



# **Stylistic Analysis of Gambian Poetry: An Exposition of Ecological Injustices**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the use of poetry to engage the problems of environmental abuse in postcolonial Gambian society as depicted in the poem ‘Bending’ from Baaba Sillah’s anthology *Péñcum Taakusaan*. Regarded as part of the intellectual struggle against silent but destructive forces, the paper draws attention to the threats and consequences of environmental degradation and social injustice to the wellbeing of Gambian society. With reference to Nixon’s (2011) conception of slow violence and environmentalism of the poor, the study aims to explore the use of both linguistic and literary devices to highlight the gradual destruction of environmental resources in Gambian society as a result of colonial, post/neocolonial and local forces. The stylistic analysis of the poem selected on the basis of its thematic focus also draws insights from Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics to highlight the role of contextual factors in the use of language. The analysis indicates that the poet has exploited the use of a number of linguistic and literary devices to convey the socio-economic significance of environmental degradation.

*Keywords:* ecocriticism, slow violence, environmentalism, environmental degradation

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## **Introduction**

Due to the fact that the productive base of the economy depends on the availability of environmental resources to function, environmental degradation has emerged as a fundamental roadblock to national growth and a major platform of competing forces with severe socio-economic consequences and injustice for the poor and vulnerable. In postcolonial societies like The Gambia where pressing environmental problems of exploitative deforestation and water pollution have impacted on the once pristine ecological system, the consequences and socio-economic injustice of environmental degradation are more damaging.

A major part of these consequences has been a severe reduction in the yield of climate-sensitive activities such as crop production, livestock rearing, and fisheries. Given the significance of these activities as a means of subsistence livelihood for the ordinary Gambian, the far-reaching implications of the spoilage of environmental resources on the national socio-economic discourse may be understood. This paper aims to investigate how the causes and effects of these environmental problems are depicted in Baaba Sillah's poem "Bending".

As an iconic figure on the Gambian literary scene, Baaba Sillah demonstrates in his works a thorough understanding of Gambian culture, history and socio-economic system. The poems that spring from his anthology, *Péñcum Taakusaan*, not only derive their aesthetics from the cultural environment, but are also firmly anchored in their thematic concerns on pressing social matters. In the poem under study, Sillah assumes the posture of an ecocritical poet who can see the direct link between environmental degradation and the people's socio-economic problems, raising the issue of slow violence and environmentalism of the poor in the Gambian context.



Ecocritical poetry or ecopoetry may be described as a literary struggle by poet-activists who attempt to capture environmental threats that may although be unnoticeable, yet effectively destroy the ecological community. The works of such poets therefore are first a representation ‘of the land and its people’ and, then more importantly, ‘an advocacy for human and environmental justice’ (Egya, 2016, p. 2). As Flannery (2016, p. 429) explains, the main crux of ecopoetry is to ‘question and renegotiate the human position in respect of the environment’ in a manner which culminates to a condemnation of the institutions seen as responsible for destroying the environment.

This struggle feeds directly into what is known as ecocriticism, a trend of literary criticism that, according to Bracke and Corporaal (2010), deals with human and nature relations in literature. In other words, it may be described as a disciplinary thread of literary theory that establishes a link between literature and the physical environment. Highlighting the extra-literary drive behind this thread, Dobie (2012), alluding to Buell (2005), argues that the investigation of this link should be informed, beyond concerns for mere thematic study, by a commitment to good environmentalist praxis.

Despite the Western origins of ecocriticism as a literary and cultural discipline (which could have negative implications for postcolonial studies given the tendency for bias and prejudice in imperialist manipulations of epistemic regimes), Egya (2018) contends that its global spread has engaged postcolonial scholars in the hitherto ignored problems of environmental abuse in postcolonial African societies. This offshoot has come to be known as postcolonial ecocriticism.

Explicating a major focus in postcolonial ecocriticism, Egya’s (2016) argument demonstrates how Anglophone African poets lament the way in which African people have been physically and spiritually displaced from their lands through a process known as ‘slow violence and environmentalism of the poor,’ a phrase coined by Nixon (2011). As Nixon



explains, slow violence of the environment refers to a subtle form of destruction ‘that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’ (p. 2). On the other hand, environmentalism of the poor is ‘triggered when an official landscape is forcibly imposed on a vernacular one’ (p. 17).

