

Planting Hope: Exploring Sustainable Futures through Ben Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*

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Abstract

The paper explores Ben Okri's ecological allegory, Every Leaf a Hallelujah, through the lens of Glenn Albrecht's concepts of Solastalgia and Symbiocene, as developed in Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World. This paper suggests that Okri's story is a lament on ecological destruction and a call for ecological restoration, and it expands, complicates, and in some ways, challenges Albrecht's framework. The novel's fairy-tale form provides emotional currency for solastalgia and also raises questions about the possibility of literary utopianism as an alternative to structural ecological action. Moreover, it is important to take care of the application of a Western ecological psychology to a West African story, as some postcolonial dynamics of human-nature interaction can be neglected in Albrecht's model. These tensions, when considered together, suggest that the combination of Okri and Albrecht is best approached dialectically, as a fruitful tension that points to new alternative visions of ecology. The research focuses on the role of literature as a transformative medium to cultivate awareness of the ecological and the notion of re-imagining sustainability as an integrated research tool.

Keywords: Symbiocene, Ecological Imagination, Sustainability, Solastalgia, Ecocriticism

Introduction

The environment is undergoing significant and continuous destruction. In response to this alarming ecological crisis, the field of literature has begun to focus more on ecological issues from the perspective of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary approach, explores the connection between literature and the natural world. It examines how literary texts reflect, question, or advocate for environmental awareness and sustainable living. By including environmental themes in the texts, authors depict the consequences of environmental damage and help shape discussions about sustainable living. Literature, therefore, emerges as a powerful medium in reimagining human connection with nature and fostering care and responsibility towards protecting the planet.

The growing literary concern resonates with Glenn Albrecht's book *Earth Emotions*, published in 2019, which introduces two important concepts. The first, Solastalgia, refers to "the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place" (Albrecht 38). In simple terms, solastalgia describes the grief and psychological distress that people experience when their home environment is damaged or transformed beyond recognition, while they remain within it. The second concept, the Symbiocene, offers a hopeful alternative: an imagined future era characterised by "human intelligence and praxis that replicate the symbiotic and mutually reinforcing life-reproducing forms and processes found

in living systems” (102). Together, these concepts provide a framework for reading ecological literature, one that accounts for both emotional suffering and the imaginative possibility of restoration.

Ben Okri’s *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*, published in 2021, is a modern fairy tale that narrates the story of a seven-year-old girl named Mangoshi, who undergoes a journey into a magical forest to find a special healing flower that can save her ailing mother and her village from a strange sickness caused by environmental degradation. It is a simple story, but a strong ecological message, the sacredness of forests and the dependence of human life on the vitality of natural systems. In this context, literature serves as a mirror of ecological sorrow and as a medium for change, for thinking about possible futures based on ecological equilibrium. This paper presents a discussion on how literature can shift its perspective from a view of the environmental loss to one of a hopeful story informed by the ideals of the Symbiocene, based on Albrecht’s framework. But there are tensions to this move, too. In this paper, the productive alignments and the critical complications are kept together, and it is asserted that the most interesting insights come from the places where the pairing of Okri and Albrecht pulls.

Theoretical Framework

According to Glenn Albrecht’s *Earth Emotions*, human emotions are inextricably linked to the environment, and this bond has been fragmented by the Anthropocene, a new geological age brought about by humans’ control over the planet’s systems. Albrecht bases solastalgia as being as much political and ethical as personal: “The natural resources, such as animals and plants, also had to be actively managed by human emotional bonds, in the form of protective personal totems...the emotional symbiosis acted to conserve the total environment” (9). This formulation states that ecological grief is a passive reaction to loss, and protective action must be born out of these emotions.

The proposed period that must come next is the Symbiocene. It is a utopia of the imagination, based on new biological science, the revelation that life lives in radical interdependence, with fungi and networks of communication between trees, and the human gut microbiome. Albrecht argues: “We are not individuals existing as isolated atoms in a sea of competition. The foundational idea of life as consisting of autonomous entities...has been shown to be fundamentally mistaken” (100). The Symbiocene is now grounded in the scientific reality, not just the hope of a dream. It necessitates, as Albrecht puts it, a revolution in both praxis and emotion, a shift from anthropocentrism to what he calls *sumbiocentrism*, which takes “into account the centrality of the process of symbiosis in all of our deliberations on human affairs” (102).

