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To cite this version:

Eunice Ngongkum. Sierra Leone Horizons: Landscape in Syl Cheney-Coker's Poetry. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 2010, Old Days, New Days, 33, pp.139-163. hal-02341423

HAL Id: hal-02341423
https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02341423

Submitted on 31 Oct 2019

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Introduction

Most literary critics today, regardless of their theoretical orientations, agree on the premise that cultural productions are grounded in identifiable geographical landscapes. In his article "History, Literature and Geography," Edward Said, in an analysis of the works of Antonio Gramsci, posits that "all ideas, all texts, all writings are embedded in actual geographical situations that make them possible" (466). Said's views draw from the premise that literature enjoys an intimate relationship with its environment of birth; speaking to, or about it. This relationship is all the more crucial in Africa where landscapes are thoroughly imbued with social significance. D. R. Fraser Taylor says to this effect that in Africa, "the historical background, social customs, religions ideas, political aspirations and a variety of other factors aspects of the environment are as significant as soils, climate and natural vegetation" (272). Ngugi Wa Thiongo corroborates this when he says that "what form(s) the African sensibility, [cannot] be divorced from the landscape and the historical experience" (133-4). The views of Fraser Tylor and Ngugi above find expression in the works of Syl Cheney-Coker, a postcolonial African poet whose artistic endeavours negotiate the geographical entity called Sierra Leone. The poetry is based on a territorial and imaginative vision of a landscape which is unique in Africa. In it, the landscape is an active presence, a player in human affairs. But first things first, what do we mean by "landscape?"

Landscape is a polysemic term which, according to Lawrence Buell, derives from early modern Dutch "landschap" painting (142). English language dictionary definitions give it as a portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view. Jim Duncan in the *Dictionary of Human Geography* says it is "the appearance of an area, the assemblage of objects used to produce that appearance (or) the area itself" (429). These definitions emphasize vision and a degree of arrangement in the palpable locale being observed. It is the sum total of what the eye can see from its point of observation. The definitions emphasise landscape as a physical, concrete place. But in contemporary scholarship, landscapes transcend the physical to include both what is "shaped by the mind of the beholder as well as socio-historical forces" (Buell: 2007 143). Barry Lopez in "Landscape and Narrative" isolates two types of landscape in literature-the external and the interior. The external landscape is the one we see-not only the line and colour of the land and its shading at different times of the day, but also its plants and animals in season, its weather, its geology, the record of its climate and evolution. The interior landscape is a "kind of projection within the person of a part of the exterior landscape" (in Buell: 1995 83). Angus Fletcher, through his theory of the environment-poem, observes that the social landscape figures as part of the total landscape in works of literature, especially poetry (122-28). Landscape then, from these definitions, transcends geography to connote a spot where people have acted out their lives; their identities, for as Leslie Marmon Silko has observed, "human identity is linked with all the elements of creation, landscape being an integral part of this whole" (266). In this paper, we take landscape to mean the description of the land or place , its role in the cultural, economic and spiritual life of a given community and above all in the vision of the poet of revolt (Loflin: 1998).

Our approach is essentially multidisciplinary, given the fact that “landscape” is not the property of a single discipline. Its cultural implications are broad. In effect, landscape operates at the confluence of geography, politics, society and the environment. Geography provides the poet of revolt with the physical entity that elicits his commitment. In postcolonial theory and environmental criticism, landscape is intimately related to the social and cultural. It is, as Malcolm Rosalind has observed, “the combination of material and social things affecting the life of a people. An environmentally conscious reading of African poetry, for instance, accentuates our perception of the indissoluble link that the literature has with the society especially as we deal with the landscape (the earth) which is the basic element that sustains the political, economical or aesthetic. These approaches delineate landscape as a crucial element in the vitality and vision of the poet of revolt.

