

Class and Disability as Environmental Issues in Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika's *Love of an Angel*

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Abstract

Over the years, African literatures have showcased various unbearable problems seen in the environment. Among the represented ill-treatment is degradation of living and non-living beings in the surroundings. This inhuman devastation that is being meted out to both humans and non-humans is caused by man. Apparently, one of the reasons for this ill-behaviour is the amount of valuable material possession the person has to his or her name. This, in turn, incapacitates the individual in the environment. Hence, there is environmental injustice. To avoid examining previous studies, this research investigates class and disability as environmental issues in Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika's *Love of an Angel*. Subsequently, class is the system of placing individuals into groups, that the yardstick for placement depends on the individual's level of socio-economic status, occupation, education, lifestyle, income, accumulated assets, among others. On the other hand, disability is a cultural construct about human bodies, human economic status, human position, human identity, to mention but a few, that the cultural construct ends up handicapping the individual. Thus, this makes them have slight or no chances of survival to attain a good standard of living, owing to the cultural construct that yields inordinate behaviours of human in the environment. Moreover, disability literary theory that fights against human action, which disembodies individuals in the environment is used to underscore this qualitative research. This study unravels that the family environment Olachi finds herself in (that is, Mrs Chendo's household) disables her through a class system that perpetuates human degradation. However, it is crucial to note that the literary writer uses class to represent environmental disability.

Keywords: African Literature, Class System, Disability Studies, Eco-Critical Studies, Family Environment

Introduction

One of the functions of literature is to bemoan attitudinal vices in the environment.

Hence, these nebulous actions are caused by man, the actions in turn, derail or obstruct the healthy living of both human and non-human nature in the environment. Ekwueme-Ugwu affirms that environmental injustices have become a recurring situation represented in African literatures of the twenty-first century (130-131). Consequently, this is to fight against dominance behaviours of man towards both living and non-living being in the environment. These inhuman dispositions are exhibited according to where the society has categorized the individual. The portrayal of this abusive action is because of the individual's background, which is known as class. According to Oyekola and Oyeyipo, class is an arrangement of people according to the societal system of arrangement (133). Mouser asserts that it is economic categorization of individual in society (1-2). In view of this concept, class is the ordering or the placement of individuals, according to their earnings, that disadvantages those that their earning is meagre. In other words, those from poor or low socio-economic background are being subjected to unkind treatment in the environs by man. This disfigures their social identity, which makes them experience social disablement, which is disability. According to Davidson, disability is the attitude exhibited by social organization that restricts activities of some people in the vicinities (6-7). Sandahl and Auslander assert that it is social exclusion meted out to categories of people in the surrounding because of the society's unwillingness to accept their class (7-10). Conceptually on this study, disability is societal-generated behavior that creates barriers in the environment.

In alignment to the above stated opinions, different academic researchers on environment and disability have shown the inter-relatedness of both studies. On the one hand, eco-critical writer Egya displays that the viewpoints of environmental criticism is not limited to one environmental concern because eco-critics like Cajetan Iheka, Fatima Fiona Moolla, Byron Caminero-Santangelo, Rob Nixon, to mention but a few, have incorporated all issues of post-coloniality into eco-criticism (1-11). In the introduction with sub-title "Itineraries of African Ecocriticism and Environmental Transformations in African Literature" of the special edition of *African Literature Today* 38, with the theme "Environmental Transformations". It was revealed that since the publication of "Ecoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses" and Anthony Vital's "Toward an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and Life & Times of Michael K", eco-critical writings have moved tremendously to encompass other emerging issues in the environment (Iheka and Newell 1-10). Gulfishaan and Durafshaan note that any literary portrayed matter in the environment is the sole aim of eco-criticism (504-505).

On the other hand, Emmanuel proposes that literary depictions of disability highlight other environmental issues. (77-81). Another scholar reveals that fictional narratives of disability are used to actualize positive change in the environment (Lara 3). Davis in his research concluded that all literary works, whether devoid or not devoid of impaired character, always depict imaginary society that is beclouded with disablement (44). Through his investigation, Yaro discovers that disability representations often address pressing issues prevalent in independent nations, including dominant-subordinate dynamics, male-controlled communities, leadership ineptitude, and economic struggles (39).

