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EARTH SONG: READING MICHAEL JACKSON AS AN ECO-POET

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Abstract

Michael Jackson is legendary for his massive impact as a musical artist and entertainer. His status as a pop-star is unarguable, with over a dozen musical albums released, and millions of copies sold globally. Yet, the concern of this paper is centred on reading the pop-icon as an eco-poet. In this regard, specific attention is paid to the eco-critical perspective of what I consider his “ecological ballad” entitled *Earth Song*, using the theory of eco-criticism in literary appreciation. A close reading of (and listening to) *Earthsong* unveils the concern of the global icon about the state of the earth’s ecosystem in the midst of humanity’s reprehensible activities, anthropocentrism and disregard for ecological sanity and responsibility. It is found that the ecological images in the poem such as pollution, animal poaching and extinction, war, famine, hunger, deforestation, drought, damaging storms and so on, show that Jackson is not just an environmentalist or an eco-activist but an eco-poet worth studying.

Keywords: Michael Jackson, *Earth Song*, eco-poet, eco-criticism, ecological ballad.

Introduction

This essay begins from the premise that poetry is not music, neither is music, poetry. Yet poetry and music are intertwined and have always shared close affinity. There could be music in poetry and poetry in music, because the attributes of poetry are fundamentally the foundational blocks for the composition of music. These include language (words), sound, versification, chorus, refrain, repetition, rhythm, and rhyme. Some poems, like ballads and dirges, are composed to be sung with instrumentation or read aloud. Moreover, poetry and music are tools for human appellation - they appeal to our senses, emotions and “create beauty whose ultimate end is to give pleasure” (Egudu 62). To put it in proper perspective, a song can be a poem – whether it is accompanied with instrumentation or not - but fundamentally, it must be built on the attributes of poetry earlier stated and most importantly the art of image-making which is the poet’s art of creating “new expressions by means of new association of words by dislocating language” (Egudu 29).

This is the basis upon which the reading of Jackson as an eco-poet and *Earth Song* as an “ecological ballad” is anchored. Jackson’s deployment of eco-critical imagery in the poem, in the form of environmental pollution, land, air, water, animal poaching, war, hunger, deforestation, drought and damaging storms, is evidence of an eco-poetic mind. In fact, *Earth Song* has been referred to as an “ecological anthem” by a music critic (Music & Media 13).

Eco-criticism is a theoretical concept that evaluates environmental and ecological concerns in the humanistic field of literary criticism. The concept was originally coined from two words “ecology” and “criticism” by its foremost proponent William Rueckert (Abrams 89). However, the theory has since gained prominence through the insightful suggestion of Cheryl Glotfelty who sees it as “the study between literature and the physical environment” as well as taking “an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (xvii). It therefore means that this theoretical concept conditions the eco-critic’s focus on the health of the earth, the environmental ecosystem and its vast biodiversity. This thought aligns with Lawrence Buell’s assertion that “environmental criticism ... is usually energized by environmental concern” (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* 97). The theory extends our knowledge into the transdisciplinary world of Environmental Humanities where the gulf between the Humanities, Social Sciences, Physical and Medical Sciences is bridged for the purpose of evoking ecological responsibility through “the spirit of commitment to environmental praxis” to quote Buell for the last time (*The Environmental Imagination* 430). Besides, there is also an enrichment of the eco-critic’s understanding of the diverse world of biotic and abiotic elements in the environment which give vent to humanity’s appreciation of the crises bedeviling the environment.

Reading Jackson from this perspective therefore grants the eco-critic insight to his eco-centred mindset, his environmental satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and how the earth could be prevented from imminent collapse. The reading shows that the pop-icon is displeased with the anthropocene and the concept of anthropocentrism in our relationship with the environment. He is therefore concerned with the re-engineering and re-awakening of the ecocentric soul of humanity so that the status of the earth can be sustained for many generations to come.