Landscape as topography

As we have noted already, Syl Cheney-Coker has Sierra Leone as suitable subject for his poetry. The range of geographical metaphors and diversity of functions these serve in the poet’s vision of revolt, suggest the poetry’s rootedness in the geographical territory known as Sierra Leone. References to the land and evocations of the landscape demonstrate the poet’s acquaintance with the topography of the country. The constant reference to “the Sierra”, “the mountain,” “mountain of lions,” in some of the poems, bears witness to this. These allusions are drawn from the physical features around Freetown, the capital of the country. In effect, geographical sources indicate that the mountains overlooking Freetown resemble crouching lions when approached from the sea. That is why Pedro da Cinta, the Portuguese explorer who first sighted and mapped Freetown in the fifteenth century, gave the name “Sierra Leone” which means, “Mountain of Lions.” M.E. Hair makes the following conclusion about this historical fact in his article “The Spelling and Connotation of the Toponym Sierra Leone since 1461:”

> Pero de Sintra thought of lions not because he saw any–there are none–or because of the roaring of the thunder or waves–these were sixteenth century fabrications–but “because the land was wild and rough”.…What is certain is that the term “lyoa” = Leonine was to refer to the steep hills of the peninsula…whose outline is so striking after a voyage along the low-lying coast. (46)

Interestingly, Syl Cheney-Coker has exploited all the connotations of this toponym in his poetry. The mountain; its volcanic character and rocklike quality, function as multifaceted symbol. For instance, the volcanic eruptions taking place on this range, constitute an apt metaphor not only of the coup phenomenon that has characterised Sierra Leonean political life since independence, but also of revolt at a personal and collective level. In “Concerto for an Exile” (*Concerto* 2), for instance, the speaker decries the killing of innocent citizens in the aftermath of the 1970 coup, “what poems shall I write for my fratricidal brothers/whose lust has made the Sierra a volcano too bloody in my life.” The symbolic “volcano”, an elemental landscape image, operates in these lines to underscore the greed of the politicians, which has led to the violent deaths, and the pain experienced by the poet-persona upon learning of the eruptive situation in his country. The physical features of Sierra Leone, from this example, can be said to be crucial in the poet’s vision of revolt.

In another poem, aptly entitled "Volcano", these same political upheavals are captured through the image of a volcanic eruption:

> And now this disquisition my Sierra
> Was I a part of it
> this gust of lava my pox
> sordidly oozing into my skull. (*Concerto* 21)

The diction in the lines above, "gust of lava", "oozing", draw from the register of volcanicity and mountain activity. This reinforces our earlier affirmation that landscape is imagery. Again, the preponderance of the short vowel sound / / coupled with hard consonant sounds like /g/, /p/ and /sk/ in words like "gust," "of," "pox," "sordidly," "skull," emphasize the poet's anger and disgust with these destructive political upheavals. The metaphor of volcanic action, from these few examples, becomes the medium through which the poet expresses his revolt at the personal and collective levels.

In "When the Revolution is Near at Hand", the speaker's anger is directed at the fascist methods adopted by the political class in his country to contain opposition. This autocratic frame of governance, according to the poet-persona, has turned the country into "a ghetto of silence". But the vision of the poem is one of hope as the poetic voice anticipates the time when these "mad panjandrums" shall be overthrown in a popular uprising. What is striking in the poem is that all forces of change, the speaker inclusive, view the revolt in terms of a volcanic eruption: "and like a volcano I spit out my disgust looking down at Sierra Leone!" (*The Graveyard* 61) This simile, drawn from the landscape, consistently highlights not only Cheney-Coker's revolutionary perspective, but calls attention to his engagement with landscape features as metaphors of that vision.

For the revolution to succeed, however, the resistance and determination of its forces is imperative as we discover through the metaphorical reference to a rock or a mountain in the poem, “Song of a Rock” (*Concerto* 34). The reference to rocks and mountains underline the firm determination of the poet to be at the forefront of the fight for change in his country. In anticipation of that time then, the poet’s role is clearly defined: “These meteors in my eyes / if they burn too fast / imagine the funeral train / of our final laughter!” The poet’s conscientizing role is here aptly underscored in the incendiary image of “meteors.” The downtrodden can effectively come into their own through an inevitable violent revolution which must begin with the poet playing a conscientizing role. Form lends credence to poetic vision in the four line stanza pattern which signals consistency in the poet’s posture as harbinger of meaningful change in the country.

Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone is built by the sea, on a peninsula with a beautiful harbour, but Cheney-Coker is more concerned with how “the sea” as symbol, can sufficiently convey the idea of revolt that he wants to communicate.

