

**Revisiting Eco-critical Discourse in the Poetics of Zakari Sule Musa's  
*Elegy for the Earth***

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***Abstract***

*To establish a critical intervention between language and literature in addressing a real-world problem of ecological nature, this paper studied an eco-critical discourse in the poetics of Zakari Sule Musa's *Elegy for the Earth*. The objective is to analyse how human activities contribute to ecological exploitation and destruction of the earth. Here, the approach of eco-critical discourse is to create awareness of social action by identifying the hidden meanings of ideology behind the texts. Under the conceptual framework, the study sought the philosophy of eco-criticism with eco-linguistics in order to emphasize the power relations between the human oppressor and the oppressed subjects. In doing this, the paper relied on the stylistic tools of foregrounding and intertextuality so as to project Norman Fairclough's three dimensions of discourse and guide our data analysis. Consequent upon this, main findings were made. The bottom line is that ecological crisis is one of the social disruptions as evidenced in the disruptive language of Musa's poetry which could draw public reader's attention more. The study therefore concludes that the public readers in the global village require knowledge of emancipation to enable them resist the discursive injustice of undue exploitation with its attendant destruction.*

**Key words:** *Language, Eco-critical Discourse, Exploitation Destruction, Ecological, Earth, Poetry*

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**Introduction**

Since the emerging studies of language and linguistics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have made English language one of the subjects in most universities worldwide, the attempts to reconcile linguistic theory and methodology with analysis of literary texts continues to attract rivalry and hostile reaction among scholars. According to Dan McIntyre:

Nowhere is this disagreement more clearly seen than in the clash between Bateson and Fowler (See Fowler 1977) which, although useful in terms of raising the issues involved, had the unfortunate effect of dragging the debate down to the level of personal insult. Fowler's famous question to Bateson asking him whether he would allow his sister to marry a linguist represents, perhaps, the nadir of this particular argument. (1)

But William Hendricks has earlier observed in a conciliatory manner before then that “This awareness might suggest that a movement is underway to reestablish rapport between the two fields” (2). Meanwhile, creating a natural connection between the two sub-disciplines has become necessary because literature entails an idiosyncratic language of expression while language is a medium of human communication. It then presupposes that this nexus can be used to analyse “The role of language in the development and possible solution to ecological and environmental problems” (Fill 6).

From this understanding, the paper focuses on eco-critical discourse as an integral part of the contemporary conversation in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) whose explicit philosophy, gives ethical vision of where societies should be heading to under an ideal circumstance. Basically, CDA has a set of core values concerning oppression, exploitation and inequality, under what situations these are acceptable and must be resisted. In the words of Teun A. Van Dijk, CDA “is a key research that primarily studies the way social power, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts” (352).

In any case, this paper relies on descriptive poetics to analyse two poems from Zakari Sule Musa’s collections namely: “*Elegy for the Earth*” and “*Tribute to Earth*”, discussing how literary texts can be interpreted through eco-critical discourse approach in order to raise not only consciousness among the oppressed of their own oppression, but also, among people in ecologically vulnerable, threatened and destructive societies about the impact of their societies on others, both human and non-human, close or distant, present and future generations. For this reason, “Poetics” has become “the theory of literary forms and literary discourse” (Gerard 14) as it helps to show how “text’s different elements come together and produce certain effects on the reader” (Culler 2). To Brian McHale, “The purpose of descriptive poetics is to give exhaustive account of different kinds of objects which can be a group of texts, the entire production of a single author, a particular genre... or even specific styles of literature” (59). It is against this background that we explore so as to describe how Musa’s poetic truth communicates the socio-politically sensitive concerns about the fate of our environment through the readers to the public.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Having articulated the direction of this discourse, the framework of the research is based on the cognate combination of eco-criticism and eco-linguistics in order to contextualise this taken-for-granted phenomenon. In the first place, eco-criticism was a term introduced in the late 1970s by combining “criticism” with a shortened form ecology” – the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats as “eco-criticism designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities” (Abrams 71). Prominent in this philosophy is the critique of binaries such as man/nature or culture/nature, taken as mutually exclusive oppositions. Actually, there is the insight that these entities are interconnected. As Wendell Berry writes in *The Unsettling of America*, “we and our country create one another, depend upon one another, and are literally part of one another... Our culture and our place are images of each other, and inseparable from each other” (18).