Right from the beginning of the poem, Jackson’s eco-consciousness is recognized in his skillful deployment of ecological imagery laced with a *mélange* of rhetorical questions, cast in the form of apostrophe. The first two stanzas are suggestive:

What about sunrise?
What about rain?
What about all the things
That you said we were to gain?

What about killing fields?
Is there a time?
What about all the things
That you said was yours and mine? (*Earth Song*)

The poet is addressing a supernatural personality by emphasizing the status of the “sunrise” and the “rain” on the environment. From the manner in which the language is constructed, one can perceive that there is a state of uncertainty about the “gain” and impact of the solar and aquatic agents in sustaining the earth’s ecosystem. Jackson’s diction encapsulates a worried mind that is ruminating on the unpredictability of these climate agents on us. His vacillation is connected with

his reliance on repetition as the climatic fluctuations dominate the ecosystem, thereby casting doubt “about all the things/that...we were to gain” from Mother Nature.

In the second stanza, Jackson takes us imaginatively to “killing fields” to visualize the savagery of humanity during wars as dead bodies litter the landscape. The gruesome imagery is suggested through rhetorical question and stretches our minds to conceive of the very unpleasant and frightening nature of the human mind. Closely related is the reference to “time”, which in reality, enquires in a subtle manner when the brazen killings will stop; and this thought contrasts with the last two lines of the quoted extract that illuminate our consciousness about our benefits here on earth.

The eco-poet’s concerns about bloodshed, violence and plunder of the earth’s resources are further stressed in the succeeding stanzas:

Did you ever stop to notice
All the blood we’ve shed before?
Did you ever stop to notice
This crying Earth, these weeping shores?

And then, there is a resounding refrain of surprise expressed in unison:

Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah
Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh
Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah
Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh (*Earth Song*)

This time Jackson addresses and appeals to the consciences of blood-thirsty personalities to examine and re-examine carefully their barbaric killings and blood-letting of the earth’s human resources through the orchestration of unbridled violence and senseless wars. The implication is to emphasise the beauty in human interactions and de-emphasise bloodshed, killings and human horror. In another instance, we could perceive the speaker’s appeal to the visual and auditory senses of despoilers of the earth and water polluters through the use of personification. One could see the damage inflicted on the earth through plunder of her terrestrial and aquatic resources as captured through the picture of “this crying earth” as well as “these weeping shores.”

The grievous atmosphere of the poem is further accentuated through the refrain in the succeeding stanza. The lines consist of an alternate repetition of sympathetic exclamations bemoaning the sad state of the earth. The expressions are relayed in one accord, a resounding human lamentation for the earth. The lines repay reading aloud as the sonorous beauty of their repetitive sound appeals to the reader’s auditory senses. In fact, it is the feelings and emotions generated by the refrain that evoke this poem as an *ecological ballad*.

Reading the succeeding stanzas of the poem further underscores the eco-sensitive consciousness of Jackson. This time, it is observed that the poet’s attention is focused on the degree of anthropocentrism in the world. The critical reader of the poem should pay close attention to the use of the plural pronoun “we” in the quoted lines:

What have we done to the world?
look what we’ve done

What about all the peace
That you pledge your only son? (*Earth Song*)

The implication of the speaker's use of rhetorical question in the first line stresses the deplorable condition of earth's terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems as well as their vast biodiversity. There is a sense of shock suggested through Jackson's description of the plundering activities of humans and the ruinous implications for the environment. As a result, the anthropocentric dimension of environmental pillage and destruction becomes the obvious reality to our visual senses. It is not surprising therefore that the word "look" is infused in the succeeding line to elucidate the unpleasant environment. The whole world of nature is riddled with horrific accounts of violent degradation, plunder and exploitation of its resources. One could infer that the poet's reference to the absence of "peace" in the human and beyond human world of nature is not unrelated to the level of climate crisis rocking the earth through global warming based on the destruction of the ozone layer from carbon pollution, devastating flooding from unprecedented amount of rainfall, damaging storms – hurricanes, typhoons as well as cyclones – severe drought resulting in famine, hunger, war and increased number of deaths in the human, animal and plant world. The whole atmosphere is plunged into chaos of unprecedented proportions.