> Ah! the Sierra is a volcano
> a gathering of clouds to announce
> the coming storm the day lashes
> at the trees its giddiness of rage (*Concerto* 9).

All elements of the sea, “its corals,” “its circular currents,” “its tidal waves,” “the equinoctial volcano of the sea,” are indications of the revolt of the peasant, who “sharpens his machete / to prepare himself for the storm.” Interestingly, the marriage of images from the mountainous landscape and the sea in the poem shows how the poet's knowledge of the geography of his country enables him to integrate such within the very experience and aspirations of the people.

Specific aspects of the Freetown physical environment are brought to the reader in, "Poet among Those Who Are Also Poets." The poem adopts the persona of the privileged traveller driving around Freetown to display knowledge of place. The cinematographic technique is effective as the camera lens of the speaker falls on specific features he wants the reader to perceive. These include "the dirty streets," "the library," "the empty fountain," "the gold-plated gates of the presidential palace," "the giant cotton tree at the centre of Freetown," "the cemetery," the garbage dump" and "the hospital." These are landscape features with which the poet is familiar. This seemingly fragmentary documentary makes a subtle comment on the disparity existing between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in post-independent Sierra Leone. This situation, captured by the poet of revolt, corroborates Andrew Merrifield's contentions that conflicts between socio-economic interests and forces aptly express themselves in the landscape (522). The poet's sarcasm in the concluding line of the poem, "such is the life seen driving around Freetown" becomes meaningful in this regard.

"Looking for the Spirit at Night" (*The Graveyard* 82), is set in Juba, home of poet Cheney-Coker. The poem captures, in pastoral tradition, details of the physical environment:

> Before my house drinking the beautiful frangipanis
> a family of coconut palms shading the nudity of the beach
> before my house the termite-infected lemon trees
> and the slow movement of the iguana on the iroko tree
> It is here that I hear…
> the wailing cicadas and the howling bats

and the monotonous croaking of the frogs
Sierra Leone with its sad eyes and the medicinal impulse.

The description is organised along the lines of landscape painting. First we see the beautiful flowers and fruit trees, alive with the sounds of birds and animals. The poet is captivated by this landscape of sound and sight which affects him psychologically: "tonight being Sunday Juba is humid and feeling this heat / I think I'll like to open the antennae of my head / to catch one word one flowering word of hope." Set against the background of solitude and grief, the landscape provides the opportunity to meditate on the meaning of life and death. The speaker, at the end of the poem, claims that the peaceful environment with its beautiful flora and the melody of the noises of "the cicadas the iguana the vulture and the frogs," jolts him out of "the matter-of-fact overdose of my solitude." Landscape here, lays the framework for understanding the conflict within the speaker's mind overwhelmed as he is by sorrow.

These examples, by no means exhaustive, indicate that distinguishing the range of Sierra Leonean topography, appropriating its sights and sounds as valid metaphors is a forte in Cheney-Coker's vision as a poet of revolt.

Landscape as history

Landscape is also history as we intimated in the introduction. In *The Middle Passage,* V.S. Naipaul notes that Caribbean history is ostensibly signified in the land. "There is slavery in the vegetation, in the sugarcane brought by Columbus on that second voyage when to Queen Isabella's fury, he proposed the enslavement of the Amerindians" (61-2). What Naipaul observes in the Caribbean context is evident in the poetry of Cheney-Coker where, history is invariably linked to the topography. Naming of Sierra Leone begins as an act of colonial possession by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century as we find in "Soul, Chilblains and Scapulas" (*The Graveyard* 65). We are told that "Historically [...] the chronicles / say 1462 they discovered my country / without learning from the gibbons the /name of my people." The use of personal pronouns "they" as against "my," captures the self / other dichotomy which is a preoccupation of resistance literature. The poet-persona in the poem revolts against "they" (the whites) who have used history to control the blacks. To borrow from Michel Foucault, history legitimates the whites as "discoverers" of Sierra Leone (in Ashcroft, *The Post-Colonial* 219-20). In effect, postcolonial theorists like Bill Ashcroft have suggested that to name reality in a sense is to exert power over it as the dominant language becomes the way in which the named locale is known (*The Empire writes Back*). Syl Cheney-Coker seems to agree with this position because the line, "without learning from the gibbons, the name of my country," suggests that the name by which the country is called today is not its original name. The poem, then, becomes the forum for the poet to register his anguish at the ascendancy of European values and perceptions over African modes of expression in the colonial context.

