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**SIN, PUNISHMENT, ATONEMENT AND REDEMPTION: AN ECO-CONSCIOUS REPRESENTATION OF NATURE IN S.T. COLERIDGE'S *THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER* AND LOLA PERPETUA K. NKAMANYANG'S *RUSTLES ON NAKED TREES***

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**Abstract**

The aim of this study is to explore similarities in the ways two writers from the background of entirely different literary genres and epochs; the nineteenth-century romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), and the postcolonial novelist, Lola Perpetua Nkamanyang in *Rustles on Naked Trees* (2015), depict the inextricable link between human and non-human nature, expressing their eco-consciousness (in the form of a plea for the preservation/protection of nature) with precision in a pattern of sin, punishment, atonement and redemption. Coleridge, writing at the time when ecocriticism was not seriously thought about, and Lola Perpetua at a time when this theory is still in its budding stage, express with remarkable precision the ecological wisdom that humanity harms itself more when humans harm nature. According to the two writers, nature's revenge is too powerful for man to bear hence, the urgent need for mankind to repent and atone for crimes against nature by shifting from his predominantly anthropocentric outlook to a biocentric or ecocentric attitude. It emerges from both the poem and the novel that humanity is the cause of the present environmental/ecological crisis and unless the harmonious coexistence between human and non-human nature is re-established, mankind will continue to suffer from a vicious cycle of natural disasters—draughts, earthquakes, floods etc., all of which both authors interpret as Nature's vengeful reaction to global environmental pollution and other forms of ecological damage.

Keywords: Coleridge, Lola Perpetua Nkamanyang, Ecocriticism, Nature.

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**Introduction**

Some call me Nature, others call me mother  
nature....

I don't really need people but people need  
me

Yes, your future depends on me

When I thrive, you thrive

When I falter, you falter or worse...

How you chose to live each day whether you  
regard or disregard me doesn't really matter  
to me

One way or the other your actions will determine your fate not mine...

(Conservation International)

Man's desire to know, to discover, to dominate or subdue nature and to prosper economically has resulted in a variety of responses from Nature—climate change, global warming, and changes in the pattern of the rainfall—with the result that humans find themselves trapped in a vicious series of catastrophic happenings: earthquakes, landslides, draughts, floods; all of which have been interpreted as nature's vengeful reaction to humanity's mistreatment of its environment. As the above anecdote explains, Nature is both benign and vengeful. Nature will always punish man's anthropomorphic violation of the environment (nature) and reward man's biocentric or eco-centric behavior. This view of nature is central to ecocriticism, which is a literary theory that seeks to foster harmony between man and nature.

As a field of literary inquiry, ecological criticism – or “ecocriticism,” as it is commonly known today<sup>1</sup> investigates the relation of literary studies to the histories of ecological or environmentalist thought, ethics, and activism. Ecocriticism thus emerges as a militant campaign through which ecocritical writers make wake-up calls to humanity through fictional and non-fictional writings for a more respectful human behavior towards nature. One of the basic premises of this new critical lens is that literature both reflects and helps to shape human responses to the natural environment. By studying the representation of the

physical world in literary texts and in the social contexts of their production, ecocriticism attempts to account for attitudes and practices that have contributed to modern-day ecological problems, while at the same time investigating alternative modes of thought and behavior, including sustainable practices that would respect the perceived rights or values associated with non-human creatures and ecological processes. In *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (2001), Lawrence Buell aptly describes the role of literature in environmental protection when he asserts that literary texts function as “acts of environmental imagination” that may “affect one's caring for the physical world,” making that world “feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable” (2).

This article explores through an ecocritical literary lens, an identical pattern of sin, punishment, atonement and redemption in Coleridge and Lola's representations of nature in the “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798) and *Rustles on Naked Trees* (2015) respectively. These ecocritical practitioners demonstrate their ecological consciousness as well as posit a biocentric world view. It emerges from both the poem and the novel of these eco-conscious authors that humanity is the cause of the present environmental/ecological crisis and unless the harmonious coexistence between human and non-human nature is re-established, mankind will continue to suffer from a vicious cycle of natural disasters—draughts, earthquakes, and floods etc., all of which both authors interpret as Nature's

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that from the outset, the term “ecocriticism,” like all critical keywords, has been a problematic and contested one. For some scholars, “ecocriticism” problematically suggests a homogeneity or consensus of critical practice that is belied by the field's internal diversity, where polemical debates are common. As a possible alternative to “ecocriticism,” other critics have suggested “environmental criticism” which, for certain reasons, has not been found to be any better. “Environment” “presupposes an image of man at the centre, surrounded by things” (Bate,107), while implying human mastery over, and possession of nature (Serres:7). Hence, numerous

commentators have rejected the term as arrogantly human-centered or “anthropocentric.” Other suggested alternatives to “ecocriticism” have been posited including “literary-environmental studies, literary ecology, literary environmentalism,” “ecoliterature,” “ecopoetics,” “ecocritical studies,” “environmental literary studies” “green cultural studies” (Heise, 502), as well as “physical criticism” (Luisser, 13) But none of these terms are immune to semantic problems; and since frequency of usage tends to determine terminological trends, “ecocriticism” has definitely been retained in spite of the fact that it is just as controversial as all the others.

vengeful reaction to environmental crimes or ecological damages caused by man. These writers demonstrate with remarkably precise plot structures/patterns the ecological wisdom that humanity harms itself more when it harms nature, for nature's revenge is too powerful for man to bear. There is therefore the urgent need for mankind to repent and atone for crimes against nature by shifting from his predominantly anthropocentric outlook to a biocentric or ecocentric world view. The major **finding** of this article is the two authors' remarkable ability to reconcile hitherto environmental offenders to nature or transform them into environmentally friendly people thus re-establishing a harmonious coexistence between human and non-human nature. The protagonists of both texts help change the mentality of imaginary characters about nature and in so doing, help shape human responses to the environment. The change in mentality that is manifested in the texts is implicitly endorsed by the reader whose own mentality is inevitably positively affected. Creating such awareness about the environment is a first step to cultural change and in doing so, both works resonate with the ecocritical view that the practice of ecocriticism will provide an antidote to the anthropocentrism that might be said to motivate, perpetuate, and aggravate the ecological crises of our time. Both Coleridge's "The Rime of the ancient Mariner" ("The Rime" for subsequent usage) and Lola's *Rustles on Naked Trees* (*Rustles* for subsequent usage) function as "acts of environmental imagination" that may "affect one's caring for the physical world" (Buell, 2). In illustrating the ecological pattern by which these authors seek ways of redressing the increasing environmental crisis faced by the world, advocate sustainable behavior and respect for nature, this paper joins ongoing research attempts to apply ecocriticism in reading literature.

### **State of The Art in Ecocriticism**

Ecocriticism is a relatively new school of thought that has just been added to the growing list of literary scholarship. Although it has gained momentum over the last four decades, as a formal field of study, this new critical approach is still evolving; still formalizing its definition for what it is

and what it is not. Ecocriticism began to formalize itself as a literary field in the 90s when, together with her co-editor, Harold Fromm and Laurence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, the acknowledged founder of this movement in the USA provided pioneer treatments of ecocriticism in texts by publishing "a key collection of helpful and definitive essays entitled, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*" (Barry, 239). Cheryll Glotfelty also co-founded the ASLE (the *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment*), an association that was formed in 1992 "at the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association" (Cheryll xviii). Coined by William Rueckert in 1978, in his essay entitled, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", the term, ecocriticism has gained global significance as humanity increasingly faces numerous threats from nature, which threats have been proven to be the consequences of humanity's hostile attitude towards the natural environment. Today, and as a necessity, these threats have become the subject of diverse forms of writing from people around the globe whose major preoccupation has been reflections about the possible ways and means by which the damage caused by humanity on the environment and our excessive exploitation of nature, can be put in check.

