

Climate Changes and its Psychological Impacts on African Americans: An Ecocritical Reading of “Floodtide” by Askia M.Toure

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Abstract

Natural disasters, climate changes and reminiscences of past collective memories often triggered tensions and rifts between the African Americans and the natural world. The natural hazards and severe climate changes cause psychological impacts and disrupt the mental health of African Americans. The mental health of a person is vulnerable and susceptible to sudden shocks and uncertainties. There is a high chance of risk in the disruption of mental equilibrium of a person who got impacted by the natural disaster and severe changes in the climate. It induces acute and chronic psychological impacts including trauma, Post Traumatic Stress Disorders, tensions in social affairs, depression, aggression and feelings of helplessness, fear, fatalism etc. The natural catastrophes induced by climate change have a high potential for sudden and severe psychological traumatic experiences raised due to the demise of a loved one, destruction to or loss of personal possession or physical injuries. But this did not result in a complete break away from nature. They own a deeper dynamic connection with nature. From nature, they experienced both its nectar and the thorns. The paper aspires to analyse the numerous ways in which nature constitutes and defines the lives of African Americans through the ecocritical reading of the African American nature poem “Floodtide” by Askia M. Toure.

Keywords: Climate change, Natural disaster, Floods, Eco-Anxiety, Transformational Resilience

Contribution/Originality: The study intends to scrutinize the multiple ways in which African Americans get psychologically impacted by the changing climate and due to devastating natural catastrophes like floods.

Introduction

Climate change causes an intense impact on the natural world and its function. It is stimulating more periodic and extreme weather events, encompassing heavy rainfall, hazardous storms, droughts and heatwaves. Such catastrophes resulted in the loss of lives and relationships, increased homelessness and crucial impacts on public health. The direct health impacts upon the population such as injuries and the indirect health impacts like malnutrition and increased contagious diseases are deemed to be crucial consequences of natural disasters. Moreover, the devastations create consequences also on the health systems, water and sanitation, infrastructure and other basic amenities. The collisions of climate change are primarily inferred by the population's susceptibility and stability. Hence, those who suffer from socio-economic disparities are more likely to be felt disproportionately.

The aftermaths of recurring climate changes and natural catastrophes lash heavily upon those lives that are closely integrated with the environment. African Americans, for that matter, are more sensitive towards confronting the consequences of climate change. It is agonizing to witness how a community that is so involved in the natural world is suffering dreadfully by the same forces itself. It will be more challenging for them to confront these vulnerable conditions as they are already grieving due to the past traumatic experiences of slavery and racism. African American communities are more susceptible to terrible weather and floods. More than half of African Americans in the US reside in the South. The southern US is more likely to have a critical storm or flood, compared to other parts of the country, affecting these dilemmas to be more terrible for African Americans. African Americans are disproportionately tormented by environmental dangers due to constant changes in climatic conditions. Moreover, the communities with low financial backgrounds are more prone to face the consequences as they lack efficient resources to mitigate. National-level surveys and study reports have estimated how a major part of the African American population, especially the financially downtrodden, are affected severely due to storms, floods, and wildfires etc. The consequences and discrepancies were made terrifyingly vivid during 2005's Hurricane Katrina when about half of the African Americans living in New Orleans were compelled to leave their residence.

The recurring disturbance in mental composure leads to the emergence of several different emotions, including fear, anger, feelings of powerlessness, or exhaustion. For African Americans, it acts as an additional stress factor to their lives as they were already suffered from past traumatic experiences of discrimination and exploitation. This kind of compounded stresses vulnerable the living conditions of African American communities. Moreover, deception from dearest and connected ones induce excruciating pain and despair. African Americans hold an integral nexus between nature even though the latter reminds the former constantly about the traumatic memories and experiences. Nature provided immense and wild possibilities for these people and that led to congruent bonding between them. This strong connection with nature led African Americans to bestow immense faith and hope in nature. So, any sort of delusion from the side of nature will cause shocking and traumatic encounters to the people.

Floods and Its psychological impacts on African Americans

African Americans respond distinctively to the climate changes and the psychological impacts created by them. One may feel fear of nature and others may experience despair or anger. Floods are always an obstacle that hinders the lives and routines of African American farmers. The farmers are the one who solely relies on nature and the climatic conditions as their entire life and livelihood confide to the fields. But the sudden and devastating floods brushes away the huge amount of agricultural land and crops. It is the agriculture sector that primarily confronts the major consequences and damage caused by floods. For black tenant farmers, such catastrophic climate change induces a sort of compound stress. The black tenant farmers are diligently sweating their efforts in the field in which they have no ownership. There was always a longing in them to have a piece of land of their own but crumbles to dust due to forces of racism and exploitation. In such a mental state it is dreadful to experience the sudden loss of all their efforts due to the ravaging climate changes. The poem "Floodtide " by Askia M.Toure resonates with how the intermittent climate change triggered an eco-anger among the black tenant farmers. The farmers in the poem exhibit resentment to nature as they were confronting severe droughts and devastating floods intermittently.