Creole history, a significant aspect of Sierra Leone history, is rooted in slavery and its antecedents, the slave trade, and the settling of freed slaves in Freetown by philanthropists. This is underscored in the poem "The Traveller." Interestingly, "the sea" assumes another symbolic dimension capturing the ramifications this time around of the Middle Passage. In effect, the "sea journey" here, delineates the poet's quest for his roots; a quest that must take him through the Slave Trade, the

Middle Passage, the subsequent abolition of slavery and the return of some blacks to the continent, eventually leading to the birth of the Creole community:

> the philanthropists…
> the miserable blacks wanted a new race
> …………………………………………
>
> the sea awaited the expedition the sea awaited the negroes
> and hungrily swallowed them (*Concerto* 5).

Palpable facts of Creole history are here highlighted in the reference to philanthropists, the miserable blacks, and Negroes. The sea continues to play a negative role in black history given its destructive potential as we are told that it "hungrily swallowed them." This is in apparent reference to the shipwrecks suffered by the returnees recorded by the poet in his novel, The Last Harmattan of Alusine *Dunbar*.

Cheney-Coker sees the creation of the Creole community as another "false start" in African history; given that the genealogy of this group can hardly be traced. This historical fact haunts the poet in "Hydropathy":

> I think of Sierra Leone
> and my madness torments me
> all my strange traditions
> the plantation blood in my veins
> my foul genealogy
> I laugh at this Creole ancestry
> which gave me my negralized head (*Concerto* 7).

Words and phrases like "foul," "plantation blood," "rape," "polluted streams," "lewd head," used in the poem, bring to mind the plight of the slaves who were not only uprooted from their ancestral land but whose women were often the slave master's sexual objects. The encounter with white culture inculcated an inferiority complex in the slave. It made him or her believe that being a person in the real sense of the word meant ascending into the superior culture of the white man. The returnees, settled in Sierra Leone, brought back vestiges of this culture and as Colonel Lookdown Akongo, one of the major characters in Cheney-Coker's *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* observes,

> Modes of behaviour long abandoned in the factories and gutters of England were still being copied with diligence by this lot…. Whereas visitors put their strangeness down to a case of bad blood, they lived in such a shocking state of unreality that they considered the cultural images of the other people in the rest of [the country] as contemptible and crude (xiii).

Such are the historical antecedents of the poet's genealogy that constitute elements of his revolt.

One aspect of Sierra Leonean history, which is a recurrent feature of the poetry, is the coup phenomenon that has bedevilled that nation since independence. The poetry captures this phenomenon in the metaphoric "tatters of tears" which is an apt reference to the frequent violent upheavals, victimisation and executions rampant in political life. "Concerto for an Exile" (*Concerto* 20), which provides the title for his first collection, draws inspiration from these sad events. In an interview with Stewart Brown, Cheney-Coker said: "Concerto for an Exile" came about as a result of the execution of Brigadier John Bangura who was Army Chief of Staff. He was executed in 1971" (*West Africa*, 3360; 3055). In effect, Brigadier John Bangura was instrumental in toppling the Milton Margai government, the first post-colonial government, and installing Siaka Stevens in power. Yet, when Bangura discovered that

Stevens' government was nothing short of a comprador regime, serving itself and the interest of foreign businesses, he staged another coup to overthrow it, but failed and was executed.