Perhaps the simplest definition of ecocriticism as a theoretical lens is that provided by its leading critic when, in answer to the question, "What then is ecocriticism?" she explains,

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty, xviii).

Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism provides some heuristic guidelines to textual interpretation using the ecocritical approach. In the same text, Glotfelty presents three patterns that ecocritical study has followed. Asserting that ecocriticism

follows the same analogous pattern as Showalter's feminist criticism, She claims that the ecocritical enterprise begins with an interest in "representations" followed by an examination of how nature is depicted in literature which subsequently leads to raising public awareness of attitudes toward the natural world.

When Glotfelty says above that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment", she is indeed, asserting the presence of a bond between the human and the non-human as the ecocritical basis of a text. Ecocriticism can thus be said to be a particular strand of scholarship that illustrates in the face of prevailing ecological threats — climate change, global warming, melting ozone layer, earthquakes, floods, draughts, dwindling water supplies and other hazard—how the environment concerns us and how environmental preservation and other ecological issues are manifested in the works of literary writers. The new literary approach thus seeks to evaluate texts and the ideas they contain in terms of their usefulness as responses to ecological issues or environmental crisis. In this regard, ecocriticism opens the chance for us to make an appraisal of the way we represent and interact with the environment. Cheryll Glotfelty even more succinctly asserts the agenda of eco-criticism by posing vital questions (some of which, as research questions will guide the analysis of the two texts in this paper) that should guide an ecocritical analysis of literary texts:

How is nature represented in this sonnet?' What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and

popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse? (xviii-xix).

Talking about the role of nature or the physical setting of a text, Glotfelty insists on nature's agency. In an ecologically oriented text, nature no longer plays a mere scenic or ornamental role. Rather, it emerges as the subject or focus of the artistic endeavor; what was traditionally considered as setting or the stage on which represented human action takes place becomes itself the subject or object of representation in the eco-text. She further explains that in such a text, nature becomes "an actor in the drama" and not just the stage on which the facts, events or relationships represented in the text take place. For most ecocritical theorists, a text is environmentally oriented when "the non-human environment is present not only as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 3) In other words, Nature or the environment must be perceived as a character like any other; an agent whose actions have far-reaching implications on the plot and on human life.

It should be emphasized that Ecocriticism is not homogeneous. While it is generally agreed that its birth place as a school of thought is the U.S and that it takes its literary bearings from three major nineteenth-century American writers (Ralph Waldo Emerson [1803- 1882], Margaret Fuller [1810-1850], and Henry David Thoreau [1817-1862]), the British brand of ecocriticism takes its bearings from the British Romanticism of the 1790s to which Coleridge belongs. Since the romantic age which was very much drawn toward nature and gave expression to their ecocritical thought predominantly through poetry, the affinity of literary and ecological

concerns has become more and more explicit,<sup>2</sup> and has led, in the 20th century, to the emergence of various forms of environmental literature, of nature writing, of ecologically inspired fiction like Lola Perpetua's *Rustles*.

Ecocritical studies and practices are also now more interdisciplinary in approach. Ever since Cheryl Glotfelty remarked that 'Ecocriticism has been predominantly a white movement' and expressed the wish 'to see ecocritical scholarship becoming even more interdisciplinary, multicultural, and international' (xxv), ecocriticism has given rise to many hybrid critical approaches: eco-feminism, postcolonial ecocriticism etc. Ecocritics too, now draw on cultural theory and criticism to explore how our interaction with nature can lead to new understandings and interpretations of our sense of nations, communities and identities. In other words, most critical reflections on ecocriticism do not only show us the connection between literature and the physical environment or the expanding scholarly conversation in this emerging field; they also underscore both the texts and the cultural practices that concern them. It is in this regard that the German ecocritic and theorist, Hubert Zeph, in his concept of the Triadic model of Literature as cultural ecology, points out that, literature might challenge and transform cultural narratives of humanity's relationship with nature via language, imagination and critique. The essence of his paradigm for literary study is to show that literature functions as cultural ecology.

### Research Questions

Drawing from Glotfelty's questions above concerning the agenda of ecocriticism, this research paper evolves around the following questions:

1. How is nature represented in the works of these two authors (does nature play an active role in the events of the plot)?
2. In which ways are these representations in accordance with ecological wisdom?
3. Do the works of these authors raise people's awareness about environmental problems; give

voice to nonhumans and encourage a rethinking or reconsideration of our relationship to nature?

### Representations of Nature in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

Before discussing the poem in greater detail, it is important to briefly examine the ecological plot pattern of Coleridge's poem. The thematic structure of Coleridge's poem is simple. The poem symbolically represents human crime/sin against nature, the natural world's revenge against man and man's redemptive reconnection to nature. Such a thematic structure is intended to illustrate the ecological wisdom that Nature is both benign and vengeful. The poem is thus thematically structured in three parts. First, Nature's benevolence to man is returned with a motiveless killing of the Albatross. Following this gratuitous killing of the sea bird, nature unleashes vengeance on the Ship crew. After much torture and suffering, the lone survivor, the ancient Mariner repents and blesses nature (the water snakes); the curse on him is broken and the partially redeemed sinner against nature becomes an environmental crusader, educating others by recounting his experience with nature to all who wish to listen. The poem is one such instance in which the mariner inspires environmental awareness in his listener (a wedding guest) by recounting his encounter with nature. The poem thus carries the message that human crimes against nature will inevitably invite punishment or natural disasters.

### Nature as a Vengeful Destroyer: The Sin— Killing the Albatross— and Nature's Revenge

The plot of Coleridge's poem follows with precision a pattern of sin against nature; Nature's Vengeance, as well as atonement and Redemption. Man's anthropocentric attitude towards nature results in his own suffering. The ancient mariner narrates to one of three wedding guests, his own mysterious encounter with nature. Once on a journey, the mariner's ship got stuck at sea as the ice would not break, but a mysterious bird, an albatross,

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the strong relationship that British writers since the romantic period had with

nature and how these writers gave expression to ecocritical thoughts, see Herbert Zeph (2006).

appeared on board the ship and soon after, the ice mysteriously melts away and the ship can once more sail on. At the appearance of the bird, the sailors recognize it as a sign of good omen: "At length did cross an Albatross,/Through the fog it came ;/As if it had been a Christian soul,/We hailed it in God's name." (1:63-66) The mariner's co-sailors and crew hail and welcome the sea bird with food and hospitality as if it were "a Christian soul", expressing their happiness at seeing this element of nature. In return, the albatross guides the mariners, "The ice did split with a thunder-fit; / the helmsman steered us through!" (1:69-70). the albatross perched on the mast for several days, during which period the weather was friendly and suitable for their voyage. Every day, the travellers will call out to the bird whenever they want to feed or play with it and the bird will come. At night, the bird would sit on the mast or on some sail of the ship. The bird followed the travellers for nine days during which they enjoyed a smooth sail for the ice split and a favourable wind drove the travellers northwards in the glimmering light of the moon.

What the first part of the poem demonstrates is a wholesome and reciprocal relationship between the human and non-human elements of nature. The assistance that the albatross brings to the stranded and desperate sailors combined with the hospitality (feeding the bird) and happiness expressed by the sailors on perceiving the albatross have far-reaching ecological implications. The Albatross insists on travelling on board with the sailors and actually stays with them for nine days; a symbolic representation of the harmony in which the human and non-human should live. While one might see this as Coleridge's expression of the pantheistic philosophy of "one Life" that lies behind romantic (Nature) poems—line 26 of Coleridge's other poem, "The Eolian Harp" reads, "the One Life within us and abroad— (and which implies that Coleridge saw Nature as a divine agent and God as diffused in nature, making it an organic unity), the harmony expressed in the interaction of the human and non-human here does not only implies the Romantic poet's rejection of the Cartesian dualism identified by ecocritics as the major source of man's anthropomorphic attitude

towards nature. The interaction between the human (the sailors) and the non-human (the albatross) here is more expressive of the ecological wisdom that emphasizes the holistic concept of nature that stresses the interconnectedness and interdependence of things in the "ecosystem— "everything is connected to everything else" (Commoner, 1971: 33) — and thus that all biological entities exist in a web of mutual interdependency; a view expressed in Coleridge's "the One Life within us and abroad" and even more beautifully expressed by his fellow romantic poet, William Blake in the proposition that "everything that lives, / Lives not alone, nor for itself".