Furthermore, it is debilitating to think that the irony of the situation is connected to the religious background of the poet. In the last two lines of the quoted extract, one observes a speaker whose knowledge of Christianity prompts his use of the rhetorical device in obvious prayer to the father (God) to emphasise the chaos on earth in spite of the "pledge" of His "son" as the sacrifice for "peace". To put it clearly, the biblical appeal is alluded to in John 3:16: "for God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son; That whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life; and in Isaiah 9:6, the "son" is aptly described as "the Prince of Peace". This is the foundation of the thoughts of the poet as he ruminates on the ironical situation of the world's ecological system.

The bizarre environmental situation continues in another part of the poem as the speaker is further puzzled by man's anthropocentric activities:

I used to dream
I used to glance beyond the star
Now I don't know where we are
Although I know we've drifted far. (*Earth Song*)

In this instance, Jackson reflects on his admiration of the blossoming ecological state of the environment sometime in the past. His language suggests a healthy environment, free from degradation and destruction. It is a "dream" world of nature with harmonious interactions between the various ecosystems - from the terrestrial to the aquatic dimension of the earth's landscape. The euphoria of the speaker is better appreciated through a critical understanding of his thought in the second line. There is evidence in his choice of words that the ecocentric dimension within his sphere of contact is quite overwhelming to his imagination.

But with a clever use of contrast in the third line, the speaker's environmental reflection in the "now" contradicts that of the past. The harmonious interactions between the various ecosystems have given way to ecological turbulence, disharmony and fluctuating patterns that baffle the imagination. In the words of Jackson, his knowledge of ecological realities has become distorted by the prevailing pattern of climate change and ecological turbulence. What is therefore

certain to him is that humanity has “drifted far” from its sense of relationship with the environment through anthropocentric actions.

As the poem rises in a crescendo, there is the use of call-and-response technique to espouse the dire situation of the earth, the environment and the status of humanity. The stanzas are replete with probing interrogatives and declaratives that underscore the dilemma of humanity in a world of environmental disharmony, chaos and turbulence:

Hey, what about yesterday?
(What about us?)
What about the seas?
(What about us?)
The Heavens are falling down
(What about us?)
I can't even breathe
(What about us?) (*Earth Song*)

Jackson's use of the exclamatory word “hey” at the beginning of this stanza is deliberate to attract the attention of environmental exploiters and polluters. One could perceive his displeasure with the current state of environmental turbulence as a result of our blatant disregard for environmental property. Moreover, the response (in parenthesis) elucidates the total disregard for the sanctity of human lives; while at the same time, the reference to aquatic and celestial images in the succeeding lines of the stanza underpin the extreme pollution of aquatic as well as atmospheric ecosystem. It is important to point out that the expression in the fifth line reminds us of the depletion of the ozone layer as a result of the release of carbon emissions from industrial pollutants to the “Heavens.” The direct rays of the sunlight on us seems to capture the true essence of the speaker's expression as the whole atmosphere is suffused with suffocating heat (carbon dioxide) which stifles our “breath”

In another part of the call-and-response stanzas, Jackson switches our attention to the animal world:

What about animals?
(What about us?)
We've turned kingdoms to dust
(What about us?)
What about elephants?
(What about us?)
Have we lost their trust?
(What about us?) (*Earth Song*)

The issue at stake here is that Jackson wants the rights of animals to life to be respected. As an animal rights activist, he is obviously against animal poaching. Reading the third line of the stanza suggests the shrewd use of euphemism to stress the unfortunate reality of animal extinction, as the poachers “turned kingdoms to dust.” One is therefore not surprised at Jackson's reference to the “elephants” – whose species is being threatened with extinction as a result of being poached for their tusks. As Shane Campbell-Staton et al found out in their research, “[elephant] poaching resulted in strong selection that favoured tusklessness amid a rapid population decline... [which is] ... the basis of a multi-billion dollar illicit wild life trade.” (483). The commodification of the anatomical endowment of the big mammal for ivory has demonstrated the impact of the

anthropocence to the environment. This is the reality of humanity's quest for commercial gains at the detriment of environmental conservation and inter-relationship. Humans have therefore "lost the trust" of the animal kingdoms whose sense of interconnection, relationship, and friendliness have been abused and maligned by our insatiable craving for money.