In Egya’s (2016) opinion, poetry from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is arguably the most vibrant canon of Anglophone African poetry that is committed to poeticising the plight of Africans confronted with extreme environmental despoliation in the face of large-scale and unethical exploitation by post/neocolonial and local institutions totally negligent of the local inhabitants’ predicament. The poets in this tradition include: Tanure Ojaide, Ogaga Ifowodo, Niyi Osundare, Onookome Okome, Joe Ushie and Bassey Nnimmo. Egya observes further that this trend of ecopoetry is appraised by a two-dimensional imaginative creativity: a celebration of the unspoiled beauty of the environment before despoliation, and an aggressive stance against the institutions to blame.

It is in the context of this literary movement that this paper intends to exploit the use of literary stylistics tools in a linguistic-cum-literary analysis that aims to characterise how language is used in Gambian poetry to depict the causes and effects of destructive cultural and technological exploration of natural resources in the form of deforestation, mining, and fishing, among other forms of environmental exploitation in The Gambia. This drive is contingent on Huggan’s (2007) argument that the postcolonial scholar’s primary commitment to social justice lends more impetus to the foregrounding of pertinent ecological concerns in his/her human, social, political and economic spheres. The paper is also intended to contribute the Gambian postcolonial ecocritical perspective that remains unexplored to the Anglophone limb of ecocriticism.



### **Statement of Research Problem**

Contemporary Gambian poets such as Baaba Sillah have devised a creative portrayal of the worsening conditions of the ordinary Gambian man and woman. Their poems carry the portrait of the ordinary Gambian who, in the context of a postcolonial society confronted with an ever-increasing cost of living, has been physically displaced from his land and spiritually denied his indigenous means of a livelihood by post- and neocolonial institutions in tandem with the complicity of his own government. The pain, poverty and helplessness portrayed in their poems calls for a critical attention requisite in the literary and cultural struggle against environmental destruction and socio-economic injustice. Hence this paper's attempt to explore the uncharted realm of environmentalism in Gambian poetry by engaging Sillah's 'Bending' in order to amplify the calls for redress.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are to

1. identify the environmental degradation in the poem;
2. analyze the linguistic and literary devices deployed in the poem; and
3. discuss the linguistic and literary devices in relation to the socio-economic implications of environmental degradation expressed in the poem.

### **Research Questions**

The study is guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the environmental problems addressed in the poem?
2. What are the linguistic and literary devices deployed to address these problem?
3. How are linguistic and literary devices used to address the socio-economic implications of environmental degradation in the poem?



## **Methodology**

This paper is a qualitative study that aims to generate an in-depth analysis of how language is used in the poetic representation of environmental degradation in Gambian society. The data consists of a poem titled 'Bending' from Baaba Sillah's collection *Péñcum Taakusaan*. This poem is chosen for the study on the basis of the socio-economic implications of the pressing environmental concerns it focuses on. The most relevant portions to the focus of the study are extracted from the poem through a close reading that pays keen attention to the cause-and-effect factors of environmental destruction raised in the poem. The selection of the theory of slow violence and environmentalism of the poor is intended to highlight the silent, gradual exploitation and destruction of environmental resources that surreptitiously pushes local inhabitants to destitution. It is also intended to mirror the complicity of sitting governments in officializing indigenous lands for use for use by exploitative companies. The application of Systemic Function Linguistics is only meant as a gateway to this extra-literary aspect as the primary concern of the study. Thus, the analysis of the linguistic and literary devices pays close attention to how these devices are utilized so as to interrogate the causes, effects, and socio-economic implications of environmental despoliation expressed in the poems.

## **Theoretical Framework**

SFL is a linguistic model that sees language as a "system of words" that is conceived as a tool for meaning-making (Matthiessen & Halliday, 1997, p. 2). According to Halliday (1994), the theoretical justification for the systemic component of SFL is that decisions are made from a network of interrelated systems in order to transmit meaning. According to Halliday and Mathiessen (2013), these systems are made up of lexico-grammatical components devoted to the interpretation of human experience as configurations that must be understood in light of the circumstances. Egudu (2007) asserts that poetry is a creative use of



words that interprets human experience. Thus, like other language users, poets also draw on the lexico-grammatical resources devoted to articulating human experience.