For some unknown reason, the ancient Mariner kills the albatross—"With my crossbow / I shot the ALBATROSS" (l: 81-82). This motiveless act of malignity clearly symbolizes man's self-disconnection from nature. In killing the albatross, he has created disharmony with all natural elements as well as with God for, to Coleridge, the act of killing is also a betrayal of God since nature can help us see, hear and feel God. The Albatross is associated with God for when it arrives, the sailor "hailed it in God's name" (l: 66), but it is also associated with the breeze, the moonshine, the mist, the snow, the fog and other elements of nature. Hence, as one critic asserts, "the Mariner's abrupt and seemingly motiveless shooting of the albatross becomes a violation of the 'One Life' principle running through all creatures" (Stillinger, 144), and as one might add, the Mariner's (a rational being's) act of shooting the albatross (an irrational being) also signifies anthropomorphic man's conscious or unconscious desire to kill, control, conquer, dominate and subdue non-human nature. The Mariner has committed a heinous crime/sin against nature and must pay for it.

It is important to recall that, the mariner's journey begins smoothly and peacefully: the "ship was cheered, the harbor cleared/ Merrily did we drop" (1: 21-22) The Mariner and his fellow sailors have had the support of the natural elements throughout their journey, but with the shooting of the Albatross, Nature withdraws its support and the journey changes drastically for the worse. The harmony between man and nature changes to

disharmony and horror. The ambivalent attitude of the ancient Mariner's co-sailors towards this gruesome murder of the bird makes them part-takers in the sin. First, his co-sailors express their disagreement with the act and thus dissociate themselves from the Mariner. As the Mariner/narrator tells us, his co-sailors claimed "I had done a hellish thing, /and it would work 'em woe: /for all averred, I had killed the bird/that made the breeze to blow. /Ah wretch! Said they, the bird to slay, /that made the breeze to blow!" (2: 91-96). However, as the weather continues to be bright shortly after the killing of the albatross, the sailors shift from their ecological understanding of the killing as a heinous crime to a more anthropomorphic perception of the act: "Nor dim nor red, like God's own head, /The glorious Sun uprist: /Then all averred, I had killed the bird/That brought the fog and mist. /'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,/That bring the fog and mist." (2: 97-100) These mariners' change of attitude foreshadows the vengeful tragedy that awaits them.

After the killing of the bird, the weather changed and nature began to take its revenge against it offenders: "Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,/'Twas sad as sad could be" (2:107-8). Their surroundings become characterized by nature's abnormality; the waters assume strange colors and the Sun becomes bloody, "All in a hot and copper sky," "No bigger than the Moon" (2:111-14); there is water everywhere, "Nor any drop to drink"; the sea rot, "slimy things did crawl with legs/Upon the slimy sea"; "The death-fires danced at night;/The water, like a witch's oils,/Burnt green, and blue and white"; while the mariners' "every tongue, through utter drought,/Was withered at the root ;/We could not speak, no more than if/ We had been choked with soot." (2: 122-139). At this junction, the attitude of the other Mariners toward the murder changed again: "what evil looks/Had I from old and young!" They no longer praised the murder of the albatross by the ancient mariner, but "Instead of the cross, the Albatross/About my neck was hung" (2: 139-40); he realizes that by destroying nature, he has brought untold suffering to himself. Thus, entrapped within the sea, the mariners are no longer able to progress with their journey and, from an

ecocritical perspective, nature is definitely hindering any further movement of the vessel. Nature is here determining the course of action for the ungrateful mariners.

After so much agony in a stagnant sea, a death ship, surprisingly, approaches the mariners: "A sail! a sail!", the mariner shouts, but only to realize that the occupants are "Death" and her sister "Life-in-death". These ghostly figures are casting dice, and while "Life-in-death" won the ancient mariner's life, the other mariners "One after one, by the star-dogged Moon,/ Too quick for groan or sigh,/Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,/And cursed me with his eye" (2:212-15). The mariners die, one by one: "The many men, so beautiful / And they all dead did lie:" (4:236-7) Left alone with the rotting sea and the 200 dead bodies whose eyes were widely open, the ancient mariner felt a great inner fear and pain. The diseased Mariner becomes a "ruined man"; an outcast feeling "alone, alone, all, all alone / Alone on a wide sea!" (4:232-33). According to one critic, the deaths of the sailors is punishment for praising the Mariner's violent act of shooting the bird: "his fellow sailors are at first horrified, and then, when the weather improves, praise him for his action. For this inconstancy or error of judgment they are condemned to die a lingering death" (Prickett, 26).

On his part, the ancient Mariner suffers great tortures from nature. The parching heat that now dominates the mariner's life may be Coleridge's version of global warming today. Nature has turned cruel to the Mariner, offering neither wind nor rain to the stranded sailor. Again, Nature turns the sky to "hot and copper" with a "bloody sun" in the middle. He seems entrapped within a vicious hell. His tragedy in this sense, translates the apocalypse, which is one of the features getting expression in some ecocritical works. With the killing of the albatross and the drastic change in the weather condition, the Mariner's composure also changes drastically; he is dehumanized, lacks speech and is ghostly. Thus frustrated, the Mariner experiences spiritual death within the heat of the sea.

**Nature as a Regenerative Force:  
Atonement/Repentance and Redemption**

After awakening Nature's vengeance, the ancient Mariner, entrapped, frustrated and helpless, begins to examine his own life and behaviour. He desperately hopes to regain his lost harmony with nature and to enjoy its support as before, but he can't. Having experienced spiritual death, he tried to pray but he couldn't: "I looked to heaven, and tried to pray; / But or ever a prayer had gushed, / A wicked whisper came, and made / My heart as dry as dust" (2: 244-247). Of course, he cannot pray; he has violated nature, the medium of communication with God. Coleridge's pantheistic philosophy holds that God speaks to man through nature; through what in "The Eolian Harp" he calls, the "intellectual breeze". Nature is thus not a machine, but a visible language, a medium of communication between God and humanity. Having thus sinned, the mariner finds himself an outcast feeling "alone, alone, all, all alone / Alone on a wide wide sea!" (4. 232-233). Like all modern ecocritics, Coleridge was a firm believer in the interconnectedness of all creatures. The Mariner needs to reconnect himself to God or the divinity of nature from which he has been cut off. The unity referred to here is transcendental but also physical for it is based on the love of nature; one cannot discriminate the elements of nature and yet love God. Hence the Mariner advises his listener as follows: "To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!/He prayeth well, who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast/He prayeth best, who loveth best/All things both great and small; / For the dear God who loveth us, /He made and loveth all." (6: 611-17) The ancient Mariner needs love of nature to become alive again. So, when he sees the water snakes, which had previously made him feel sick, his attitude changes; he suddenly discovers their beauty as the biological nausea he had felt before gives way to a powerful sense of beauty expressed in his praise and admiration of the water snakes: "I watched their rich attire: /Blue, glossy green, and velvet black, /They coiled and swam; and every track/Was a flash of golden fire." "O happy living things! no tongue/Their beauty might declare: /A spring of love gushed from my heart,/And I blessed them unaware: /Sure my kind saint took pity on me,/And I blessed them unaware"(4:278-87). The "spring of love" for nature that "gushes from [his] heart" when he expresses