In another call-and-response stanza, Jackson appeals to our visual senses to capture images of humans "ravaging the seas" – decimating the aquatic ecosystem for commercial purposes through industrial fishing. As a result, our auditory senses are tickled by the "crying whales" whose lamentations emphasise the dire threats and warnings from the bio diverse marine habitat. The picture reveals that the ocean communities industry engage in illegal, unregulated as well as unsustainable fishing practices that devastate the animal kingdom of the marine community. To quote the words of Junichi Sato, "overfishing also threatens the whales ... [while] scientists working with the international whaling commission estimate that 300,000 cetaceans (Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises) die each year by entanglement in fishing gear; [while at the same time] ship strikes, pollution, ocean noise and climate change bring additional threats" (The New York Times).

Moreover, the use of the "forest" image in the poem is quite significant as it elicits two ideas. First, the sense of serenity between humans and the abundant biotic element from green vegetation. This cycle of matter shows how the green vegetation affects the atmosphere as they release oxygen for human sustenance within the biosphere. Second the "trails" in the forest become paths that encourage recreational activities from picnickers, hikers, mountain bikers, trail runners, dog walkers, equestrians, and environmentalists, as the forest trees provide shelter and canopy for nature enthusiasts. But in clear violation of the ethics of eco-centricity the "forest" and its "trails" are said to be "burnt despite our pleas". This act of deforestation by capitalists causes extensive environmental damage and loss of biodiversity which "would heavily affect human society and consequently the human collapse would start much earlier" (Bologna and Aquino 2).

The tempo of the poem is further heightened by Jackson as he calls our attention to the plight of the vulnerable in the society:

What about children dying?
(What about us?)
Can't you hear them cry?
(What about us?)
Can't you hear them cry?
(What about us?)
Where did we go wrong?
(ooh)
Someone tell me why?

...

What about the crying man?
(What about us?)
What about Abraham?
(What about us?)
What about death again?

(ooh)

Do we give a damn? (*Earth Song*).

One of the beautiful aspects of this poem is the manner in which Jackson uses rhetorical questions. The handling of the technique is quite inspirational and it speaks volumes about the poet's knack for literary interpretation. In the extract, one notices the speaker's appeal to our visual and auditory senses to illuminate and emphasise horrific pictures of dead "children" around the world. We could perceive their "cry" literally from the poet's voice as the desolation of the environment drives them into depths of despair and untold anguish. There is an overwhelming sense of death and loud unpleasant sound that dominates the atmosphere of the poem. The succeeding lines of the extract are charged with Jackson's thoughts that challenge the anthropocene and generate probing insights into the reckless environmental disposition of humanity.

As the poem continues, the dilemma of humanity is emphasised through the image of "the crying man," while the poet's use of biblical allusion stretches the imagination to ruminate on the status and survival of humanity, in a world full of "death" and befuddled by the fury of Mother Nature. The reference reminds us of the survival instincts of Abraham in Hebrews 11:8; "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went, not knowing whither he went." By implication, Jackson is calling on humanity to draw from the survival instincts of Abraham and demonstrate faith as responsible environmental citizens that "give a damn" about the survival of the world entrusted in their care.

At this juncture, it is important to state that the lines from Jackson's eco-poem remind one of the eco-poem of Niyi Osundare, - one of Nigeria's and indeed Africa's finest eco-poets. The poem which is entitled "Once upon a planet" captures the whole essence of Jackson's concerns about the health status of planet earth. The poem is quoted here in full:

The sky above our head is
A ragged umbrella in need of a needle

The rain which leaks through the rupture
Is a cocktail of contending toxins

The cloud up there is a wet blanket
Dripping like a dirge upon a feverish earth

The birds fled several seasons ago
Without leaving a forwarding address

Prodigal saws have felled the joy
of flourishing forests

There is a twilight stanza
In the song of the wind

Several seasons ago we sowed the wind
The whirlwind is ripe for our heedless reaping

The earth we used to know
Is once-upon-a-time (*Green 29*).