The preface to the poem intimates that the speaker's agony is accentuated by the civil strife in his country captured in surrealist imagery. "And the guns roared on / in Sierra Leone / to plunder the tree of agony in my soul." "The tree of agony in my soul" image delineates the speaker's anguish at the turn of events in the land. The opening of the poem is dramatic to this effect: "The news of the coups the bullets in my soul! / I plunge into the streets holding the dead in my head." The drama and surrealist imagery, at once, heighten the distress of the poet of revolt. This unnatural situation is the fruit of the actions of "my fratricidal brothers / whose lust has made the Sierra a volcano too bloody in my life." The personal pronoun "my," underlines the poet's identification with the country torn apart by those he considers brothers. The "volcano" image, drawn from the setting, continues to emphasise the destructive political upheavals which have become the bane of Sierra Leone. This turbulent atmosphere has reduced the country to "a boulevard of corpses." This metaphor underscores the extent to which killings and victimisations have become a distressing feature of postcolonial Sierra Leone.

The poem carefully selects and effectively employs diction. Words and phrases like "bloody executioners," "decalcified," "slit their bellies," "eruption tearing my country apart," and "ravaged Sierra Leonean earth" point to the inevitable destruction consequent upon power tussles and quarrels. At the end, the speaker seems to find the roots of this unnerving situation not only in history but also in the innate greed of man: "And I come to you once again Pedro da Cinta / my Portuguese conquistador my Sierra my volcano / was I a part of it the eruption tearing my country apart" (20).

In "My Soul O Oasis" (*Concerto* 19), Sierra Leone is described as an inferno, in apparent reference to the destruction of life and property drawing from the coups. The image of "inferno" equally operates here as an expression of the anger and revolt of the speaker with regard to this state of affairs in his country. The preface expresses the persona's attempts to "curtain" himself from what is happening in his country but the "news" of the violent upheavals comes "to shatter [his] heart." Love for the country elicits sensitivity to her plight. Again, as in *"Concerto for an Exile,"* the causes of these turmoils are fuelled by history and politics, "shadows of the conquistadors /….Pedro da Cinta…/ and all the other djinns of Sierra Leone." The mythic reference to djinns (supernatural spirits that often take on human form and serve their summoners), is particularly effective in the postcolonial context of Sierra Leone, where leadership simply serves neo-colonial masters at the expense of the masses. The poem displays a certain structural fluidity which underlines unity in thought and attitude–the speaker reports the events that have occurred in the country, discusses the effects on himself and country while situating the roots in history and politics.

The poem ends on an ironic note: "Only the disembowelled belly of a youth tells me the Sierra is in good health!" (19). This seems to suggest that for the elite to remain in "good health" (power), lives must be destroyed. Such irony underscores the ruthlessness of the rulers against whom the poet revolts.

Landscape as social practice and politics

Andrew Merrifield has argued that place [landscape] is "the terrain where basic social practices…are lived out…where everyday life is situated" (522). In the poetry of Syl Cheney-Coker, everyday life situations of the ordinary Sierra Leonean inform theme, poetic form and attitude. "Nausea," (*The Graveyard* 59), describes the world of the oppressed. This is an environment in which a "mother chews a thousand pieces of cocaine / to fill the void in her stomach" and the "singing mulatress" living in the shanty, nurses "her son in whose eyes she reads the hungry patterns of death." The predicament of this vulnerable group, the poet tells us, is "wrought by those who have never sorrowed/ who have never known pain/who have never died once." Parallelisms at the structural level and at the level of ideas indicate the poet's revolt against this class which perpetrates the misery of the populace. The satirical thrust is evident in the tongue-in cheek tone adopted to laugh at these privileged ones who believe that money and power can protect them from pain and death.

In "Myopia," (*Concerto* 38), the focus is on rice cultivation which is a major agricultural activity in Sierra Leone. The speaker is concerned with the peasants whose labour builds the country but, who ironically are "drenched" on "rainy mornings", "shivering in their emaciated bones/along the boulevards of misery." In these lines, as in the entire poem, surrealist imagery emphasises the paradox of suffering amidst plenty and the awful spectacle of a country's human and material resources being systematically depleted by a materialistic class indifferent to the plight of the poor:

> the boulevards of this country
> are railway tracks in my heart
> a train of anguish runs on them
> rage corollary of hunger. (38)

The conceits, in this extract, suggest the mental agony at seeing these contradictions in an otherwise rich country. Anger, in this context, becomes a legitimate impulse at the fact that the country's wealth has become the preserve of an insensitive few. Furthermore, the lines "The rice pads of this country / are putrid marshlands in my soul / tended by no magic fertilizers" are eloquent from the ecocritical perspective adopted in this paper. In ecocritical thought, the marshlands are often associated with illness, disease and death. In Sierra Leone, however, they have been transformed into rice pads. In referring to the rice pads as "putrid marshlands," the poet at once employs the usual semiotic implications of marshlands as places of pollution, death and putrefaction to convey his disgust with insensitive politics which exploit the masses for the benefit of those in positions of power.