Notably, SFL is a linguistic model that is based on a functional framework rather than a formal one, according to Halliday (1994). This is because SFL was developed to explain how language is structured based on the functional role it fulfils. Halliday coined the word "metafunction" to describe how language is functionally ordered and to demonstrate the inherent role of function in influencing language usage. According to Halliday (1994), language has two main purposes: the ideational metafunction, which expresses human experience, and the interpersonal metafunction, which enacts social relations. The discourse that conveys interpersonal and ideational meanings is constructed by the textual metafunction. As a result, the process of creating meaning involves three interconnected metafunctions that all make use of lexico-grammatical resources and rely on context to be produced and understood.

According to Taiwo (2006), SFL analysis aims to investigate how context influences and limits the selection of linguistic structures and elements to be used in a given event. This is guided by the understanding that the context of any linguistic event is just as significant as the linguistic elements that make up the event (Canning, 2014). As Yeibo (2011) suggests, SFL shows that the subject matter and other social and contextual variables determine the linguistic features in a text. Mcrae and Clark (2004) go on to explain that the importance of context is highlighted by the dialectics that exist between a text's message and how that message is received within the broader framework of culture and social relations. They contend that this is due to the fact that just as context affects the writer's selection of linguistic devices, it also affects the reader's comprehension of the text by influencing the reader's assumptions, social codes, and customs. But Eggins (2004) poses the fundamental



question of what aspects of context are likely to affect the reader's interpretation of the text and the language employed in it.

In answer to this question, Eggins (2004) states that the three metafunctions are components of context that are pertinent to every text and are referred to as the context of situation. According to Canning (2014), the social realities in the immediate context comprise the context of situation. Thus, it is possible to view the metafunctions as a mirror of the social realities that make up the situation's backdrop. Given this, Canning (2014) goes on to say that all of the metafunctions are important for interpreting meaning since they serve as the text's central point, where linguistic expressions and contextual elements converge. Thus, as Hassanpour and Hashim (2012) affirm, the metafunctions not only demonstrate the relationship between language form and socially created meaning in the discourse of poetics, but they also highlight the connection between the poetry of commitment and its goal of highlighting social problems and injustice.

Eggins (2004) examines the textual material's schemata as a component of the textual metafunction in order to address how context is negotiated into the text. According to his explanation, the schematic structure refers to the text's constituent parts, which can be examined using a functional labelling system that divides the text using either a formal criterion—such as stanzas—or a functional criterion—such as the function of the various parts of the text. Given this, the textual metafunction is particularly pertinent as it offers a framework for examining the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions as well as the social, cultural, and other contextual concerns that the poetry under consideration raises.

The extra-textual context is just as important to the reception of a text as the textual function, even though the latter may offer certain context-related elements. According to Matthiessen and Halliday (1997), the ideational function uses the lexico-grammatical options offered by the transitivity system to construct experience through structural configurations. In



accordance with the kind of experience, according to Halliday (1994, p. 106), "[t]he transitivity system construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types". According to Halliday, there are three primary processes in English: relational, mental, and material processes. Poets, and other text producers as well, use lexico-grammatical choices that are appropriate for the type of experience they are describing in order to construct the social experiences they highlight. In light of this, the study aims to emphasize not only the experience of ecological injustice imparted in 'Bending', but also the poet's attitude and that of society towards those experiences by examining the choices made from the transitivity system based on the poet's preference for one process type over another.

Furthermore, Matthiessen and Halliday (1997) postulate that the interpersonal function in the text is how social interactions are implemented. According to Gallardo (2006), poets' use of mood and modality patterns allows them to navigate these relationship characteristics. Thus, the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions "orient towards two "extra-linguistic" phenomena, the social world and the natural world," according to Mathiessen and Halliday (1997, p. 13). In this way, these metafunctions offer the linguistic instruments for examining extra-textual elements that influence the selection of literary and linguistic techniques by poets as well as how such methods are interpreted by readers.