his admiration for the water snakes is, "a dynamic and voluntary exchange between man and God...", since nature represents God (Appleyard, 45). It is only after recognizing the beauty of nature (i.e. the water snakes shining in the moonlight), and appreciating it, that the Mariner can pray and move God/nature. It is after he sincerely expresses his love for nature by praising the beauty of water snakes that he is redeemed and the curse is removed. Throughout the poem, Nature shows her benign as well as cruel and hostile side to human beings; it avenges when human beings go against it, but it is also rewarding and nourishing. Hence, as the "spring of love for nature gushes" out of the Mariner's lips, the dead bird drops down from his neck (a sign that the curse has been removed). His love and admiration for the water snakes re-establishes his faith in the unity of all creatures. Nature rewards the Mariner's faith accordingly by sending rain, sleep, the wind and 'the Polar Spirit' to move the ship home. The sense of guilt in his heart also begins to reduce. He can now fall asleep. When he wakes up, it rains, "My lips were wet, my throat was cold" (4:301). The ancient mariner's plea has moved God/Nature and he can now set sail for home.

It is important to note that with this reconciliation with nature, the mariner is still not completely purged of his sin. While in a trance, the mariner had listened to a dialogue between two unearthly spirits in which one angrily identifies the mariner as the man who committed the heinous crime of killing an innocent Albatross that loved him. The metaphor here is that of Christ who loved man, but was killed by man. On the other hand, the gentler spirit (a voice) explains that the mariner has already done some penance and would do more penance before all his guilt can be washed away from his tormented soul: "The man hath penance done/And penance more will do" (2: 408-9). The dialogue between these two spirits asserts two points. First, the two spirits here represent the justice and mercy of nature; the spirits clearly tell us that nature is at once, benign and vengeful in character. While nature punishes man, it is on the whole a benevolent force of life to man. The second point that the conversation between the spirits makes clear is that, the mariner is not completely



purged of his sin/crime. It is thus no coincidence that on reaching the harbor, the ancient mariner undergoes another ritual of purification through an encounter with a hermit: a man capable of purging him of his anthropomorphic attitudes since the hermit is the kind of man that has maintained the most harmonious relationship with nature. But again, the hermit only partially purifies the mariner.

On meeting the hermit, the Mariner earnestly requests to be shriven. The hermit makes a sign of the cross on his forehead and asks him to say what kind of a man he was. At this juncture, the ancient mariner undergoes a convulsive agony. He then proceeds to recount the tale of his strange encounter with nature to the hermit and since then, time and again, the ancient mariner's agony returns and it is only quietened when he has narrated his tale of sin, suffering, atonement and redemption to a suitable listener. We are told that he now moves from land to land narrating his strange tale of sin against nature and suffering to people.

The hermit symbolizes redemption and after the mariner's encounter with him, the divine bond is partially repaired and the Mariner partially purged, but the violation can neither be fully recovered nor the damages fully repaired. The Mariner must continue doing penance for his sin, and his narrative is still part of his quest for redemption. He must convey his experience of the mutual survival of man and nature to others as a means of educating them on the irreparable damage that a life alienated from nature may cause humanity. The guilt keeps lingering in the ancient Mariner's heart so that he constantly has to alleviate his sense of guilt by telling his story to those who seem willing to listen to his lessons and the Wedding-Guest to whom he narrates the poem is one such listener inclined to be transformed by his tale. At last, we know why the ancient mariner's life was spared. Two hundred of his co-sailors had died at sea. He has probably been left alive to tell the lesson again and again, and to pass it from generation to generation. Indeed, Nature has also prepared him for this environmental campaign for, after his experience with nature, the mariner had been endowed with a "strange" power of speech and probably with the mysterious power of identifying potential eco-friendly people: "I have

strange power of speech;/That moment that his face I see, /I know the man that must hear me:/ To him my tale I teach." (6: 587-590). It is with such divine powers that he picks out one of the three wedding guests as listener. First his listener is mesmerized and cannot move until he has heard all of the mariner's tale and, second, after telling him his story, the wedding guest is seriously affected/transformed by it. After listening to the mariner, the wedding guest "Turned from the bridegroom's door" (6:621), feeling immensely affected by the tale. He also wakes up the next day a "sadder" and "wiser" man. The Wedding guest represents the young generation to which the Mariner must pass on his new found ecological wisdom.

#### **Representing Nature in Lola Perpetua Nkamanyang's *Rustles on Naked Trees*:**

#### **Nature as Vengeful Destroyer; The Sin—Earth Pollution—and Nature's Revenge**

Like Coleridge's "Rime of the ancient Mariner", Lola's *Rustles* follows the same pattern of sin, punishment, atonement and redemption with nature or the environment playing an active role in the events that propel the plot. Set in an imaginary grassfield area of Cameroon, the novel paints a gruesome picture of a raging fire that consumes everything along its track thus obliging the desperate survivors, the inhabitants of Ubanako Ubaka, to relocate. But the supposed safe zone to which the victims are relocated is only an uninhabitable arid land that itself requires nurturing.

The novel opens with Bernsah Greenfield, the protagonist regaining consciousness after serious suffocation from a fire disaster. In a dream-like flashback, Bernsah tells the reader how it all happened. Four months before the great fire disaster, the people of Ubanako Ubaka and its neighborhoods had witnessed ominous signs of an imminent calamity— volcanic eruptions, landslides, gaseous discharges from the earth; the crumbling of stones from mountain tops and the flood that erased Tiigana Andre's family and forced him to take to drinking as a coping strategy. These minor calamities had been followed by a protracted famine. Like King Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the*

*King* who dispatches an envoy (Creon) to Appollo's Oracle to seek remedy for the famine that plagued the Theban people, Shufai Nsaw, the traditional prime minister of Ubanako Ubaka dispatches emissaries to the Oracle to seek the cause and solution to the hunger that plagued his people. Speaking for nature, the Oracle furiously predicts doom for Ubanako Ubaka if the people do not change their anthropomorphic attitudes: "I see nothing but gloom and shadows creeping around me." "The land", he tells them, "is no longer healthy" because the people of Ubanako Ubaka have chosen to abandon their pre-colonial nature friendly attitudes and to clutch onto strangers like wet clothes on a body" (60)... You defy my law and listen only to the strange voice from across the river. You are answerable to your own cravings which strive on nothing but personal greed.... I see you henceforth as rebels in my colony, I see you as rebels and not freedom fighters. You have defiled the land. Because you have chosen to listen rather to the voice of strangers and Government...you must taste the sting of my fury (62-3)

The gods accuse the people of Ubanako Ubaka of complicity in the wantonly exploitation of the land: large portions of their forests have suffered colonial/neocolonial deforestation while the soil has completely been polluted with by-products of imperialist markets. The "strangers" referred to are the colonialists who initially claimed their mission was "to wean the desperate addicts from the breasts of darkness" (60), but ended up stripping the land bare of its resources. Imperialists have conspired with the neocolonial government of post-independent Ubanako Ubaka to cut down forests through timber exploitation and to pollute the earth with plastic byproducts of western markets. The draught that the Oracle decries is the unhealthy consequences of deforestation:

What I hear are rattles and songs of irons and machines whose breath feeds the air and lungs with cough. The wind is stifling. The roasting air drains the veins of my leaves and branches, I can see bees basking on pale-brown grass. I can see the hovering birds frowning at the floating sitting on the dry bones of lakes and rivers. I see bats hanging

in the air and fluttering sluggishly.... I can see skeletal toads and frogs diving out of the shrunken bodies of bony rivers. I hear not the hum of butterflies but wane hisses. I no longer hear the buzz of bees in my garden. I hear the bees, butterflies, birds, insects, beetles and snails have become tourists and are packing their wrecks.... the soil under my feet is thirsty (61).