Apart from portraying inter-relatedness, these previous studies have shown that there is a gap that needs to be filled in research. This is to determine how barrier creation faced by individuals from lower class handicaps them in the environs they find themselves. In lending more credence to this study, individuals who subject their fellow human beings to suffering because of their class, disable the victims. This exploitative activity of man disables life in the environment. African literary writers have represented this disheartening situation in order to exterminate its practice. Thence, this qualitative study uses the disability literary theory to analyse class and disability as environmental issues in Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika's *Love of an Angel*.

Review of Related Literature

Scholars have deliberated on class. Mouser elucidates that social location is among the factors that form class (12-13). Nevertheless, inasmuch as it is among the factors necessary for class formation, socio-economic status determines the social location of a class, which also helps to contribute to issues in the environment. Oyekola and Oyeyipo argue that class is not based on ascription, but achievement (133). Apparently, it is based on achievement because it is determined by acquired possession. Moreover, Davidson states that disability focuses on the social aspect of disablement (6). Subsequently, this is among the tenets of disability literary theory. Sandahl and Auslander affirm that it treats how societal laws and structures incapacitate individuals in society (8). Consequently, it leads to environmental issues. In addition, Ekwueme-Ugwu elucidates that dreadful activities of man towards man and nature have become an environmental issue (131-134). Similarly, it disables them in the environment. Olughu notes that eco-critical study helps to reveal abnormalities seen in the environment, which in turn, become environmental issues (1-2). However, disability study also reveals environmental issues.

In addition to the above, Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika's *Love of an Angel* is yet to receive much critical attention by literary critics. Ujowundu in his essay titled

“Man’s Inhumanity to Man in Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika’s *Love of an Angel*”, asserts that the novel treats man’s inhumanity to man which is exhibited through selfishness, greed and hubris (161-172). This notwithstanding, the novel also discusses environmental subordination meted out to individuals. Chukwumezie, T. M. E. in his blurb, emphasizes that the literary work tells of the sufferings a girl child faces in life. Consequently, the sufferings disable them in the environment. Nzerem, T. A. N. added to the blurb by saying that African fiction unravels the bad experiences children face in life. Moreover, the bad experiences disable them in the environment they find themselves. In another blurb by Egbuta, Ikechukwu Otuu states that the story showcases daily struggles. However, it showcases the daily struggles of man in the environment. Again, Nneoma Otuegbe’s blurb asserts that literary art delves into narrating the realistic travails of children who are not living with their parents. Furthermore, these travails lead to environmental issues. Another blurb states that the creative oeuvre calls for sober reflection of man to re-examine their attitudes towards others. Apparently, the creative oeuvre advocates environmental consciousness (Abba A. Abba).

Class and Disability as Environmental Issues in *Love of an Angel*

Literary writers and critics have treated ecological degradation, which focuses on depletion of nature in the environment. This is due to the fact that human beings see themselves as lords over everything on earth and as being beyond criticism. This mental inclination therefore instigates man into portraying selfish desires in his relationship with the environment. Subsequently, this inhuman treatment gravely disables man, fauna, flora, air, water, among others, in all ramifications. Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika in *Love of an Angel* represented the adverse effects of unguided human disposition on the existence of living beings in the environment. Olachi, a girl child, finds herself in an environment that plunders her. This becomes an unbearable dehumanization for her. Obviously, the environment is Mrs. Chendo’s household where Mrs. Chendo and her children subject Olachi to disability because of her class. Its outcome becomes detrimental to her healthy living in the environment.

In Mrs. Chendo’s household, she is not allowed to enjoy the free gift of nature from God. This is seen when she “. . . always wakes up as early as four-thirty in the morning to do the unending house chores” (10). This unending house chores end “. . . when the whole family must have slept off peacefully and soundly” (11). Olughu demonstrates that mistreatment of man and nature by man fosters an unsafe environment (32-33). Even the small time fashioned for her to sleep, she does not enjoy nature that “After eating the take-and-don’t-kill-me-with-eyes-size of food, she is made to rest her body and soul in the kitchen” (11). This is because “Often she

spends sleepless nights trying to ward off the strange sized types of rats playing chess and hide and seek game in the kitchen” (11). It becomes a lucrative activity for the rats that they “... soon grew to like her company. Even a newly born . . . [mouse] seems to anticipate meeting her and enjoy her weaning chase all around the kitchen” (11). Hence, human degradation. Chim elucidates that ecological inquiry has evolved into a multi-disciplinary research focus, now examining social vices that hinder both human and non-human nature within the environment (43-44).