Ultimately, SFL may be viewed as a helpful framework for a stylistic analysis that aims to draw attention to serious environmental concerns by examining literary and linguistic elements as well as the circumstances that lead to their usage in the poem being studied. Interesting insights into the social and ecological issues raised by the poet can be gained by examining his selection of linguistic elements, preference for specific clause types offered by the transitivity system, his deployment of lexico-grammatical resources to enact interpersonal relations, and how these are arranged in textual form.



Regarding the intersection between SFL and Nixon's concepts of slow violence and environmentalism of the poor, SFL offers resources for examining the representation of slow violence in prevailing narratives. Environmental harm is frequently invisible because it is not immediately represented visually or linguistically in the media. By examining the ideational decisions made in texts pertaining to environmental concerns, SFL can assist in identifying these gaps. Nixon's emphasis on the environmentalism of the poor is consistent with SFL's capacity to examine the ways in which underprivileged groups express their hardships. SFL can look at how these communities create counter-narratives that subvert prevailing discourses about environmental degradation and development using language. Additionally, both Nixon and Halliday stress how systems contribute to the continuation of inequality through environmentalism of the poor and under-privileged. SFL's critical approach can examine how language is used to unmask slow violence and its inevitable outcomes.

Although it is challenging to narrativize slow violence because of its gradual character, through SFL, the use of linguistic resources such as parallelism and cohesive devices, interpersonal involvement, and literary devices like simile and metaphor to emphasise the cumulative effects of slow violence can be investigated in order to make it understandable and urgent. Halliday's SFL and Nixon's idea of gradual violence and environmentalism of the poor both have the ability to dissect and reinterpret texts about social (in)justice and the environment. In order to promote a better knowledge of and reaction to environmental injustice, academics and activists can utilise SFL to critically analyse the language used to (mis)represent environmental concerns and to elevate the voices of those most impacted by slow violence.



### **Analysis of Data and Discussion**

On the basis of Egya's observation that Anglophone African ecocritical poetry is comprised first by a celebration of the unsoiled beauty of the environment before the arrival of destruction forces, one can claim that Sillah's ecocritical activism begins with an alignment with the canonical practice of other poets. This is evident from his poeticisation of the universal balance that existed between human beings and their natural environment at the beginning of 'Bending':

Creation equalises and harmonises tendencies at odds though.

Humankind, like humane arrows in a humanistic quiver,

Tipped their arrow-head ends with humane regard for creation

Grafted the shafts...knowledge that

The Cosmos has finite endowments...man's duty to:

Preserve, conserve, nurture, cherish, treasure is abiding.

The conjunctive relationship between the synonymous verbals 'equalises' and 'harmonises' projects the image of mutual interdependence that once defined relations between man and his environment. In addition, the metaphorical use of 'arrows' in a 'quiver' is a compelling device that conveys the manner in which notions about how to use the environment reflected a sense of restraint. This device is rendered more emphatically through the pre-modification and comparison in line 2 of the extract. Whereas the modifiers 'humane' and 'humanistic' reflect an awareness of the ecological system as essentially an irreplaceable 'endowment' to be used in a judicious manner, the explicit comparison of human beings to 'humane arrows in a humanistic quiver' portrays the protective tendency that human activities bore towards the environment.



The piling of synonymous verbs in an order of ascending tenderness does not just emphasize reverence for the environment, it also demonstrates that mutuality between the human and non-human aspects of the ecological system is a necessary and increasingly demanding obligation which humans carried out in the past. Thus, the persona renders from a universal point of view that the historical relationship between Gambians and their natural environment was not always of a destructive sort because they respected the dictates of nature. The lesson thus appears to be that present generation of Gambians must recover this lost reverence for the ecological system.

This is necessary in order to recover the socio-economic benefits that earlier generations enjoyed in accessing a reliable means of livelihood. Consider the following extract.