Castigating the emissaries for their role in this deforestation and thus in the environmental destruction that has caused the famine, the Oracle adds, "Your hammers and axes have left wounds on tree trunks for pests and diseases to enter. Your brutal and murderous machines continue to rant and rave where I tend my plants and raffia trees" (61). But colonial/neocolonial deforestation is not the only form of environmental degradation in the land. With the complicity of the neocolonial government, the colonialists ("strangers", to cite the Oracle once more) have floated postcolonial Ubanako Ubaka with finished products from the western world, with the result that, the earth/soil has been polluted with byproducts of these Western markets. As the Oracle puts it,

The womb of the ancestral soil had suckled not on the breast of soil ash that it knows but on stabbed irons, crusts of rusted tins, wounded papers, plastic bags stung on all sides, butchered bottles buried deep in the soil, and heaps of papers.... The soil is barren and needs healing otherwise women would continue to cultivate on sterile soil. (62)

Consequently, the Oracle concludes with an ultimatum: "Return to your old [pre-colonial] ways! Feed the soil with ash milk or pay a high price (61-62)... Return to your old ways! Our soil must continue to suck on ash milk! Bathe the soil! Cleanse the land of crusts with soil ash or be ready to face extinction!" Dismissing the emissaries, the Oracle screams, "Leave my land now! Stubborn race! Never come back here until I see the change I want in your action! Go! Go!" (63).

On return, the men double down on their ecological crimes by organizing a huge hunting expedition as a means of wadding off hunger (64).

Only the protagonist, Bernsah appears disturbed by the Oracle's pronouncement. On hearing what the Oracle has decreed, Bernsah "rushed to their farmlands and picked all the rusted tins, plastic things and any other material he imagined could contaminate and infect the earth" (64). His single effort however, can neither cleanse the land nor wade off the wrath of the gods. Shortly after the visit to the Oracle, an inferno sparks off and erases Ubanako Ubaka, forcing government to relocate survivors to the aforementioned arid land.

An apocalyptic scenario is evoked here in symbolic terms and used to denounce and punish the environmental offenders. As Lawrence Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* explains, "Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (300-01). Lola twice employs the apocalyptic trope in her novel to inspire action. First is the flood in the neighborhood and second is the inferno that erases the village. As the narrator tells us,

Four months before the fire disaster, an adjacent village that merges into Lower Ubanako Ubaka at the far end of the plains flooded when River Mairin burst its banks. He [Tiigana Andre] had since the month of August not seen his wife and their two children. She had gone to one of her farms in the plains at Ubanako Ubaka but did not return after heavy rains caused floods. The village became covered with a sea of water which wrenched from the earth buildings, trees and ridges and swept them away including people and animals (22-23)

This plotline is reminiscent of the biblical flood and the fire disaster that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah; the only difference being that, the sinners are ecological sinners. Lola's technique of redressing/retelling popular biblical stories in ecological terms here creates a high sense of awareness that nature can destroy lives once it becomes heavily damaged or exploited. In Lola's version of the Biblical threat of the cataclysmic end of the world, the voice of the Oracle, like the Biblical voice of God warning the sinners of Sodom and

Gomorrah to turn away from their sinful ways or face destruction, warns the people of Ubanako Ubaka to desist from their environmentally destructive ways or face death and destruction: "Return to your old ways!... or be ready to face extinction!" (63). "You have defiled the land... [and so] you must taste the sting of my fury!" (39). The punishment is a fire disaster which indiscriminately takes animal, plant and human life leaving behind "naked trees" and frail human survivors suffering from "pollution in the lungs"; damage of "eyes and blood vessels", "suffocation and serious lung's infection" (21). But the fire disaster is only a prelude to the miseries of these environmental offenders.

The fire disaster necessitates the relocation of survivors from the disaster zone to a "supposedly" secured area, but in effect, moving from Ubanako Ubaka to Ubergerf is like moving from one draught-stricken area to another. While "joy storms [the] hearts" of the victims when they are informed of the government's project to relocate them to a new land, Bernsah remains apprehensive of the environmental conditions of the new land and its suitability for human habitation: "Uncle, would there be water in the new land?" (108). Bernsah alone knows that human life depends on a healthy environment. His fears become a reality when the supposed "land of promise" turns out to be an uninhabited arid and barren land, which itself requires long time nurturing before it can be rendered humanly habitable. It is on this desert-like settlement that the environmental sinners are left to make atonement for their sins. Would they like Coleridge's ancient Mariner repent and convert to environmentally friendly beings? Only through environmentally friendly practices can they reconnect to nature. Such harmony is a pre-requisite for redemption and a return to normal life. Viewed thus, one deduces that the narrative motif that governs the reader's expectation is whether the fallen people of Ubanako Ubaka can learn from their mistakes; restore a healthy relation with the environment and regain wholesomeness.

**Eco/Green Vs Brown Politics:<sup>3</sup> The Way to Atonement and Redemption**

The environmental theme of the text cannot be separated from the political theme with which it is interwoven. While the new settlement is a hitherto uninhabited arid jungle that requires human nurture, the settlers are faced with other political challenges: anarchy and the need for governance.

Among some of the problems faced by the settlers are, insecurity perpetrated by young unemployed people; the absence of traditional and legal institutions to perform traditional rituals and settle the numerous land disputes that emerged from the emigrants' attempts to settle down in the new land; the need for socio-cultural, administrative and political structures; in short, the need for governance. The Shufai Nsaw of the former Ubanako Ubaka has not been found since the fire disaster. The existing leadership void created by his disappearance sets the stage for a political race for power and authority; creating enabling grounds for leadership conflict between the environmentally minded son of the former Shufai—Bernsah Greenfield whose agenda is to re-green the new settlement, and the power-hungry and anthropomorphic Alahbukang who is the most non-eco-friendly character in the novel. Alabukang's sole agenda is to devise various strategies for grabbing power, (not as a means to solving his people's problems, but as a means to amassing personal wealth), an ambition which he sustains through the well-known tactics of neo-colonial African leaders:

connivance, corruption, bribery, electoral fraud and the systematic elimination of political opponents from the political race.

The political and environmental themes of Lola's novel are intricately intertwined. In merging the political and environmental themes/conflict, Lola offers the former environmental offenders (the new settlers) a real chance of atonement and redemptive reconnection with nature. Will the ecological sinners throw their weight behind Bernsah Greenfield and endorse his agenda of re-greening the arid wasteland or choose to remain within Alahbukang's anthropomorphic and neo-colonial leadership? Through the interwoven/twin themes of the novel, Lola is implicitly raising a vital question: what does good governance imply in our age of environmental crisis? As political leaders, Bernsah and Alahbukang represent two opposing worldviews in ecocriticism: biocentric/ecocentric and anthropomorphic worldviews respectively. In pairing them as political rivals, Lola decontextualizes the quotation from "Conservative International" with which I began this paper. She is saying that the salvation of the ecological sinners from Ubanako Ubaka depends on the leadership choice they make; whether they choose to regard or disregard nature depends on the political choice of leadership they make, but their choice will definitely determine their fate in the new land. For Lola, the political choice of leadership thus has spiritual significance for the settlers; it offers them a real chance of redemption and reconnection to nature and the ancestral gods who had earlier dismissed them as ecological "rebels", requesting that they purify the land. To

<sup>3</sup> Generally, political colours are used to represent broad political ideologies, movements or parties, officially or unofficially. The political colours 'green' and 'brown' encode very broad political agendas. In this paper, the terms are not used in their strict conventional sense, but rather in a narrower sense. Green politics or eco-politics is used here to refer to a political ideology that aims to foster an ecologically sustainable society. It is rooted in environmentalism, social justice and grassroots democracy. In is in this sense that I associate the term to Bernsah's whose name already encodes the green color; whose political agenda and vision for Ubergerf is founded on ecological principles and who has made the

environment the dominant issue in Ubergerf politics and society. As his name implies, his dominant focus is re-greening the fields. In Europe and elsewhere, the colour, 'brown' has always been associated with fascists in general, but brown is also sometimes used to describe the opposite of green parties, that is to describe parties or political ideologies like Alahbukang's that are not only dictatorial and suppressive, but care little about environmental issues. It is for this reason that I identify Alahbukang's political ideology with this colour.

better understand the interrelation of the political and environmental themes as well as the spiritual implications of the settlers' choice of political leadership, it is important to explain in greater detail, the political ideologies of the two main characters— Alahbukang and Bernsah Greenfield— involved in the leadership tussle.

