human society, possibly at the expense of the natural world. This suggests that even when humans try to escape into nature, they cannot escape the consequences of their actions on the environment. This goes on to highlights the complex relationship between humans and nature, suggesting that nature can both offer a refuge for human society and also be impacted by human actions. In the words of the persona:

But you come and raid and flee
 With different tunes of your nagging horn
 In different colors, in different cloaks
 Sucking my prostrate peasant trunk (p13)

The foregoing lines present an image of the destructive relationship between humans and the environment. The phrase “sucking my prostrate peasant trunk” can be seen as a metaphor for the exploitation of natural resources for human gain, without regard for the negative impact on the environment.

The repetition of the phrase “Different tunes of your nagging horn” and the description of the horn as being “In different colors, in different cloaks” suggests that the destructive behavior is ongoing and multifaceted. The use of the word "raid" implies a violent and forceful taking of resources, further highlighting the exploitative nature of human actions towards the environment.

The use of vivid imagery and sensory language can also be interpreted as a call to action to protect the environment. The contrast between the vibrant and diverse imagery used to describe the natural world and the destructive actions of humans towards it serves to emphasize the importance of preserving the environment and reducing human impact. This extract can be seen as a warning against the consequences of unsustainable human practices and a plea to protect and preserve the environment for future generations. With the hardship created by the incessant activities of the African mosquito, the persona cautions in a revolting tone:

Beware, African tyrant of the dark
 The night which shields you
 And blinds me, last but for a while as
 Soon my sun shall beam from the hills (p.14).

The lines above foreground a warning against the destruction of the natural environment. The darkness of the night can be seen as a metaphor for the ignorance and blindness of those who do not see the importance of protecting the environment. The tyrant, in this context, can represent the human desire for power and control, which often leads to the exploitation and destruction of nature.

The line “The night which shields you” is a reference to the way that darkness can be both protective and dangerous for different species. Some animals, for example, use the darkness of night to hunt and to hide from predators. However, the destruction of natural habitats through human activities such as deforestation, mining, and pollution can lead to the extinction of these animals.

The line “Soon my sun shall beam from the hills” can be seen as a hopeful vision of a future in which the natural environment is protected and restored. The image of the sun rising over the hills can be interpreted as a symbol of renewal and regeneration, representing the possibility of a new dawn for the natural world. The lines offer a warning against the destructive impact of human activities on the environment, and a call to action to protect and preserve the natural world.

In “Song of the Dead” the poet persona in a devastating state of anguish laments the pain

caused upon nature by humans. The earth which is personified wishes there was a defender who should tell the story of her anguish. But disappointedly, no one cares to inform the world of nature’s enslavement by man. In the words of the persona:

Before I died
You could have wept
To the world my blight;
But you did nothing;
And now you shake the hills
With echoes of your wails (p38)

The above lines are a critique of human indifference to environmental destruction and its consequences. The speaker in the poem appears to be someone who has died, and is addressing those who are still alive. The first line, “Before I died,” suggests that the speaker had foreseen their own death and had hoped for a different outcome.

The second line, “You could have wept”, implies that the speaker expected some sort of emotional reaction from the living in response to their death. However, the reason for this emotion is not explicitly stated, leaving it open to interpretation. One possible interpretation is that the speaker sees their own death as a result of environmental degradation or pollution, and they expected others to mourn the loss of the natural world that they represented.

Again, the line, “To the world my blight”, reinforces this interpretation, as it suggests that the speaker's death was a consequence of some sort of ecological disaster or harm. The use of the word “blight” also connotes disease and decay, further emphasizing the negative impact of environmental destruction.

As seen in line 3, “But you did nothing”, highlights the theme of human inaction and apathy in the face of environmental crises. The implication is that the living had the power to prevent the speaker's death and the broader ecological damage that it represents, but they failed to act.

Consequently, the lines, “And now you shake the hills / With echoes of your wails”, is a form of irony or bitter criticism. The living are now mourning the loss that they could have prevented, and their grief is amplified by the environmental damage that they have caused. The use of the phrase “shake the hills” suggests that the living are now experiencing a powerful emotional response, but it is too late to undo the harm that has been done. These lines can be seen as a powerful critique of human indifference to environmental destruction, and a call to action to prevent further harm. This continues below:

Before I died
You could have penned
To the world my plight;
But you did nothing;
And now you stir a flood
With nib in grief (p 38).