Termite clay smelted metals  
Oyster shells worked into adobe  
River clay moulded colander, urns, jars, made paints,  
Trimmed and smoothed the décor  
Bark beaten into fibre cloth  
Animal hides tanned to Mandinka leather  
Njaalang flowers fixed Indigo...all colours of the spectrum  
Fabled cloth in *Baara-fula*...

The poet's predilection for syntactic parallelism is the most outstanding stylistic device in the extract. Occupying the syntactic slot of subject in each line of the extract above is a raw material from the environment used for a specific purpose: termite mounds and the bark of trees from the forest used for the production of farm equipment and clothing by craftsmen and craftswomen; oyster shells and river clay from the Atlantic Ocean and River Gambia used for building houses and making house utensil; animal hide from livestock used



as leather pouches, slippers and prayer mats. A closer analysis will also reveal that the nominal groups at subject position are all artefacts of natural resources whereas the nominal groups at object position are cultural artefacts of craftsmanship. Thus, the argument is by establishing a pattern of nature resource artefacts versus cultural artefacts in a material-product relationship, the persona raises the socio-economic implications of a good environment in supplying raw materials for economic production and utility – a relationship that is quickly disappearing from the present Gambian economic system.

In addition, the material processes represented by the verbal elements of the clauses in the extract depict the cultural procedures through which natural resources were put to produce various items essential to different aspects of life represented by the syntactic objects. Thus, by maintaining the parallel Subject-Verb-Complement (SPC) pattern throughout the extract, while varying the lexical items that fill the syntactic slots of Actor and Goal, the poet utilizes a syntactic arrangement that establishes the ideal connection that existed between different aspects of the Gambian ecological system and the lives of the people. Furthermore, using inanimate resources as Actors in material processes that would normally have been performed by animate beings, the poet brings to life the fact that the environment was a living source of economic activity, occupation and livelihood for the people.

However, the entrance of colonial and neocolonial forces into the Gambian ecological scene marks a point of departure into the slow violence and environmentalism of the poor that characterises the relationship between the ordinary Gambian and his ecological system today. Turning his attention to the agents responsible for the loss of the primary source of socio-economic growth, Sillah assumes the aggressive stance that typifies the second component of Anglophone African ecopoetry against the culpable institutions. The anguish in the following extract is easily discernible.



... trampled over the prevailing mutuality

The complementarity, the homeostasis

Odious are his turbid slushy, spikey, boots

Treading, over-riding, squashing, squelching, mashing...

Trade between and among peoples far and beyond took root

The lines became destructive and extractive

Tarrying technologies...ravished and harried

It is relevant here to make reference to Nixon's (2011) argument that environmentalism of the poor often takes the form of a resource imperialism that is imposed on poor countries in the global South in order to meet the consumer demands of rich countries in other parts of the world. Such resource imperialism, itself a form of neocolonialism, has impacted on the ecological system of the Kombo South region of The Gambia which, blessed with long stretches of silver beaches, had provided food and income for many generations of Gambians. However, the arrival of international fishmeal companies has led to a reckless emission of toxic waste into the sea and the nearby lagoons imposing severe pollution upon the ecological system of the once pristine area. Thus, the persona's lament on the destruction of the environment as a source of socio-economic growth could be extended to the destruction of this once vibrant source of food and finance for many Gambians.

In reference to the stylistic features of the extract, the metaphor of the beast contained in the first line is significant not only because it conveys the anguish that tones the extract; it can also be used to locate the blame for the degradation of the Kombo South coastal environment on the greed of such multinational companies interested only in extracting resources without any regard for the environment or the local inhabitants who depend on those resources for survival. This lack of consideration for any relevant principles of safe



environmental practice is reflected by the lexical choice of the verb ‘trampled’, a beastly act which demonizes the agents responsible for destroying the environment. Their environmentally destructive actions are depicted in the string of hazardous material processes of ‘treading, over-riding, squashing, squelching, [and] mashing...’ The use of cacophonous sounds in the verbs as a device to conjure an auditory image of destruction, coupled with their arrangement in ascending order of aggressiveness, suggests the increasing pollution and destruction of this environment as the multinational companies continue to expand their environmental rape of the Kombo South ecology.