In addition to this position, eco-linguistics (ecological linguistics) emerged in the 1990s as a new paradigm of linguistic research, widening sociolinguistics to take into account not only the social context in which language is included, but also the wider ecological issues including other species and the physical environment. According to Arran Stibbe, eco-linguistics critiques. “Those which encourage ecologically destructive behaviour and seeking out those which encourage relationships of respect and care for the natural world”. (117)

Language is part of the environment where we live; it is to be speculated in accordance with this environment. This is why eco-linguistics can expose how common sense assumptions

within transnational capitalism play role in destroying the ecological systems that oppressed communities depend on for their wellbeing and survival, and providing evidence and materials that self directed social movements from these communities can use in working towards social change. This is what C. Stewart describes as “Other directed social movements’ – movements which are struggling for the freedom, equity, justice and rights of others than selves” (92).

However, both eco-criticism and eco-linguistics have come under criticisms in the sense that:

The expanded context ‘eco’ complicates power relations between oppressor and oppressed since it considers impacts on non-human subjects and future generations not yet born, necessitating both theoretical development of critical discourse studies and application of an ecologically based normative framework for judging discourses against. (Stibbe 118)

Apart from this, Dana Philips also critiques especially that:

Eco-criticism is therefore unlikely to make dramatic progress on solving its own hard problems, and in mapping the terrain of its concerns with an eye to the functionality of this terrain’s many and diverse regions... it is rhetorical... and results from the temptation... eco-critics feel when they meet with metaphors like geographical, topographical and cartographical ones (like) explore, mapping, terrain, regions... The temptation needs to be resisted since it is not merely stylistic; it is also discursive, even cognitive. (456)

Yet, the philosophical underpinnings of both eco-critics and eco-linguists are that the creation of language awareness through “(re)readings of world literature from the standpoint of attention to environmental emplacement and environmental concern can have a public consciousness – raising effect” (Philips 37). As “the results of ecological destruction may also cycle back to have an impact on those responsible for them, or their children, which blurs the line between simplistic constructions of the oppressors and oppressed” (Goatly, 538).

### **Methodology**

This study would adopt Norman Fairclough’s three analytical dimensions of discourse in analyzing any communicative event in the poetics. They include ‘text’ (e.g. news report), ‘discursive practice’ (e.g. the process of production and consumption), and ‘social practice’ (e.g. social and cultural structures which give rise to the communicative event (*Media Discourse* 576). Actually, these dimensions are borne out of Fairclough’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that could by extension, justify the objective of eco-critical discourse analysis. And in our case, the dimensions would analyse text through foregrounding, discursive practice through production and reception, and social practice through intertextuality with the lens of critical linguistics in the interpretation of our two selected poems whose transcripts are presented below as follows:

### ***Elegy for the Earth* pp.194 – 195**

1	Energy was the earth	<b>a</b>
	Now, the souls twitch	<b>b</b>
	At its primordial death	<b>a</b>
	In shock, subtle stitch	<b>b</b>
5	I hear affront and rhythm	<b>c</b>
	See the surgeon’s scalpel	<b>d</b>
	Fly and frontally fling	<b>e</b>

	Hailing the drug cartel	<b>d</b>
	As they joyously sing	<b>e</b>
10	See the strewed ripples	<b>f</b>
	Under the flesh hovering skin	<b>g</b>
	Celebrate the clouds of sin	<b>g</b>
	Losing-energy and breath	<b>a</b>
	Anesthetizing her to this death	<b>a</b>

***Tribute to Earth***

1	As you lie in this silent state	<b>a</b>
	In subtle words I have to state	<b>a</b>
	With pain as I moan and groan	<b>b</b>
	With love our meals you have grown	<b>b</b>
5	This is my neat pack of rose	<b>c</b>
	For you and for those who rose	<b>c</b>
	We have given as wreath	<b>d</b>
	For our barley and wheat	<b>e</b>
10	Our cruel knives	<b>f</b>
	Would brush your lush	<b>g</b>
	Unknown we stab our lives	<b>f</b>
	In your beauty that we often flush	<b>g</b>
	We are the ones staked to death	<b>h</b>
	It is not you, our dear earth	<b>h</b>