A power monger, Alahbukang perceives power as the shortest means to personal material aggrandizement. Hence on arrival, he strategizes on taking political control of the new settlement. Shortly after arriving the new land, he convenes and presides over a first meeting in which he attributes the reigning insecurity to the absence of a leader and thus declares himself "the custodian of the land" (Lola, 131). Alahbukang proposes the formation of an interim government for the duration leading up to the first ever election in the new land and imposes himself as that interim leader. He also declares himself the acting PTA president, acting Shufai, the interim Mayor and parliamentarian for that constituency; all of these positions he claims to hold pending official elections. Alahbukang is carved in the image of the neo-colonial ruling elites who are fattened by the fruits of betrayal of their own people and whose chief task is the crude accumulation of wealth. He turns the plight of his people into personal opportunities. He trades job opportunities, rents out government apartments (Social Houses) at cut-throat rates as well as divert relief assistance meant for disaster victims into his private commercial shops. The result is that, the new Ubergerf Sub-division, besides facing an adverse environmental condition—drought—, is characterized by indices of underdevelopment, economic dependence on aid, mass unemployment (resulting in youth delinquency and involvement in illicit activities like banditry and the sale of contraband goods like drugs and fuel["*funge*"]), acute poverty, insecurity, corruption and the lack of infrastructures. The New settlement replicates in graphic terms a postcolonial African nation at the brink of collapse; one characterized by despair, exploitation, electoral fraud, the torture and intimidation of political opponents, favoritism and embezzlement of public funds.

Theorists of ecocriticism agree that the oppression of animals is analogous with the oppression of humans and vice-versa: "The otherness, the exploitation, and the oppression of animals are sometimes a transparent metaphor... for humans' oppression of humans" (Heise, 640). Besides being a neo-colonial agent of repression, Alahbukang is also the most anthropomorphic character in the novel. While in Ubanako Ubaka, he had earned his living by digging and selling stones and sand, activities that destroy and endanger the landscape, in the New settlement, Alahbukang indulges in the indiscriminate sale of community land. Above all, Alahbukang enriches himself from sponsoring illegal hunting (poaching) of endangered species like elephants for their precious tusks: "He had bought two guns for Bakana and Banla for wildlife trafficking" (Lola, 89). Like Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Alahbukang goes after the precious tusks of elephants. His poaching activities are therefore reminiscent of imperialist exploitation of Africa's natural resources. Like his colonial predecessors, Kurtz too, Alahbukang personifies the anthropomorphic man who perceives nature only in terms of its marketability.

Alahbukang is partly to blame for the drought. As the novel tells us, he has the monopoly of selling land in the new settlement. What is worse is that Alahbukang is an enabler or facilitator of the colonial deforestation that has rendered the land dry. The people of Ubergerf blame the deforestation of their land on government's indiscriminate sale of land to European timber exploiters. Although a retired civil servant, Alahbukang has close links with government. He is probably the undercover agent through whom government sells land to imperialists. The people of Unanako Ubakan directly link him to corrupt government policies: "Alabukang,... didn't you come here many times to tell us that you were the eyes and ears of Government? Were you not the one who said you think for Government?" (63). Though not directly accused, there is evidence that Alahbukang is the local enabler of colonial deforestation; conniving with the western multinational corporations to recklessly exploit the nation's natural forest. As a result,

the new land [Ubergerf] had bargained away their logs to people from the land of the Rising Sun... Forest had begun to disappear. Heavy duty vehicles trailed the new settlement on a daily basis. One could hear machines raging furiously from the distant forest. Planks, wood and logs were pillaged from the forests in the night. The soil became drier than before. Water became rarer than before. Alahbukang was more concerned with Relief Aid and issues of town planning (147).

Here, Lola highlights the impact of colonial timber exploitation on deforestation in Africa. The neo-colonial government with Alahbukang as enabler has sold out its forests to Europeans for timber exploitation. The destruction of long grown trees has dire consequences on the ecosystem. Among other things, it leads inevitably to the decimation of rare life forms and, as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin add, such “cash cropping and other European agricultural practices usually replaced hunting and subsistence farming, thereby damaging established ecosystems, reducing soil fertility, or even, as in the case of the Sahara, resulting in desertification” (1). This statement impresses us more as a succinct description of the consequences of deforestation on the new settlement. Describing the ecological impact—the draught— of this imperialists’ logging of trees and their shipment to Europe, the narrator of Lola’s *Rustles* has this to say

The land was too dry. Fowls and cattle died in their numbers. Lack of water and green vegetation had often compelled women and children to trudge through thick bushes to distant valleys in search of water. The brown sweet waters from the bony banks of River Mairin were beginning to wreak havoc in intestines. The first Cholera epidemic which claimed many lives had rendered Bernshah and Kongnyuy bedridden for almost two weeks.... (129). The soul of plants and flowers had departed leaving squashed fruits, bony trunks of trees and dead leaves for bees, birds and insects to feed on. People were thirsty. Plants looked sick and thirsty. Crops looked pale. The flowers had puckered their buds which now looked like the mouth of an old

person who is about to cry. Dry punctured leaves on the top branches could be heard rustling in the wind. The soil was too dry. The air was hot. The gasping wind was dry and hostile. You could smell the menu of dust it was dishing out to leaves and branches it has transformed into stockings and jackets of dust. (130)

Deforestation has resulted in unbearable climate change: the dry heat, the tight air, thirst, dry soil, dry wind, dry plants, water scarcity and the drinking of dirty water which has only led to a cholera epidemic. Water shortages have sent women and children trekking far distances to fetch drinking water. All of these adverse happenings make nature appear as an active agent and character in the novel, a character whose health or ill health directly affects the lives of other characters. Though almost invisible, Nature is permanently present in the novel by appearing as a serious menace to human life in as much as humans continue to misuse it. The human suffering described here is reminiscent of the suffering of the ancient mariner at sea. Here, Lola’s empathetic mind has also helped her imagine the catastrophe which would befall us as an impact of any further serious damage to nature. The situation of hostile heat and of being thirsty with no water to drink translates itself to the present situation of global warming amidst depleting water levels. The recent changes in the climate have resulted in the depletion of surface and ground water in many areas. And with too much of pollution, we are all like these people from Ubanako Ubaka slowly losing the privilege of getting pure water to drink, and clean and fresh air to breathe. Of significance here is Alahbukang’s role in this environmental crisis which the novel describes as follows: “Alahbukang Bleeds Ubergerf Sub-Division dry...” as he becomes, “a Drain on Environment and State Resources... rather than a leader (257),”

The environmental crisis shade light on the leadership qualities of the two main characters vying for political power. While Alahbukang focuses on the short term political and economic solutions to the environmental crisis such as requesting government food relief and other financial and material assistance for victims (and this, for personal interest

for, he steals whatever is destined for the survivors), Bernsah Greenfield as his name implies, focuses on re-greening Ubergerf. To this end, Greenfield tailors his activities and even his education to suit the long-term environmental needs of the people. He knows that greening the land or rendering it fertile and thus habitable is key to his people's survival. On arrival in the new settlement, Bernsah immediately draws up an agenda to re-green the arid land through the planting of trees and the creation of what he calls a "Community Forest Garden":