The eco-centric consciousness of Osundare seems to be operating at the same wave length as that of Jackson's. From the opening couplet, one could picture the speaker's clever evocation of the depletion of the ozone layer in "the sky above our head". The interesting thing here is that the picture of a depleted ozone layer is captured through the image of an umbrella, whose canopy is worn to shreds. This is quite significant as the analogy draws our attention to the dangers of global warming as the direct rays of the sun-light bakes our skin. The release of greenhouse gases in the upper atmosphere has left the ozone layer in tatters, leaving it worn out and defective like a "ragged umbrella". It is therefore not surprising that it is said to be "in need of a needle" to replete its protective shield. The picture in this instance moves our imaginations to the umbrella repairer using his needle and thread to refill a threadbare canopy of an umbrella.

Apart from the searing heat having direct impact on humans, one can also see from the poem's succeeding stanza that "the rain" is depicted as toxic, as it "leaks through the rupture" of the ozone layer. The "cocktail" image that is deployed in this case is a deft management of imaginative brilliance. The speaker's use of the image espouses the "contending toxins" that constitute "the rain." To have a better understanding of the picture, the critical reader of the poem must have a good knowledge of "cocktail" recipes and preparation by a mixologist. The cocktail is a drink that is made up of a mixture of spirits with other ingredients like whiskey, sugar, water, ice and orange peels or bitters. These ingredients are put in cocktail measuring cup (jigger) by the mixologist, then the mixture is transferred into a cocktail shaker and poured out through a strainer into a cocktail glass. In the mind of Osundare, the toxicity in the environment due to reprehensible human activities has made "the rain" a mixture of "toxins" in the same manner that the mixologist prepares a cocktail with a mixture of ingredients. As these "contending toxins" fall from the sky, they are presented as "a dirge upon a feverish earth." There is lamentation everywhere as the "earth" itself suffers from chronic stress and traumatic events.

Closely related to the feverish condition of the earth is the disruption of the bird's ecosystem with the "birds" said to have "fled several seasons ago" due to the threat and destruction of their ecosystem and vast biodiversity by human forces. The reader should understand that this is no bird migration along the flyway, rather it is the bird displaying survival instincts due to the adverse effects of destructive habits in a world of the anthropocene. There is massive deforestation of the earth's "flourishing forests" as the habitats of these birds are destroyed. Moreover, the wasteful character of humanity is stressed through the poet's use of pun to make the allusion to the biblical "prodigal" son as seen in the parable of the prodigal son recorded in Luke 15:11-32. But in this sense, lumberjacks are seen as the profligate ones using their "prodigal saws" to cut down "the joy" of the birds in the forests. From all indications, the earth has suddenly become a place of destruction, pillage and plunder as its glory and splendor seems to be a thing of the past.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that Jackson is an eco-poet, who uses his creative acumen to evoke his ecocentric consciousness. In reading the poem *Earth Song*, one could tell that Jackson's poetic skills interface with his musical ones. As an eco-poet, he dots his verses with eco-critical imagery to underpin his concern for the state of the environment and draw our attention to the extreme eco-practises of resource thieves who pose as capitalists in our world.

The poet's concern extends into deforestation, drought, famine, hunger, pollution, overfishing, animal poaching, damaging storms, war and so on. These environmental concerns are related through the shrewd deployment of apostrophe, rhetorical questions, repetition, personification, biblical allusions as well as vivid imagery conveyed with simplicity of language. This paper therefore, confirms Jackson not just as an environmentalist or an eco-activist but as an eco-poet that is worth the studious attention of eco-critics globally.

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