In "Poet among Those Who are also Poets" (*The Graveyard* 67), varying scenes of suffering and misery are presented through the techniques of documentation and cinematography. The setting is Freetown and the persona drives round "its dirty streets." His poetic lens captures with realism and matter-of-factness, the frustrated man committing suicide, another chewing cola-nut to check hunger, yet another "crouching half dying under a giant cotton tree." The scene shifts to the presidential palace where a man is "shrieking with a stream of saliva running down his face" and "a beggar goes by shouting he has been robbed."

The second stanza focuses on the women with one "screaming raped by a bureaucrat" while "a childless harlot is beaten by another kids." Furthermore, at the shanty, there is no water because "the women have ruined the toilets" and another woman confesses her greed which made her sell her daughter. The scene shifts to the children in stanza three where "one child is driven to school in "a limousine unmarked / while the classmates walk on all ten." At the hospital, we are told that, there is "commotion because two children / have been bitten over at the garbage dump." This image of "life seen driving around Freetown" realistically demonstrates how human beings have been reduced to the level of animals by a system that degrades, dehumanises and destroys. The structure of the poem equally highlights (by its systematic focus on men, women and children) the extent to which these different classes are affected by the antics of the kleptocracy that controls the country. Parallelism and repetitions are important purveyors of theme and attitude, while the juxtaposition of the beggar by the presidential palace and the child driven to school as against others who walk, serves to emphasise the gulf between the masses and the elite, consistently condemned in much of this poetry.

Post-colonial Sierra Leone in the poetry is "sick." This is so because the rulers are conservative in orientation and uncritically support the West in their actions. The poet considers them as a mercantilist comprador bourgeoisie which has shamelessly destroyed and ravaged a country once considered "a pearl" in Africa. In "Song for the Ravaged Country" (*The Graveyard* 54), for instance, the concern is with the physical ravages committed on the land by the politicians. Their voracity for wealth, according to the poet, is unequalled elsewhere on the continent of Africa. Words like "plesiosaurian gods," effectively underscore the greed of these few who have raised themselves to the level of "gods" in the country. The verb “ravaged,” as qualifier, delineates the violent destruction that has become Sierra Leone as a result of such politics. Reference to the “fleshy ribs” of a country broken by the “rapacious hold” of the politicians, all point to the wanton destruction of the once beautiful country. A preponderance of images of violence, destruction, sterility and death emphasise the chaotic situation in the country. Other images, like those of sexual harassment, point to the destructive lust of those in power. In all, Cheney-Coker thinks that Sierra Leone is now only “a skeleton of its former self,” “a colossus strangled by fratricidal parasites.” The land is today a “poisoned gift,” for the majority of the people; “poisoned” by “the men of our dreams.” These are the men elected to power but who have failed to deliver the goods:

> I swim in the toxins in the waters
> ……………………………………
>
> what have I not known in my land
> the men of our dreams the men of our delusions
> and Sierra Leone like a gargantuan beast
> producing the slobber whose former image
> I no longer remember. (*The Graveyard* 54)

The comparison of Sierra Leone to a “gargantuan beast / producing the slobber,” defines the deflation and ruin consequent upon the actions of “the men of our dreams the men of our delusions”. Parallelism here underscores the failure of these politicians to meet the expectations of the people; politicians in whom the people had much hope. In the poem, the country is likened to a giant that has gone to sleep, that has decayed at its vital seams. The inevitable lament by the poet-persona—"I no longer have a country / centrifugal and proud"—is all the more poignant in this regard.