**Analysis and Discussion**

For the purpose of our textual analysis, these two poems contained both intrinsic and extrinsic features of linguistic and literary tools as the reading can be justified in this eco-critical discourse enterprise in order to address ecological exploitation and destruction of the earth. Therefore, the two poems “have some practical functions in that they have intentions which can be related to the real world around us” (Verdonk 12). Although poetry is detached from the ordinary context of social life because of its strange and unconventional display of language behaviour, yet: “All this does not mean, of course, that literary texts bear no relation to the real world, of course, they do otherwise we would not be able to identify with them and construe some meaningful discourse” (Verdonk 22). As the case may be, “a discourse is a context-bound act of communication verbalised in a text, and waiting to be inferred from it” (22).

Considering the subject of these two poems, Musa’s use of certain linguistic and literary devices in his poetics presupposes readers’ presence in the context of an eco-critical discourse world. We therefore:

[E]xperience the verbal structures of a literary text as elements of a dynamic communicative interaction between writer and reader in which our expectations are fulfilled or frustrated and our emotions roused or soothed by incentives in the text wherever we turn to it. (Verdonk 22)

By so doing, the approach of eco-critical discourse analysis is used here to describe the following with the help of comparison for reporting based on our methodological guide.

**Text**

The text dimension here attended to the language analysis through the transcript of the two poems. Actually, it was a written product that manifested through the analytic concept of

foregrounding in which there is “this throwing into relief” of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language (Wales 157). Thus, foregrounding is a prominent portion of this textual data that contributed to the goal of noticing and exploring linguistic patterns of those poems. Musa’s style seems to apply foregrounding, that is, sometimes created by a deviation from linguistic norms, sometimes by repetition of linguistic forms or other times by rhyme scheme of varied prosody. This can be represented in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Foregrounding in the two poems.**

Repetition	Semantic deviation	Phonological Deviation	Rhyme Scheme
<i>Elegy for the Earth</i>			
Energy [1, 13] Death [3, 14]	<p><b>Metaphor:</b> Energy was the earth [1] Now, the souls twitch [2] In shock, subtle stitch [4] See the surgeon’s scalpel/fly and frontally thing [6] Under the flesh hovering skin [11]</p> <p><b>Personification:</b> At its primordial death [3] Hailing the drugs cartel [8] Celebrate the clouds of sin [12] Anesthetizing her to this death [14]</p>	<p><b>Rhyme scheme:</b> <u>Ea</u>r<u>th</u>, dea<u>th</u>, brea<u>th</u> /ə/ [a in lines 1, 3, 14] versus rhy<u>th</u>m /ðm/ [c in line 5]  ripples /S/ [f in line 10] versus [nil]</p>	<p>1 – a 2 – b 3 – a 4 – b 5 – c 6 – d 7 – e 8 – d 9 – e 10 – f 11 – g 12 – g 13 – a 14 – a</p>
<i>Tribute to Earth</i>			
	<p><b>Metaphor:</b> Unknown, we stab our lines [11]</p> <p><b>Personification:</b> As you lie in this silent state [1] With love our meals you have grown [4] For you and for those who rose/ we have given as wreath [6,7] Our cruel knives [9] would brush your [10]</p> <p><b>Apostrophe:</b> It is not you, our dear Earth [14]</p>	<p><b>Rhyme scheme:</b> Wreath /ri: / [d in line 7] versus wheat /wi:t/ [e in line 8]</p>	<p>1 – a 2 – a 3 – b 4 – b 5 – c 6 – c 7 – d 8 – e 9 – c 10 – f 11 – c 12 – f 13 – g 14 – g</p>

**Sources:** *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Childs and Fowler 11) and *Elegy for the Earth* (Musa 2020)

We can also see from the transcripts of the poems and Table 1 above that the dominant lexical items were nouns which refer to physical and abstract entities. These nouns were divided into two areas of semantic classes that are related to nature and humans. Hence, the distributions of nouns within these two basic semantic classes are shown in the Table below:

**Table 2: Distribution of Nouns within two Basic Semantic Classes**

Nouns Related to nature	Nouns related to humans
<i>Elegy for the Earth</i>	
Earth, stitch, ripples, clouds	Energy, souls, death x <sup>2</sup> , shock, affront, surgeon, scalpel, drug, cartel, flesh, skin, breath
<i>Tribute for Earth</i>	
Rose, wreath, barley, wheat, lush, earth	State, words, pain, love, meals, pack, knives, lives, beauty, ones, death

Source: *Elegy for the Earth* (Musa 2020)

### Discursive Practice

The discursive practice dimension specifies the nature of the processes of text production and reception. As far as this research is concerned, there is no comprehensive reader response study of this collection of poems. But on the basis of global attention, it could be assumed that the readership of the poems among others have consisted mostly students, scholars, critics, social movements and environmental activists who are currently pursuing an altruistic agenda on eco-critical related discourse of environmental exploitation and destruction. Thus, the discursive practice is illustrated in Table 3 below:

**Table 3: Discursive Practice**

Date of Publication	Publisher	Number of Pages	Readership	Ratings/Review	Themes
2020	Kraft Books Limited, Ibadan, Nigeria	243	No record	No record	Ecological discourse of environmental exploitation and destruction

Source: Analyzing Discourse (Fairclough 29).

### Social Practice

The social practice(s) dimension attended to the issues of ecological concern in social analysis such as the institutional and organizational circumstances of discursive event and how that shapes the nature of production and interpretation of the poetic text as well as the constitutive effects of eco-critical discourse under study. In any case, the concept of intertextuality is mostly associated with social practices as “it is usually a small excerpt of a hypertext that assists in the understanding of the near hypertext’s original themes, characters or contexts (Ivanic 8). While Julia Kristeva observes that “Intertextuality implies the insertion of text history ... that the text responds to... and thereby help to make history and contributes to the wider processes of change... trying to shake subsequent texts (66), for Fairclough, “intertextuality is a matter of recontextualization” (*Intertextuality in Critical Discourse Analysis* 51) given that Per Linell defines recontextualization as a “dynamic transfer- and-transformation of something from one discourse text –in-context... to another” (150) because such text tends to have linguistic, social and ideological differences. Meanwhile, the social practices of this eco-critical discourse analysis of the two poems are therefore interpreted as follows:

#### ‘*Elegy for the Earth*’ and ‘*Tribute to Earth*’

Here, the initial introduction of both poems indicates that they are sonnets \_\_\_\_\_ a fourteen line poem of one stanza. But it seems these ones were no perfectly written in iambic pentameters.

On the basis of this, we see as, these poems open our mental and psychological window for us to visualize the observing consciousness of our environmental – material world being subjected to human exploitation and destruction of nature due to greed of construction.

Then, the title of the first poem suggests an elegiac tone towards the persona, the readers and the ecological issue at hand. Even though, an elegy is a poem of serious reflection and lamentation for the dead, the poet however, replaces ‘the dead’ with ‘earth’ through personifications (see Table 1) in order for the readers to capture the pensive mood of what the innocent nature of the earth used to be: *Energy was the earth* and how her present situation of destruction turned out to be: *Now, the souls twitch/At its primordial death*. Of course, the expression in line 1 seems to echo Mahatma Gandhi’s words that “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s needs, but not every man’s greed” (qtd. in Geckoandfly). But there is a change as “*Now, the souls twitch/At its primordial death*”. This perhaps reflects Penn Jillette’s observation that “Everyday, TV, newspaper, and the internet bombard us with a message that we’re destroying the earth” (qtd. in Greckoandfly) because “Harm falls most in man’s destroying way” (Clare 5).

Also, the poet uses metaphors (see Table 1) to drive his poetic discourse from lines 4 to 14 so as to express man’s unconscionable pleasure and brazen knack for exploitation which leaves behind a future of uncertainty and a trail of destruction as in: “*I hear affront and rhythm/See the surgeon’s scalpel/Fly and frontally fling/Hurling the drug cartel/As they joyously siege/See the strewed ripples/Under the fresh hovering skin/Celebrate the clouds of sin/Losing-energy and breath/Anesthetizing her to this death*”. Indeed, this mostly agrees with this thoughtful quote:

Some say the planet is sick and humans are the virus, it is undeniably we as a species have destroyed the beautiful planet at an alarming rate. Putting aside global warming and climate change, no species is as greedy as the human race, we take more than we need and leave a trail of destruction. (qtd. in Geckoandfly)

This experience has become an unfortunate situation for our civilization as Desmond Tutu admonishes that “The destruction of the earth’s environment is the human rights challenge of our time”. (qtd. in Geckoandfly).