The line, “Before I died”, once again suggests that the speaker is addressing the living from beyond the grave. The line, “You could have penned”, implies that the speaker expected someone to write about their plight or the ecological damage that they represent, possibly to raise awareness or inspire action.

The line, “To the world my plight”, reinforces the idea that the speaker's death or environmental degradation is a result of human actions, and that it is a matter of global concern rather than an isolated incident. The use of the word “plight” also connotes a sense of vulnerability and suffering, further emphasizing the negative impact of environmental degradation. While the line, “But you did nothing”, once again highlights human inaction and apathy in the face of ecological crises, but the tone is more accusatory and confrontational compared to the previous set of lines. The implication is that the living had a moral responsibility to act, but they failed to do so, leading to the speaker's death and the broader ecological damage.

The two lines, “And now you stir a flood / With nib in grief”, is a form of irony or reversal. The living are now expressing their grief and remorse through writing, but it is too late to undo the harm that has been done. The use of the phrase “stir a flood” suggests a sense of urgency and intensity, but it also implies that the grief and remorse may not be enough to prevent further environmental damage.

These lines can be seen as a forceful critique of human inaction and a call to action to address environmental crises. The tone is more confrontational and urgent compared to the previous set of lines, reflecting a sense of frustration and anger at the lack of progress in addressing environmental issues:

Before I died
You could have clad
My body from cold and shame;
But you did nothing;
And now you dress
My dust in silk (p 38).

These lines are a critique of human priorities and values, particularly in relation to material possessions and social status. The line, "Before I died", once again suggests that the speaker is addressing the living from beyond the grave. The line, "You could have clad",s implies that the speaker expected someone to provide them with clothing or protection from the elements, possibly due to their vulnerable or marginalized status.

While the line, "My body from cold and shame", reinforces the idea that the speaker's death or environmental degradation is a result of human actions, and that it is a matter of basic human dignity and respect. The use of the words "cold and shame" connotes a sense of physical discomfort and emotional humiliation, further emphasizing the negative impact of environmental degradation on human well-being.

Consequently, the line, "But you did nothing," once again highlights human inaction and apathy in the face of ecological crises, but with a different focus and emphasis compared to the previous sets of lines. The implication is that the living had a moral obligation to care for the speaker's basic needs, but they failed to do so, leading to the speaker's death and the broader ecological damage.

This perhaps is the reason, the two lines, "And now you dress / My dust in silk," can be interpreted as a form of irony or critique of materialism and superficiality. The living are now expressing their remorse or respect through clothing the speaker's dust in silk, a luxurious material associated with social status and wealth. The use of the word "dust" emphasizes the transience and impermanence of material possessions, and the futility of using them to express respect or regret.

These lines can be seen as a poignant critique of human values and priorities, and a call to prioritize basic human dignity and environmental responsibility over material possessions and status. The tone is melancholic and reflective, highlighting the loss and regret associated with environmental degradation and human inaction.

In "The hills will rise again" human actions that cause environmental destruction and change the shape of the earth's surface is underscored. In the words of the persona: "Violence, after Pressure / Carved earth's hunchbacks, / Says the wizard of earth's form (p. 51). The line, "Violence, after Pressure," suggests that the speaker is referring to some form of human activity that puts pressure on the earth's surface, and that this pressure leads to violence or destruction. The use of the word "violence" emphasizes the harmful impact of these actions on the natural world. The line, "Carved earth's hunchbacks," reinforces the idea that human actions can change the shape of the earth's surface, possibly through mining, deforestation, or other forms of resource extraction. The use of the word "carved" connotes a sense of deliberate and intentional action, further emphasizing the human agency and responsibility for environmental damage.

On the other hand, the line, "Says the wizard of earth's form," adds a mystical or spiritual dimension to the critique of human actions. The speaker is portrayed as a "wizard," someone with special knowledge or insight into the natural world, who is able to understand the impact of human actions on the earth's form. The use of the word "form" suggests that the speaker is concerned with the aesthetic and structural aspects of the earth, and that human actions can disrupt the natural balance and beauty of the environment.

These lines can be seen as a powerful critique of human actions that cause environmental destruction and alter the shape of the earth's surface. The tone is forceful and accusatory, emphasizing the negative impact of these actions on the natural world and the need for greater environmental responsibility and accountability. The use of the mystical or spiritual language adds a sense of urgency and importance to the critique, suggesting that the earth's form is not just a matter of practical concern, but also a matter of aesthetic and spiritual significance:

For too long now have the hills
Stood in silence as man
Skins the hills
Defiles the valleys
Brushes his teeth with man's femur
Dresses himself in man's sweat
And bear the weight of man (p 51).