As quoted from Egya above, the complicity of government in facilitating slow violence and environmentalism of the poor is reflected in the nominal group ‘trade’. In the context of post- and neocolonial arrangements, governments are usually the hypocritical entities that make trade deals with such multinational corporations. In that case, the nominal ‘lines’ suggests the boundaries that should have been used to delineate the activities of the companies within the range of environmentally safe limits. But as indicated by the predicate adjectives, ‘destructive’ and ‘extractive’ define the consequences of the activities of the companies and the connivance of the government for the human and non-human population of the Kombo South ecological system. Government’s preference for silence and political indifference is usually a weapon to safeguard the interest of its economic benefactors rather than its impoverished citizens.

Unfortunately, environmentalism of the poor is not perpetrated only in the Kombo South region of The Gambia, nor has it spared the woodland ecological system of the rural countryside. In fact, a more subtle and pervasive form of slow violence predates the Kombo South environmental catastrophe. Accompanying the resource imperialism of the nineteenth century, Western demands for Africa’s agricultural products led colonial authorities to introduce, or rather impose, a cash-crop first policy in most colonial territories in East and



West Africa. The Gambia's experience with this policy is a prime instance of how such programmes fit in perfectly with Nixon's concept of slow violence and environmentalism of the poor. Sillah alludes to this in the following extract from 'Bending':

All the woodland made way for the cash-crops  
Rubber, tea, coffee, groundnuts, and cotton,  
Infamous production, bizarre places  
Instruments of agonies, suffering en-masse!

The persona's use of a declarative 'All the woodland made way for the cash-crops' is a compelling matter-of-fact portrayal of a drastic change in the woodland ecological system of The Gambia, conjuring the image of widespread deforestation. Ordinarily, Gambian farmers cultivated food-crops such as rice, maize and millet. Colonial authorities however lured them, with the prospect of revenues, into the cultivation of groundnuts and cotton needed for Western industrialisation, provoking a staggering scale of country-wide deforestation as woodlands were cleared for cultivation. In this sense, the nominal group 'cash-crops' may be considered a metaphorical representation of the resource imperialism that motivated colonial agricultural policies which had devastating effects that continue to haunt Gambian society to date. Today, the nefarious effects are all too evident. In addition to the deforestation and loss of bio-diversity consequent upon it, these policies caused food insecurity, economic dependency and entrenched poverty as farmers who cultivated subsistence crops for food and raised money from their sales became fully dependent on the production of groundnuts and cotton and their sale on the fluctuating tides of international markets that have now disappeared for their survival. To worsen the situation, their present reliance on a lengthy chain of middlemen, including many tiers of wholesalers and aggregators has affected the sector. In this light, the attributive qualifier 'infamous' encapsulates the indigenous attitude towards this mode of 'production', highlighting its



unpopularity and lack of cultural value for the farmers. Coupled with the use of the metaphor ‘instruments of agonies’, the injustice is laid bare. Stuck with produce they can neither eat nor sell, Gambian farmers are completely stripped from any possibility of self-subsistence by the cash crop policy, visiting upon the local people an enduring form of slow violence.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to analyse the use of linguistic and literary devices to address the issue of environmental degradation in the poem ‘Bending’ by Baaba Sillah. By deploying the tools of a literary stylistics linguistic-cum-literary analysis, the study attempted to highlight how local, colonial, and neocolonial forces exploited the natural environment for its resources without due regard for safe environmental praxis, resulting in harmful effects on the ecological system's human and non-human populations, as portrayed in the poem. The analysis has revealed that the poem raises a juxtaposition of the past mutual interdependence and the present exploitation of the ecological system. The analysis has also attempted to read the poem as a depiction of the environmental degradation of the Kombo South region of the country by multinational corporations linking it closely with the colonial resource imperialism that resulted in implementation of harmful agricultural policies that continue to adversely affect both the environment and socio-economic development of The Gambia. The paper has investigated how linguistic and literary devices have been deployed to highlight the socio-economic implications of the environmental despoliation raised in the poem. The findings indicate the poet’s use of syntactic devices such as parallelism and cohesive techniques, interpersonal involvement, and literary devices of metaphor and simile as major stylistic tools to portray the effects of environmental destruction on the livelihoods of the people.



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