It is important to establish precisely how these two concepts function as an analytical lens in this paper before moving to the text. Here, solastalgia acts as a diagnostic tool for analysing how Okri represents environmental loss, feelings of sadness and a lost sense of place in his characters and background. It is the Symbiocene, which is a normative horizon, a desired future that the novel’s narrative is moving towards. The analysis that follows does not simply transfer these ideas to the events in the novel, but questions the way that the novel’s formal strategies complicate, heighten, and sometimes overwork the framework that Albrecht offers.

Solastalgia and the Sentient Forest

The trees in this novel are endowed with human qualities and given a voice to represent the suffering of the natural world. The rhetorical device of personification is not fully equivalent: it is a structural inversion, which is an inversion of the flow of solastalgia. Albrecht describes the concept in terms of emotional suffering in humans when faced with environmental shifts.

Okri's text focuses on the sufferings of the trees, and it's the forest that grieves, and Mangoshi must become that emotional witness, in order to act. This is an analytical distinction because it is not just Okri moving within Albrecht's framework, but the centre of gravity of suffering is shifted to the non-human, to challenge the anthropocentric base of Albrecht's first model.

The degradation of the village is presented as inevitable and gradual. The villagers notice, "their harvests grew poorer, and they had less to eat. Strange animals appeared in the village. It became scorching in the daytime. Then, people began falling ill, and no one knew where the illness came from" (Okri 31). This sequence of events is a readily understood causal chain: deforestation causes crop failure, heat, disease and social unrest. The solastalgia of the community is biophysical. Environmental damage is felt first by their bodies, and then in their minds. Similarly, Albrecht notes that ecological loss brings about psychological and physical suffering, and that environmental loss should be considered as a way of "lived experience" rather than mere sentiment (Albrecht 38).

The second time Mangoshi goes to the forest, she discovers a different kind of forest: "she was surprised at what she saw: the dryness, the ash of vines, the broken earth. Trees had been uprooted, and many had been cut and their broken trunks lay among their resplendent branches on cracked Earth" (Okri 41). This scene does exactly what Albrecht envisioned solastalgia does: it is an assault on place, not metaphorical but real, and the emotional responses engendered in the characters (grief, guilt, responsibility) alter Mangoshi's attitudes from extractive to relational. This change is encapsulated in her conversation with the fallen tree:

"...tell me what happened to you. Why are you fallen?"

"Human beings came and cut me down."

"But why?"

"To sell me and make money."

"But if they do that, there will be no forest left."

"I know. They do not know what terrible troubles they are causing."

"I am sorry this has been done to you."

"Do not be sorry. Do something. Talk to older trees. Go into the forest."

"Thank you. I will." (48)

The fallen tree's last directive, "Do something," is the pivot of the novel's ecological message. As Albrecht argues, solastalgia should not be petrifying, but rather motivating towards protection. The novel is a reflection of this transition through Mangoshi's character arc, grief becomes conscience, then becomes action. This is not just descriptive of alignment with Albrecht's framework but a formalization of his argument that emotional attachment to the Earth is essential for the conservation of the Earth.

In part, inspired by the ecological science of today, Albrecht's *Symbiocene* is grounded in the tree's underground communication system, "All the trees are connected. If one suffers, all suffer. We each feel what all the others are feeling...We are all linked by our roots" (Okri 44). Researchers such as Suzanne Simard have shown that, in the forest, trees send nutrients and crisis messages to one another via fungal networks that defy the theory of competition-based evolution (Albrecht 115). Trees suffer together, but people who are indifferent to one tree will be indifferent to the forest community as a whole, because there is no such thing as a single tree; there is only a forest community.

Towards the Symbiocene: Repair and Reciprocity of Nature

The Baobab tree's conversation with Mangoshi represents what Albrecht calls the positive psychoterratic aspect of the living of *Symbiocene*, not simply about grief at loss, but about a relationship with the living world that is active and emotionally engaged. The Baobab explains: "We are not just trees... We hold the Earth together...We give the earth air humans breathe..."