The line, "For too long now have the hills / Stood in silence as man," sets up a contrast between the natural world, represented by the hills, and human society, represented by "man." The implication is that human actions have been going on for too long, and that the natural world has been too passive or silent in response.

This perhaps explains why the line, "Skins the hills," suggests that human activities such as mining or deforestation are literally stripping the earth's surface of its natural resources, leaving it bare and exposed. The use of the word "skins" connotes a violent and destructive action, emphasizing the negative impact of human actions on the natural world. More so, the line, "Defiles the valleys," reinforces the idea that human actions are causing environmental degradation and pollution. The use of the word "defiles" connotes a sense of pollution or contamination, further emphasizing the negative impact of human actions on the natural world.

Consequently, the line, "Brushes his teeth with man's femur," adds a gruesome and disturbing image to the critique, suggesting that human actions are not only destructive to the natural world, but also to human dignity and morality. The use of the word "femur" connotes a sense of violence and brutality, further emphasizing the negative impact of human actions on the natural world and on human values.

"Dresses himself in man's sweat," adds a further layer of critique, suggesting that human exploitation of natural resources is also associated with exploitation of human labor and sweat. The use of the word "sweat" connotes a sense of hard work and sacrifice, highlighting the human cost of resource extraction and exploitation.

And again, the line, "And bear the weight of man," emphasizes the burden and responsibility that the natural world is bearing as a result of human actions. The use of the word "bear" connotes a sense of endurance and resilience, but also a sense of suffering and struggle. These lines can be seen as a powerful critique of human actions and their impact on the natural world, highlighting the negative consequences

of resource exploitation and environmental degradation. The tone is forceful and accusatory, emphasizing the urgency and importance of environmental responsibility and accountability.

Language and Imagery

Ushie's poems are filled with vivid imagery that depicts the beauty and fragility of the natural world. He uses concrete details and sensory language to immerse the reader in the experience of nature, offering descriptions of "sunburnt hills", "rivers choked with weeds", and "forests bleeding green". This evocative language creates a sense of connection between the reader and the natural world, making the impact of environmental destruction all the more poignant.

Metaphor and Personification

Ushie also employs metaphor and personification to further emphasize the interconnectedness of humans and nature. In "Hill Songs" the poet personifies the hills as "witnesses" to human destruction, lamenting that they "have watched us ravage the land". This powerful imagery underscores the agency of the natural world and highlights the ethical responsibility humans hold towards its protection.

Ethical Dimensions

Beyond depicting the physical consequences of environmental destruction, Ushie's poems also explore the ethical dimensions of this issue. He confronts readers with questions of responsibility and agency, urging them to consider their role in the destruction of the natural world. The poet asks, "who will speak for the trees?" challenging readers to consider the voiceless victims of environmental degradation.

Urgency and Action

Through his evocative language and imagery, Ushie conveys a sense of urgency regarding the need for action. His poems serve as a powerful call to arms, urging readers to recognize the severity of environmental destruction and take steps to protect the natural world. In "Hill Songs 6," the poet concludes with a plea for change: "Let us rise and rebuild the earth". This message of hope and resilience encourages readers to engage with environmental issues and work towards a more sustainable future.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the ways in which Joe Ushie utilizes literary techniques in his poetry collection *Hill Songs* to convey the urgency of environmental destruction. Through a close reading approach and drawing on existing scholarship on ecocriticism, the analysis has revealed how Ushie's evocative language, imagery, and metaphors serve to raise awareness, engage readers emotionally, and inspire action towards preserving the natural world. The study has demonstrated the effectiveness of Ushie's personification of nature, which imbues the natural world with sentience and voice, amplifying the impact of human-induced damage. Moreover, the analysis has highlighted how Ushie transcends mere artistic

expression to engage in ethical philosophy, interrogating the responsibilities and moral obligations of humankind towards the natural world. Ushie's *Hill Songs* serves as a powerful testament to the transformative power of literature, demonstrating its ability to raise awareness, provoke critical reflection, and inspire action. The study concludes by advocating for the inclusion of this collection in environmental education and advocacy initiatives, recognizing its potential to galvanize individuals to become active participants in protecting the natural world.

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