In a dramatic sense, the second poem seems to pay tribute through the oration of the poet in memory of the dead earth as a postmortem gesture. Here, both the personal and public voice of the persona portrays a funereal tone as the uses of personifications with metaphors (see Table 1) continue to be reoccurring patterns of the linguistic sign. For example in: “*As you lie in this silent state/In subtle words I have to state/With pain as I moan and groan/With love our meals you have grown*” in stanza one. This intertextuality implies the thought of Albert Hoffman that “it is very, very dangerous to lose contact with the living nature” (qtd. in Geckoandfly).

For the second stanza, the poet is presumed to have taken on ironic note as in “*This is my neat pack of rose/For you and for those who rose/We have given as wreath/For our barley and wheat*” from lines 5 to 8. This is because humanity and nature require reciprocal kindness and not what Kahlil Gibran writes as: “Trees are a poem the earth writes across the sky. Humanity cuts them down for paper so we may record our emptiness” (qtd. in Gecknandfly).

In the last stanza, the poet appears to have shown a shocking realization of man’s self-destructive nature as in: “*Our cruel knives/Would brush your lush/Unknown we stab our lives/In your beauty that we often flush/We are the ones staked to death*” from lines 9 to 13. Somehow, this evokes Jones Cynan’s comment that “How often the process of construction starts with destruction” (qtd. in Goodreads). Also, Jane Goodall asks rhetorical question of “How is it possible that the most intellectual creature to ever walk the planet earth is destroying its only home?” (qtd. in Goodreads). This, of course, suggests a self indictment on man whilst the poet resolves to end the last line of the poem with an apostrophe that “*It is not you, our dear Earth*” (see Table 1) but we the humans. This context could be in comparison to Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s warning that:

Man, do not pride yourself on your superiority to the animals, for they are without sin, while you, with all greatness, you defile the earth wherever you appear and leave an ignoble trail behind you.... and that is true, alas, for almost every one of us! (qtd. in Goodreads)

To this end, it is worthy to note that the rhyme scheme of both poems indicate alternate and coupled rhymes except for the irregularity experienced in lines 5 and 10 as well as line 8 of each sonnet which contributed to phonological deviation (see Table 1). Besides, the mixture of nouns in both poems which belong to two different semantic classes could be analysed to account for what the readers perceive as an interconnection between nature and man. And that suggests some kind of elemental conflict, and how man with nouns related to humans has played the role of destroying earth with nouns related to nature. This is explained in part by Table 3 above.

Since, we make sense of these texts by relating them to the context of our knowledge, emotions and experience, yet eco-poetics has been used as a process of transmutation from the particular to the universal in order to raise social consciousness of the public that is coterminous with the on-going global concerns about ecological crisis. This might be part of the social disruptions which produce the effects of Musa's poetry thereby accounting for the linguistic disruptions to the form, the grammar, the written patterns on a page, the line length, and the inclusion of rhymes. Even then, it entails that those surface manifestations could help to sustain the attention of the readers given that a lack of normal language and presentation make declaiming of poetry more effortful.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the eco-critical discourse analysis in this study is assumed to have shown how the poetic language of Zakari Sule Musa and the discourse of ecological crisis shape each other respectively because the relationship between language and literature within the context of eco-critical discourse presupposes that link between text and society which are mediated to address social problems of ecological crisis since power relations are discursive and ideological to achieve social action. Therefore, the eco-critical discourse analysis for this study can help to develop the public exploitation and destruction of the ecological system which is based on various forms of ideological assumptions that are hidden in the words of the two poems. By enabling us to make these assumptions explicit, eco-critical discourse analysis has provided the readers with a higher awareness of motivations in others and ourselves to ask ontological and epistemological questions. This is to help in solving problems of power imbalances and to enable people resist the discursive injustice of undue exploitation of the earth with its attendant destruction.

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