This disability is born out of the forced class which is poor class that she is categorized into by Mrs. Chendo’s household, which, in turn, creates human degradation. This does not allow her to watch the odyssey movie showing on the television in the living room. She quickly “... left the room for the safety of her skin. If she was ever caught peeping into the television, she would have bought a free ticket to her grave” (7). The enforced disability on her through class that yields human degradation “... made her body more mature like that of an eighteen-year-old girl. The suffering has a way of adding six more years to her actual year any time you come across her” (9). Whereas she “... was a young girl of about fourteen years old” (9). Mouser explains that the experiences of people from the upper class differ from those of the lower class (1-2). This human degradation is at such an extreme level that they give her rags as clothes to wear, which are tagged Miriam clothes. Nevertheless, there is “... nothing like Miriam clothes but pieces of rags, worn-out and tattered clothes made from [Mrs. Chendo’s] out dated wrappers” (48). Also, “At her age, she still cuts her hair with a razor blade.... She derives pleasure in pounding her face just to disfigure her beauty” (9-10). This human degradation that disables her in Mrs. Chendo’s house due to her class, makes Mrs. Chendo to give her “. . . a standing order, to finish all the loaves of bread, which she always sells at market. It was an abomination for her to return home with a single loaf of bread” (10). Hence:

One needs to see her struggling under the scorching sun, bare-footed with a weary and tattered body drenched with sweat all in her bid to finish the loaves of bread she took to the market. This made her pass with a nauseating body odour. Olachi almost put her legs on thorns daily just to complete the sales of about sixty-to-eighty loaves of bread she carries to the market every day. She lurks in all the corners of the streets and markets in order to see what providence has in store for her and to make a good sale. (10)

This human degradation being meted out to her “... baffle some of the close neighbours on why she was being subjected to such cruel pains and injustices when her aunty, her so-called benefactress has enough to keep any large family going” (10). The human degradation she experiences because of her class incapacitates her in all the times of the day. After all, upon her encountered stress in selling bread, she

comes back home to face another stress. The environment disables her freedom of expression or speech that she cannot tell or beg Mrs. Chendo to rest for some time. On one occasion, she comes back home after selling loaves of bread, she is not able to come back home on time because “It had rained earlier in the day and that prevented her from selling her goods at ease, yet the thought of what will happen to her at home made her wander farer into the streets” (11). Luckily she “... did manage to finish her sales, but that was late in the evening” (11). On that fateful day, the house chores are enormous for her to complete on time. She has to “...boil *ede* for her and get it ready for soup. There is also *ora* in the fridge she said you should ‘kpaccha ya’ Mummy said you should fetch water and fill the tank outside and then wash all the clothes she kept outside” (12-13). She also has to clean the whole house. These environmental issues remind her thence:

... where she had held her mother’s wrapper in the village stream, playing the goddess of the river. She saw herself splashing water with her fellow children and laying bare their bodies to the hot sun that seemed only to smile at them. She saw the freedom, the freedom of a thousand doves in the air, the freedom of the insects, the crickets in the forest, the freedom of the jumping frogs, the freedom of the fishes in the river. Such freedom she will never experience again. Her lips widened as if to laugh but it ended up in solemn and heart-touching tears. (17)

In addition to the human degradation that disables her due to her class, Junior and Nwabunnaya also leave the “.... living-room as scattered as the hair of a dirty old woman, left-over foods were littered all over the floor. Nwabunnaya and Junior were playing volley ball in the living room scattering everything as they play” (12). She did not finish the house chores before Mrs. Chendo came back from work, due to the enormity of the house chores. She finishes other house chores except the clothes she is washing that includes Mrs. Chendo’s progressive women uniform, she will wear the next day for their meeting by 9 O’ clock and the kitchen she will clean, which she purposely decides to clean after dinner. When Mrs. Chendo comes back from work and notices that she is still washing the clothes. Hence:

With a little pounding on her face, she turned over the whole bucket of water on the young girl’s body. Providence was on her side to escape the iron-bucket directed towards her head. It was made to smash her useless skull as Mama Junior often describes it. The iron-bucket covered her head. Before Olachi could remove the bucket that covered her face, Mama Junior was almost through with her music practice and drum beating exercise on her body. The iron-bucket really dealt with her face. The beating was nothing compared with the pains all over her head. (15-16)