We have the healing power. We are older than the human race.” (Okri 57). It’s not the language of resource management; it’s the language of kinship and obligation. The Baobab also teaches: “Take me, for example. Every part of me is useful. My leaves and bark produce healing medicine. My fruits are nutritious. My roots cure many known and unknown diseases” (58). This mutual interdependence is precisely in line with Albrecht’s Symbiocene principle, “all species, great and small, [must have] their life interests and biocomunal properties understood and respected” (Albrecht 104).

Mangoshi’s political act of standing before the tree-cutters and saying “I understand that you want to kill this tree for no good reason, and I won’t let you... You will have to cut me down before you touch this tree” (Okri 72), dramatises what Albrecht calls *soliphilia*, the love of the totality of our place relationships, and a willingness to accept the political responsibility for protecting and conserving them at all scales (Albrecht 122). This is an important difference to solastalgia. Solastalgia is the emotional injury, soliphilia is the emotional activism that engages with it. Mangoshi’s courage then catalyses a collective response: “...more people gathered. The more people gathered, the more difficult it was for the tree cutters to do their work... The people who had come supported her” (Okri 79). This need is explicitly stated by Albrecht, who argues that there is a requirement for people who feel emotionally at home and can guide humans into a new era of living with nature, the Symbiocene (Albrecht xii). Mangoshi is this figure, and her metamorphosis from a frightened child to a forest protector is the prototype of the formation of Symbiocene identity.

The novel’s main theme of symbiotic reciprocity is symbolized by the healing flower itself, which only appears when the forest is safe, secure, and happy. A flower cannot be removed from a broken forest; it can only emerge from a mended forest. This is Okri’s most forthright ecological argument that nature’s healing gifts are dependent upon human respect and are not given for humans to take. The magic, in other words, is not supernatural in any arbitrary sense. It is a figure for the real logic of ecological systems, in which the well-being of humans is downstream of the health of the ecosystem.

The Problem of Utopianism

There is a need to examine the resolution of the novel. One child cries, loggers run away, the magic flower blooms, and the village is healed. A striking and satisfying resolution, but with a simple structure. The novel does not describe the systemic economic pressure and the poverty and global supply chains that send loggers to the forest in the first place, nor does it explain the economic pressures that drive deforestation. Mangoshi stops these particular loggers; she does not stop logging. A real question arises: will the fairy-tale form, in its ability to offer emotionally complete resolution, provide readers with any form of gratification that will replace the discomfort that would lead to structural change?

Albrecht is well aware of this danger. He explicitly warns against ecological visions that are rapidly “turned into business-as-usual growth, easily appropriated by the forces of destruction” (103). A utopian story that helps to solve ecological problems with individual heroism and magic may paradoxically be useful for the dominant ideology in making environmental issues appear manageable at the individual level. The resolution of the problem, the salvation of the village, the fairy-tale ending may tame the nature of the crisis set up by the imagery of the novel.

This shouldn’t be a reason to give away the novel. Instead, it calls for a genre reading that is aware and conscious. Okri’s decision to use a fairy tale is also a political move; it is a shift from the managerial and the technical to the ecological and the communal, from the world of the individual to the world of the community. As Clarisse Pinchon has argued, imagination is “necessary for putting the ethics of responsibility into practice” (Pinchon 23). The fairy

tale does not tell what has to become possible. Albrecht similarly believes that “imagination is powerful and necessary for creating a sustainable future” (Albrecht xi). If this is so, the novel’s utopianism is not a downside but a genre-specific tactic: it’s an approach to the reader’s emotional orientation, rather than a policy model. The constraint is that emotional reorientation, without structural critique, can be a comfort, postponing action instead of catalysing it.

Postcolonial Context

A deeper disagreement concerns Albrecht’s framework and how it’s applied to a Sub-Saharan African story. Albrecht’s notion of solastalgia has been built on research in Australian mining communities and is rooted in a Western tradition of environmental psychology. At its heart, the concept is based on the idea of an ecological balance that has been disrupted, presumably because it was invaded by another species. But for communities in Africa whose homes have been taken over, settled by colonialists, exploited by extractive capitalism, and whose relationship to land was destroyed over centuries, it is just a natural environment, and a colonially violated sociocultural and spiritual relationship to land.