He would choose an empty stretch of land. He will encourage Blossom, Kongnyuy and the young people to join him to farm it. A well would be dug in the middle of the garden. Fig trees, peace plants and raffia tees will be planted around the well. The soil will suckle on water from the roots of trees. The roots will breast-feed the soil and the soil will breast-feed the well. Where there are tees, there is water. And where there is water, there is life. Bernsah mused (130)

Bernsah knows that his people cannot sustain themselves on trickles of food and other relief assistance from government which, instead of distributing to the survivors, Alabukang simply diverts to his shops. Bernsah is not committed to the short-term political gains that preoccupy Alahbukang. While Alahbukang facilitates deforestation, Bernsah plants trees for he knows that the loss of trees is detrimental to the larger ecological sustainability. He foresees the trees he intends to plant helping to shade humans and animals from the excruciating heat of Ubergerf; providing food; relieving unemployment among the youths and, above all, serving as water catchment. Bernsah knows the role of trees in environmental preservation: "...the Community Forest Garden... is [also] envisaged to provide jobs for the young people, fruits for consumption as well as ensure a regular supply of water to the community through the Well" (154); it will also guarantee an "improvement in vegetables and crop production" (155). There is no discrimination; his trees are intended to serve both human and non-human nature. A leader with a green vision, Bernsah knows that his people can only independently sustain

themselves in a healthy and fertile environment that will provide for them the much-needed food. He knows that the well-being of the community depends on environmental preservation and sustainable development. Saving his environment is synonymous to saving the lives of his people: "I want to save my people from suffering. I want to save my environment from dryness." (161).

The draught stricken Ubergerf can be nurtured and rendered fruitful and Bernsah is determined to do just that. But he also knows that he cannot do this alone: "He will encourage Blossom, Kongnyuy and the young people to join him to farm it" (130). What Bernsah implies here is a mobilization and sensitization campaign that will not only improve their environmental conditions but also change his people's attitude towards the environment. Lola's eco-conscious protagonist knows that his green revolution requires the collective effort of all his community and a first step to achieving such collectivity is to change the attitude of his fellow immigrants (former environmental offenders) towards their environment. To equip himself for this task, Bernsah pursues education in environmental protection and agricultural sciences. During this time, he also undertakes a variety of environmental activities and projects which transform both the environment and eventually instill in his people a protectionist attitude towards the environment. As a mobilization and sensitization strategy, Bernsah creates a Village Development Association and a Youth Programme with one of its major objectives being to reduce youth delinquency and help promote environmental consciousness, (strikingly the group "was [initially] refused recognition by Alahbukang"[135]). To complement the Youth Programme, he "has gone further to form an Environmental Club... whose main activities were tree planting around the school premises and the circulation of tracks to both the public and students on "Environmental Protection and Social Responsibility". Through these environmental activities, Bernsah brings together people from diverse walks of life — students, Park boys, bike riders, the Driver's Union and the common villagers— who now opt to work together for the environmental benefit of the community.

Bernsah's dedication to his environmental activities and his charismatic ability to bring together people from all walks of life project him naturally into the spotlight as a leader with an uncontestable long term political solutions to the plight of the people. His environmental activities had earned him the positions of Head boy in his primary school days, senior prefect in secondary school and Head of the Environmental Club, President of the Students' Union and, together with Blossom, he has been nominated as the official Caretaker of the Community Forest Garden that he had created with the help of various groups. "Bernsah had won the hearts of the villagers...and the main street passing through the market square has been named, Bernsah's Street (140-41). Bernsah now seems poised to be elected Parliamentarian and leader of Ubergerf Sub-Division. In trying to heal the environment, Bernsah emerges in the public eye as the much-needed leader, a leader with a *green* political vision on how the new society can move forward. As will be expected, his mobilization of these groups "...and the support Bernsah had harvested from young people... seemed to have fueled the flames of anger in Alahbukang" (138) who now sees him as a potential rival and a threat to his ambition of becoming the first ever parliamentarian and leader of Ubergerf.

The threat posed by Bernsah seemed to grow bigger and bigger as the election draws close and it becomes imperative for Alahbukang to root off the threat. His fury and jealousy were constantly aroused by the round of applause that Bernsah's intervention at public gatherings received. On one important occasion, Bernsah had explained to the entire community that the influx of new populations in the settlement had caused water shortages. He

thus requested (from Alahbukang) permission to extend the Community Forest Garden by planting more trees. In this way, he hopes the trees will increase the volume of water in the Well. This proposal was vehemently rejected by Alahbukang, who had arrogated authority over the land, but the local population defied Alahbukang by ordering Bernsah and the youths to extend the Community Forest Garden and to fix specific days for the entire community to come out and assist in planting more trees. Bernsah's public victory constitutes a test of his popularity and foreshadows his eventual victory over Alahbukang in the upcoming parliamentary election.

That Lola intends her readers to perceive the political crisis of leadership as inextricably linked to, and determined by the environmental crisis is not only evident in the political fame that Bernsah gains as an environmentalist, but also from the consignment of books on "Environmental Conservation and Leadership" (161) that the white man, Senior Ubergerf offers Bernsah as a sign of encouragement for his environmental protection activities. In like manner, "the Parliamentarian for Ubanako Ubaka, Prof. Verkijika had donated gifts of books on leadership when he visited Bernsah's environmental club (141). The novel thus seems to suggest that the world needs environmentally conscious leaders and only political leaders with a green vision can lead Africa/the world out of the present environmental crisis.<sup>4</sup> Bernsah's leadership role emerges naturally to oppose Alahbukang's self-imposed rule. Bernsah has established himself as a Leader with an environmental vision; one who knows how Ubergerf can restore its wholesomeness. Thus, when towards the end of the novel Bernsah proposes an extension of the Community Forest

<sup>4</sup> Lola's view that only environmentally conscious leaders can save Africa from the present environmental prediction, and even her use of the apocalyptic trope to raise prophetic apprehensions of environmental calamities corroborate scientific knowledge about Sub-Saharan Africa, where Cameroon, the setting of the novel, belongs: A report by the UN's Global Humanitarian Forum for example, estimates that global climate disruption causes 300,000 deaths a year due to increased

drought, flooding, and other environmental consequences, a figure that will dramatically increase if mitigation against climate change is not pursued. Ninety-eight percent of all such deaths occur in postcolonial nations; in stark contrast, only one of the twelve least vulnerable nations is a developing country. Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and the island states of the Pacific and Indian Oceans have been specifically identified as the most at risk. (DeLoughrey and Handley, 27).



Garden (a proposal to which Alabukang is strongly opposed) and requests for more land and donations of raffia, palm and fruit trees from villagers, he is indeed calling for a political referendum on his own environmental activities and on his green vision for Ubergerf. He is also offering the people of the former Ubanako Ubaka a very real possibility of reconnecting with nature and finding a better way of life.

Besides foreshadowing his victory against Alahbukang in the up-coming parliamentary elections, the villagers' positive response to Bernsah's request is evidence that his environmental campaign has been successful. It is important to note that, only Alahbukang votes against Bernsah's environmental project and his opinion is overwhelmingly overruled by the villagers:

Baa Shahdzeka wasted no time to tell the young people to go ahead with the planting of more trees in the garden. Apart from Alahbukang who was silent, everybody supported the idea of extending the Community Garden to accommodate more trees. Bernsah and the young people were asked by Baa Shahdzeka to go ahead and fix specific days when the villagers will join them for the tree planting exercise (155).