She is not satisfied with it and still thinks of what to do to her “Skin her alive? Set her ablaze? Break her waist? Cut off her breasts? Thrash her like a beast? Hang her? Tie her to a stalk?” (16). Still pondering on how to subject her to disability, she thinks of putting “... pepper in her anus and private part; after all, she had done that on two occasions. That was the day the soup got sour under her care and the day she lost her money! Who cares? Nobody!” (16). Oyekola and Oyeyipo unravel that class makes some categories of individuals encounter poor quality life (133). Finally, she decides that Olachi should sleep outside the house by telling her “I don’t want to see you inside the house until these uniforms are dried” (16). Whereas she “... had another uniform why would she be so heartless to make her sleep in the cold just to dry the other one?” (59). Siebers reveals that social environment handicaps individuals through oppression (4). This human degradation of sleeping outside enables the wind to use her as a football that “It was when she heard the rattling noise of her teeth and the rhythmic beat of her heart that she lets out a loud cry” (8). The next day Olachi enables “... dumbfounded ... [when] The woman wore a new red wrapper, exactly the progressive women uniform” (59).

Class and disability that are environmental issues for Olachi, yield human degradation but “The thought of schooling made Olachi listen attentively. That was the only reason she agreed to come to the city, for her father and her younger ones” (50), which becomes a mirage. Rather “She was confronted with unending house chores that sapped all her energy in her veins and made her an empty sack” (51). Ekwueme-Ugwu expresses that literary works also represent realities of despoliation caused by actions of man to both living and non-living beings (132-133). The day she asks Mrs. Chendo when she would start school instead she “... introduced [her] into the bread business You will start selling bread until you make enough money to start school. My business is bad and cannot accommodate your schooling” (53). Being degraded “Everything she did with the best of her knowledge [in that environment] seemed to be the worst thing she could ever do before her demi-god” (51).

The disability emanating from coming from the poor class makes her receive “... the flogging of her life the day Mama Junior came into the kitchen and saw a dark flame staining the corner of her pot” (51). Angrily, “... she gave her a push that landed her head on the wall. Olachi was still there mopping like a rat dashed on a concrete floor, when from nowhere *koboko* was raining all over her body” (51). Even when she explains “Mummy I am sorry. I didn’t mean to light it this ... high ... I am still getting used to ... it” (51). Mrs. Chendo “... continued until her strength was exhausted. Even Olachi too was tired of crying” (51). She is the one that cooks all the food to be eaten in the house “... but all she could eat were leftovers after the family had eaten

drunk to their satisfaction” (52). Asenath and Santhanalakshmi unravel that eco-critical studies concentrate on eliminating societal created barriers that disrupt environment and human harmony (1286). This human degradation also handicaps her freedom of speech in Mrs. Chendo’s household. Even when it is not her fault, she is blamed for it. One day, she puts water on the gas cooker to boil and goes out to buy bread and eggs for breakfast. The children are in the living-room when she goes out to buy bread and eggs. On her way back, she finds Junior in the kitchen, who has mistakenly pours the hot water on his left leg. Olachi, at the sight of that, quickly applies first aid on him by pouring egg and salt on his leg. Mrs. Chendo, without listening to her excuse that “... he was playing in the parlour when I left, I don’t know how he came to the kitchen” (53). Mrs. Chendo who has been subjecting Olachi to disability because of her class, tells her “How will you know? When all in your mind is evil, but before you will kill any of my children, I will kill you first.” With that, she made for the remaining hot water and spilled it over Olachi’s legs” (53). Lipenga discloses that the present state of an environment like war, marginalization, victimization, discrimination provide a disabling environment for the people (62-64).