The grief is thus double-layered, of which Albrecht’s framework (inspired by a settler-colonial context) does not fully theorise. But not everything applies to solastalgia. Albrecht admits that “in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East...climate change and religious, political, and ethnic persecution are likely to cause traditionally defined homesickness” (46). He is also aware that throughout the world, Indigenous people have long engaged in forms of ecological relationship that anticipated many of the tenets of the Symbiocene: Aboriginal Australians, for instance, “lived within what we now call bioregions” and “developed a detailed knowledge of their place, or country” through practices that express living forms of symbiotic coexistence (24). Many communities of West Africa, too, have ways of forest knowledge, animist worldviews and community land management that, according to Albrecht, are forms of living what he calls the Symbiocene.

This indigenous ecological knowledge is captured in the novel’s character of the Baobab, one of Africa’s most culturally significant trees, with roots in ancestral memory, communal gathering, and healing in many cultures in sub-Saharan Africa. It is not just a botanical prop; the Baobab has a culturally specific spiritual authority that is older than Albrecht’s model by thousands of years. To read the novel only from Albrecht’s perspective is to risk reducing the specificity of the book, assimilating African ecological knowledge into a Western theoretical framework that treats the African knowledge as an example of the schema itself. If a more serious application of the framework is to take place, Okri’s text must recognize that his ecological insight is not dependent on the presence of Albrecht, but rather is rooted in a human-nature relation which pre-exists and exists outside of Western environmental psychology. The productive scholarly act is to read them in dialogue, to see what Albrecht brings out in Okri, and what Okri brings out in the context of Africa, in which Albrecht’s scope is limited.

Literature as Ecological Tool

Such is the case, however, when Okri and Albrecht combine their talents, for they make a strong case for literature as an integrated research tool for sustainability despite the tensions. According to Hanna Lehtimäki, Siiri Piironen, and Mark Issac, “imagination plays an important role in pursuing more sustainable futures” (Lehtimäki et al. 31). This is not a sentimental appeal to the uplift of literature; it is a positive argument that imaginative modalities or genres serve cognitive and moral functions that are not part of scientific discourse. Science and research are required to solve environmental issues, and there should be a place for storytelling, emotion and imagination as Albrecht explicitly declares: “The future could turn out to be very ugly for humanity, but then again, it could be brilliant” (Albrecht xi). One answer to this call is the fairy-

tale form that Okri employs.

Okri gives voice to the forest and makes it the target of moral concern, something that science would not do as well. The tree that says “Do something” is not a fact; it is an ethical instruction. The novel also shows how ecological imagination isn’t necessarily consolation to be politically useful. The earth’s cracks, the fallen trees weeping, the dying baobab, are disturbing because they cannot be simply aestheticized; they are devastating. The forest is not made beautiful; it is made intimate. Here, the affective politics of solastalgia is used as a literary device: readers are placed in a subject position to actualise the forest’s distress as their own, thus embodying the condition of emotionality, the very basis required for ecological action as put forth by Albrecht. As he argues, “we lose culture, language, and our emotional choreography in relation to disappearing first nature” (Albrecht 68), and literature is one of the few forms capable of making that loss felt, rather than merely known.

Conclusion

Every Leaf a Hallelujah by Ben Okri does not just give an illustration of Glenn Albrecht’s ideas on the concept of Solastalgia and the Symbiocene, it embodies and challenges them. The shift from a grieving witness to active protector is what Mangoshi exemplifies as the psychological journey she has made, from Albrecht’s perspective of Solastalgia to Soliphilia, the psychological shift of our time. The novel’s forest, its talking trees, and its healing flower are all imaginative expressions of the scientific facts of symbiotic ecology that lie at the heart of Albrecht’s Symbiocene vision. This alignment has its limitations, too. The idyllic solution to the ecological crisis, which might be a result of the fairy tale, could lead to aestheticization that lightens the burden on the reader’s critical consciousness. More significantly, a process of appropriating a text from a literate culture, Western environmental psychology, to a non-literate one, West African literary text, can only be done after acknowledging the indigenous cultural ecological traditions that Okri draws upon, the Symbiocene concept being only a partial acknowledgement. These are not weaknesses in the pairing; they are strengths and the circumstances of its mental fertility. Both Okri and Albrecht know this, and it is what this paper wants to suggest: The right policy is not enough to protect the Earth; imagination must be transformed. As the Baobab tells Mangoshi: “All the trees radiate love...and every leaf is a hallelujah” (Okri 96). That hallelujah is not consolation. It is a demand.

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