This unanimous support marks victory for protectionist attitudes and practices. It is also an indication that Bernsah has finally engendered in the people of the former Ubanako Ubaka an attitude of respect for, and ethical care for the realm of non-human nature. But like the Mariner's last act of blessing the water snakes, the unanimous decision to support Bernsah's green project, coming from these villagers who are the former inhabitants of the erased Ubanako Ubaka has far-reaching spiritual significance.

Through their suffering both in Ubanako Ubaka and now in Ubergerf, Lola's environmental offenders have done enough penance for their sin, and by their decision to join hands with Bernsah to extend and preserve the Community Forest Garden, they have signaled their repentance and willingness to atone for their sins. They have shown their determination to change their environmental

attitudes and practices. Their unanimous decision to work as a community in the protection and preservation of the environment amounts to purifying the land as the oracle had earlier requested. These former inhabitants of Ubanako Ubaka are like Coleridge's ancient mariner who, awakened by nature's revenge have re-examined their own behavior and decided to once more reconnect and live in harmony with nature. Like the Mariner too, who is redeemed by his change of attitude towards nature—admiringly blessing the water snakes for whom he had previously felt nothing but nausea—, the former inhabitants of Ubanako Ubaka, formerly, toxic polluters of the earth have now gained forgiveness or redemption by this single act of coming together to preserve their natural environment. With this act comes a flicker of hope that life will soon return to normal. Indeed "change was visible" and the narrator records this transformation thus:

Although complaints about poor standards of living continued to pour from disgruntled lips, change was visible. As life and mind-sets began to witness gradual metamorphosis, so did the environment whose growth and mutation was facilitated by both individuals, groups and Government. Physical growth was consistent with corresponding environmental, mental and emotional responses (209).

What is however significant is that, by enthusiastically endorsing the extension, protection and conservation of the Community Forest Garden project, the people of the former Ubanako Ubaka who had earlier contaminated the land, forcing it to unleash its wrath have unanimously accepted to turn away from their environmentally unfriendly ways and to join Bernsah in the process of healing the "Bleeding Earth" (title of chapter four). By this decision, they have also finally agreed to do the will of the Oracle who had pronounced the land "defiled", "barren" and in need of "healing otherwise women would continue to cultivate on sterile soil" (62). The community has now decided to join hands with Bernsah in performing the ritual cleansing sacrifice that will heal the land and appeases the ancestral gods. There are now signs

that “women would [no longer] continue to cultivate on sterile soil” as Blossom, Bernsah’s wife-to-be, already owns a fruit shop where she sells the fruits cultivated around the Community Forest Garden.

Environmental activists like Bernsah are for the most part, interested in altering people’s perceptions and ethical considerations for and about the environment. By getting his community to agree to, and assist in, the extension of the Community Garden, Bernsah has succeeded in changing their perception of, and attitude towards their environment. And it is here that Lola’s eco-conscious novel encodes a Discourse of Cultural Change. In other words, this is where Lola’s view of literature as cultural ecology is expressed. Like Coleridge’s “The Rime”, *Rustles* also has a transformative cultural agency that doubles as an ecological discourse. If we stretch out further the ecological issues that have been discussed above to integrate the idea of literature as cultural ecology (Zapf, 5), then we could deduce that at the heart of Lola’s environmental consciousness is lodged the issue of cultural change to which the practice of ecocriticism can contribute. An intellectual inquiry such as ecocriticism can change a person’s/people’s belief, and consequently lead to environmentally-friendly practices that will promote awareness to the roles we are to play in response to changes in our environment. Awareness of the issues, after all, is the first step to cultural change. This contention is in agreement with the idea that the practice of ecocriticism will provide an antidote to the anthropocentrism that might be said to motivate, perpetuate, and aggravate the ecological crises of our time. As Lawrence Buell puts it, literary texts function as “acts of environmental imagination” that may “affect one’s caring for the physical world” (*Writing for an Endangered World*, 2). Bernsah has changed his society’s mentality about the environment. He has helped shape human responses toward the environment. But the impact of his environmental activities is not only intended to affect the minds of the imaginary characters of the text. By implication the change in mentality that Bernsah’s community manifests is endorsed by the reader whose own mentality is inevitably affected. With Bernsah’s election Victory and Alabukang’s

demise (he is arrested at the end of the novel) and this cultural change of mind, the community has, metaphorically speaking, agreed to bring back the rich rustles of fresh leaves on the Naked trees left behind after the fire disaster at Ubanako Ubaka, or on the entire plant life dried up by the scorching sun of the arid new settlement.

There is also the suggestion that the next generation of settlers will be more eco-conscious and ecofriendly. Bernsah is rewarded with a child. It is in the Community Forest Garden that the couple discover their hidden love for each other. While Bernsah is trying to teach Blossom the hybridization of plants, nature awakens in them an uncontrollable attraction for each other, with the result that Bernsah impregnates Blossom right in the middle of the Community Forest Garden. The child is named Seed. Seed is the fruit/reward of the parents’ environmental stewardship. Seed represents a new generation of eco-friendly Ubankans and like his/her earth-bound parents, Seed is likely to continue the task of environmental protection/preservation.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the disparities in genre, sex, culture and literary period between the two authors, the reader can find striking similarities in their views about nature. While the writers chosen for study are historically divided by centuries, Lola, the postcolonial novelist, has undoubtedly taken an equal stand with Coleridge, the romantic poet, in expressing the need to have a shift from anthropocentric outlook to biocentric or ecocentric attitude. With an unparalleled foresight, both authors narrate the horrifying consequences of man’s anthropomorphic attitude towards nature. Using the framework of Glotfelty’s 3-step approach to ecocritical analysis, this paper has highlighted how Coleridge’s “The Rime” and Lola’s *Rustles* have contributed not just to the representation of the holistic ecological model that all organisms and objects, human or non-human in a given environment constitute, through their complex mutual relations, an “ecosystem” in which “everything is connected to everything else” (Commoner, 33). Their works not only represent the close connection and attachment that we, humans

have with other non-human elements of nature, but also raise a collective environmental consciousness/awareness among its readers. Several ecocritical conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of both authors' works: Firstly, both authors employ an identical plotline of sin, punishment, atonement and redemption to demonstrate that nature is a powerful force that can render man helpless and destitute, and this is presented through the use of environmental disasters or apocalyptic trope in both works. Secondly, in both works, nature is depicted as the dwelling of God/the gods and ancestral spirits, through which man should pay their respects. Thirdly, environmental issues like drought, extreme weather conditions, global warming, food and water shortages, environmental diseases, and climate change in general are embedded in the plot. Most of all, both works demonstrate that anthropocentrism does not coincide with the ecological wisdom that invite a bio-centric or eco-centric worldview. Finally, in an exceptional fashion, the works of these two authors act as a transformative cultural agency that doubles as an ecological discourse. In transforming their imaginary characters, these authors implicitly trigger in their readers a more environmentally-conscious thinking. In doing so, their works allow us to reflect on the values and practices that might help to redress our present ecological crisis. Coleridge's "The Rime" and Lola's *Rustles* constitute wake-up calls for cultural change; this means that both the poem and the novel allow us to rethink (and eventually shed off) our anthropocentric attitudes and perceive ourselves, not as superior beings over nature, but as equal members of the natural world.

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#### **A Brief Biography**

Born of the 21 of May 1969 in the Bafut Sub-division of Cameroon, Gerald Niba Nforbin is a Senior Lecturer of Literary and Cultural Studies in the Department of English and Foreign Languages of the University of Douala-Cameroon where he has been working since 2000. He did his undergraduate studies in the University of Yaounde 1 and after obtaining a B.A in English went on to obtain an M.A in Literary Studies from the same University. He presently holds a PhD in English Literary Studies from Justus-Liebig University, Giessen, Germany. His teaching/core areas include Literary theory, Drama, Narrative, Memory cultures, identity, Gender, and postcolonial studies. He has published several articles in national and international journals.

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