Consequently, on the day hoodlums steal the money she earns from selling bread, Mrs. Chendo rejects her submission because she comes from a poor background. Moreover, Mrs. Chendo assumes that she has misused the money, spending it on frivolous things like hair styling. In the middle of the night, she locks the room and carries the “... hot surface of iron touched Olachi, she had leaped off like a wild pig, shouting on top of her voice . . .” (55). Mrs. Chendo realizes that “... she was done with her body but still could not extract anything from her, she gave up her struggle” (56). Barnes pointed out that violence is associated with disability because it destroys human enablement in the community (25). The human degradation subjects to her because of her class which, in turn, disables her in the family environment reminds her of the former environment that has no environmental issues. Thus:

She saw herself in the forefront with the *nza*, that white horse tail, doing what she knew how best to do. She saw the laughter on her face, and laughed out tears. She saw herself in a circle on the floor with her brothers and sisters, doing justice to a huge pile of *fufu* and *egusi* soup. They will throw the balls of *fufu* up and down before eating it. It was all fun. She saw the whole family round their father listening to his sweet folktales about the tortoise and the squirrel, the tortoise and the dove, the tortoise and the lion. She remembered how she had laughed and fallen on her father when she learnt that the tortoise fell from the height and broke his shell. She had laughed when tortoise was taken away by his creditor. (60)

In her hunger to return to an environment untainted by human degradation, she "... wished she could still recognize her way . . . [to her family] but like one doomed with a spell, she had forgotten even the name of her town. As she thought about her childhood freedom [she experienced in her family environment], hot tears rolled down the more" (60-61). Subsequently, this human degradation because of her class that disables her, is not meted out to her only by Mrs. Chendo but by her children too. Junior and Nwabunwanne do subject her to disability in Mrs. Chendo's household. For instance, Junior tells her, "Mummy said you should stop talking to us. She said that you are smelling, hum. Junior mocked her by closing his nose" (13). Davidson notes that individuals who are subjected to disability by the society, encounter barrier that creates social limitation in the environment (4-8). Oliver, his first son is not left out, he has been trying various means to have her. He renders fake apologies and gives Olachi packet of rice and chicken, which "... he added a substantial amount of Indian hemp that was to make Olachi lose all control" (62). Then he zooms off to play video games in the living room. This is to await when she will enter his trap. Being that Olachi has not eaten the whole day, "After a while, the aroma of the food took no time to seduce Olachi" (62). He invests his cassava inside her. This affects her that she did not go out to sell bread. She cries all day when she wakes up and realizes she has been deflowered and nothing can be done again. Mrs. Chendo comes back from work and "... again put pepper in her private parts" (64) for not selling bread. Oliver a consoler indeed consoles her and makes his way again by investing his cassava in her and "That became a daily routine" (64).

This human degradation arising from environmental issues lead to pregnancy and being disabled because of her class, they reject her and the baby. Mrs. Chendo under the guise of taking "... you to the village to meet your father and apologize to him, and then we find out the marriage protocols and see if we can proceed" (98). All these promises are from the pit of hell. In addition, the dress, shoe and wig given to her are to cover her evil intentions. Sandahl and Auslander expiate that disability is the way the people in environment interact with the individuals around them that creates environmental disablement and not a physical condition (8). Mrs. Chendo drops her in the middle of nowhere with the one thousand five hundred naira she throws on her feet. Then tells her thus:

I picked you from the gutter and in the gutter I want to drop you. My son will never ever marry a cheap whore like you. So from here you can find the way to your village and go and deliver the stupid thing in your womb. Let me never see you in my house again, or that will be your last! Well you will never ever locate me. We are four states away from where I live. (102)

The disability the family environment has bestowed on her because of her class, which creates environmental issues that yields human degradation, becomes a heavy burden to remove. Snyder and Mitchell contributed by saying that communities beclouded with class and racial thinking or actions weaken man's enablement in society (111). At last, in all her efforts to overcome the effects of environmental issues being meted out to her by Mrs. Chendo because of her class, which in turn, disables her, and create human degradation. Neither did she see her family again nor Mrs. Chendo's household. She is being degraded to death by motor-car accident. St. Albert's Hospital the masses rush her to couldn't restore her back to life because she has lost so much blood and "... she had no medical attention from the way the baby sat precariously in her womb" (233). The narrator in his story reveals that Mrs. Chendo's household or family environment has been environment that creates environmental issues for people from lower class which in turn disable them. People "... like Miriam, like Isabela . . ." (63) . . . and Enuma" (47).

Conclusion

The textual illustration of this essay has shown that Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika's *Love of an Angel* explores class and disability as environmental issues. In other words, how class disables individuals becomes an environmental issue. Moreover, this qualitative research incorporates disability literary theory for its investigation. The analysis of this study reveals that the disability enforced on Olachi through class, creates human degradation. Thus, Mrs. Chendo's household, in other words, family environment becomes an environment that handicaps individuals from the lower class, which in turn, creates environmental disability.

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