Moderate climate and rainfall are essential for the farmers to flourish their agricultural fields with optimum productivity. But in this poem, the black tenant farmers are experiencing an

excruciating condition where they have been completely deceived by the destructive forces of nature. Drought made their lives pathetic and dreadful. The poet explains the pathetic condition of the black farmers, “drought, / the river is a tricklin’ stream / dust on the dry tongues of livestock” (Toure, 2009, p.184). The farmers are enduring a crucial condition where there is not even a single drop of water which is enough to moist their dried tongues. This agonising crisis intensely attacked them and created psychological impacts. The usage of phrases like, ‘merciless sunlight, ‘dust devils ‘merciless heatspell’ etc. implies the triggering of eco-anger and disgust. The tenant farmers exhibited a strong sense of anger and resentment towards the natural forces. The inducement of eco-anger in the black farmers leads to the identification of natural elements as estranging and evil ones. The farmers were in a dilemma and a miserable situation where they had no enough water to quench the thirst of their cattle and to moist their agricultural fields.

The constant encounters with natural disasters and due to its devastating consequences, the waves of Eco-anxieties and climate anxieties began to ashore on the African American communities. The Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht introduced the term ‘Eco-anxiety’ which applies to the existential pain experienced when the place where one inhabits is exposed to environmental collapse. His idea of Solastalgia is closely related to the notions of Eco-anxiety. According to Albrecht, solastalgia refers to a “set of psychological disorders that occur in a native population following destructive changes in their territory, whether as a result of human activities or the climate.” The social psychologists of the American Psychological Association (APA) describe Eco-anxiety as "a chronic fear of environmental doom,"(2017). The terms like “climate change distress,” “eco-trauma,” “eco-angst,” and “ecological grief,” etc. also come connected to eco-anxiety.

The resentment towards nature reinforces in the black tenant farmers as their prayers for ‘warm soft rain’ turned into mockery. This strong sense of aggression is a chronic psychological impact caused by the sudden and raging climate change. The vulnerable situation of the farmers got further worse when “the rain comes / and washes the green mountains; / floods the cotton land”(Toure, 2009, p.185). The farmers were already in a state of tension due to the ‘merciless drought’ and ‘white folks.’ The flood generates a state of Compounded Stress and eco-anger among the black tenant farmers. It grabbed their source of livelihood, shelter and brought utter

despair and agony. The heightened level of deception from nature caused a transition in the farmers. During the times of drought, they prayed for warm soft rain and now the farmers address it as ‘killer rain.’ This transition exhibits the degree to which, the immediate climate change, generated psychological impacts on the farmers.

killer rain comes:
the river is a ragin’ madman.
the river breaks our hearts.
...
Silence;
gray mist and heartache,
the flooded land.
now, screams ;now, cries if rage.
the wails of women
and children,
the cursing men.
wetsmells, deathsmells
of cattle, pigs,
of bloated men,
of hope,
of fallen dreams. (Toure, 2009, p.185-186)

The flood crumbled the lives and dreams of the black tenant farmers. The limes vividly showcase the resentment and rage of farmers towards all those natural elements which break their hearts. It caused a massive impact on the women and children of these poor farmers. They were in a state of helplessness as their hopes and dreams shattered all of a sudden. As Camille Dungy rightly pointed out that, “we need to think about the ways in which the black and brown people, poor people and women are very frequently the ones most directly impacted by environmental degradations” (Transatlantic Thursdays - What Is Black Nature Poetry, and Why Should We Be Talking About It More? 01:07:05). The mental stability of these women disrupts badly as they lose their men, livestock and dreams.

wake up and live;
cleanup
the flooded land,
the fallen trees, the fields.
rebuild
the shattered homes,
the shattered lives,
the hopes.
rebuild
your shattered dreams.
“though sorrows completely
bend them down.
though butchered and maimed
by nature and white folks,
they sing their songs, (Toure,2009, p.187)

Though there induced rage and resentment in the farmers towards nature, the climate change and flood evoked a positive sense of Transformational Resilience and Climate Resilience in them. Anxiety stimulated by the menace of climate change can be either adaptive or maladaptive. The adaptive anxiety encourages the affected individuals to cope up with the crisis by promoting them to find better resolutions and remedies. It is significant to maintain the inner strength as did by these tenant farmers though they were ravished by the destructive forces of nature and ‘Whitefolks.’ Bob Doppelt in his 2016 book *Transformational Resilience: How Building Human Resilience to Climate Disruption Can Safeguard Society and Increase Wellbeing*, introduced the concept of Transformational Resilience. It guides the victims to think and act constructively and to imbibe the adversities of calamities as a catalyst to elevate a sense of hope, faith and resilience. Furthermore, it alarms for the idea of Practical eco-anxiety. In such instances, the anxiety steers people to re-evaluate their circumstance, explore for reasonable input, and to bring about transformations in individual and collective attitude. As the process of rejuvenation and resurrection from the devastating encounters with nature demands time, it is significant to

maintain mental stability for the time being. It is equally substantial to accept the current situation and to adopt practical and adaptable strategies to redeem out from the sudden shocks.

Here in this poem, the black tenant farmers are in a state of deep dilemma, despair and rage due to the immediate drought and flood. But further, they took this as a motivation and exhibited their perseverance to ‘rebuild their shattered homes, the shattered lives, the hopes.’ The farmers call each other to resurrect and relive rather than remain as rotten. The anxiety and tension so far haunted them kindled a new spirit of rejuvenation. The farmers identify the reality of a life where you have to stand up even if you are made to doom and dust. They developed adaptive anxiety to all the sudden destructive forces, both from nature and from the white men. The black tenant farmers, “they sing their songs, and carry on.”(Toure,2009, p.187). They sang their songs of victory, hope and mental peace tuned with the rhythms of rejuvenation and resilience. Carolyn Finney in her 2014 book, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* rightly pointed out that:

Our resilience is reflection of our need to survive...our resilience becomes multidimensional and explosive with possibilities because of what we believe we can create. And creation does not exist in vacuum. There is something about our collective experiences—the“collective”sometimes defined by cultural/ethnic/racial differences—and the relationship between those differences that offers a chance to recognize and embrace our common humanity; a chance to imagine other possibilities by seeing another’s position of privilege and the challenges one has experienced. We come to understand how people create, retain hope,and move forward. Our mutual responsibility is to see those differences and recognize the possibilities and be fearless enough to bring those possibilities into our realities. (Finney, 2014, p.134)

Conclusion

The ecocritical readings of the selected poems provide critical and theoretical understandings of the association between African Americans and nature. The ecocritical analysis of the poems assists in providing extensive understandings regarding the dynamic and meaningful relationship between nature and African Americans. African Americans maintain a dynamic

relationship with the natural world. Their relationship with nature undergoes intermittent fluctuations and thereby defines the relationship as a notable one. It is a significant culture to practice robust and dynamic connectivity with nature. Experiencing only the single aspect of a relationship will eventually cause great rifts. It is essential to identify and encounter multiple realms. Such practices aid in identifying the complexity and fluidity of the relationship. African Americans witnessed the multiple faces of the natural terrain that binds and surrounds them. The flexibility and adaptability of African Americans to the recurring alterations of nature elevates their connection to a meaningful realm. Camille Dungy rightly observes in the introductory session of *Black Nature*, “Despite the hardships visited upon African American and the natural world they live in hope and potential for renewal, regeneration, and positive growth spring eternally” (Dungy, 2009, p. xxxiv).

Tied to its ties, the mind is many a time a tangled kite. The mental states vary from person to person. The way one responds to the sudden shocks and tensions can be both personal and collective. Both the personal and social factors have a major role in the psychological responses of the victims. The psychological impacts induced by the altering climatic conditions and natural disasters create different mental health issues in the victims. The fluid and dynamic status of the relationship between human and nature makes man exposed to the grim realities of life. Nature itself is the greatest mentor for man to learn the deeper meanings of his life. Nature reflects the never-ending life lessons and existences. It echoes the unsung rhythms of life alarms. Though nature offers and exposes to the fullest, it depends on the individual how their mental temperaments are tuned and respond to the changes.

Rather than getting only influenced and enthralled by the strong relationship with nature, it is also integral to analyse the psychological modifications happening in humans due to the changes in nature. Today, the disruptions in the environment are directing men to challenging situations where they are encountering unstable living conditions. The floods, communicable diseases and pandemic situations are not only arousing economic and administrative dilemmas but also affecting the mental health of the people. It is high time to normalise the discussions regarding mental health. Living in such relatable environmental conditions and getting mentally impacted by the changing natural scenarios, the study widens its horizon.

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