The diseases that have rendered the country "gangrenous" are "contingency, incompetence, regional rivalries, corruption and the exercise of political patronage as we find in "Nausea" :

> The corruption in this country…nauseates me
> ……………………………………………
>
> Oh my! Land! my Sierra! my woman!
> you have not killed me yet
> For writing about your disease. (*The Graveyard* 60)

The last line above highlights the role of the poet in the context of revolt. As a socially responsible individual, he observes and lays bare the social landscape even at the expense of life. Syl Cheney-Coker's consciousness and love for his country, fuels his revolt. The poet is up against the debt trap and the tutelage of international finance capital which have combined with corruption and mismanagement to reduce Sierra Leone to a "corpse" as we find in "The Diaspora."

> In the pallid eyes of an evening
> our world transforms itself crawling on its knees
> to its beggar's role; it loses its shame, taciturn world
> The disgraced half of a world no longer ours
> speaking its history in tatters of tears;
> It is dying of kwashiorkor, the starved face. (*The Blood* 10)

The images in this extract underline the morosity of the present. The words "pallid" and "evening" convey not only the drabness characteristic of Sierra Leone but also the disillusionment of the speaker at the state of affairs. The country is said to have "transformed itself crawling on its knees / to its beggar's role." This line clearly emphasises the difference between the remembered past of the country and the present. It also calls attention to the present predicament of most African countries, which depend on external support especially the IMF and the World Bank to sustain the affairs of the state. The disease image, "kwashiorkor," (a nutritional disease in infants and children) coupled with the images of death, dryness and sterility, elsewhere in the poem ("dearth of rain," "corpse," "starved," "scorched," "burnt brambles" and "skeleton"), emphasise the ruin that has become the country in the wake of such insensitive politics.

In the poems above, as in others of this nature, Syl Cheney-Coker negotiates the landscape of Sierra Leonean politics, revealing it as degenerate and insensitive to the plight of the people. Yet, as a major point of departure in setting the scene for revolt, he displays tenderness for this vulnerable geographical entity, a point already hinted at above.

Landscape as relationship

In Cheney-Coker's poetry, the country is raised to the level of a woman; a beautiful, cold-hearted individual, whom the male loves very much, but whose love is unrequited. Relationship with this environment is discussed in male-female terms to underline the poet's commitment to the country as Emmanuel Obiechina argues

> The committed writer must love [his country]; he must believe that [it] is redeemable that [it] deserves a future free of man-made tragedies and undue neuroses and avoidable sufferings and the harshness of material want, attended by physical degradation. (*Okike* 27/28: 4)

Possessive pronouns like “my Sierra,” “my land,” “my country” and “my woman,” convey the poet’s love for and commitment to his country. The mutual love existing between the poet and a human mistress becomes a mirror of the kind of relationship he desires to have with his country. Rejection by a human mistress symbolises his own rejection by a country that has “so loved me and so hated me” *(The Graveyard* 7). “Poem for a Lost Lover” is built on this kind of association. Dedicated to Merle Alexander, an English woman whom the poet had once loved, the poem describes by way of associational imagery, the beauty of woman and the splendour of reciprocal love.

In the vein of pastoral lyrics, a celebration in “the purest of verse” is done for a physically and a morally excellent woman, the word “purest” immediately conveying the flawlessness of this woman, whose eyes are of “heavenly essence” comparable only to “Russian Sapphire.” “Sapphire” is a gem of deep pure blue, at once suggesting an irresistibility that charms the lover in the poem. The woman is gentle, calm, courageous and patient. For instance, she is likened to “wine” that gently softens and soothes the lover “like the plenitude of bach.” She is “the Sargassian Sea” in the expansiveness of her love. The sea of Sargasso, in the North Atlantic, is noted for its floating expanse of gulfweed that renders its waters calm and steady. This association vividly underlines the restorative effect of this woman on a fragile and moody soul like the poet. The virtues of patience and courage in the physical mistress are beautifully reinforced by the alliterative /m/ in the phrase “moulding my moody”:

> The patience of you loving my fragile soul
> the courage of you moulding my moody words. (*The Graveyard* 110)

A recollection of Merle's love in the second stanza of the poem, leads to a nostalgic but romantic outburst "Oh that," "you that I love." The ideal nature of this love is recalled even when the speaker regrets losing her in "the opium of my youth." This love is nevertheless the picture of the kind that he would desire for his continent Africa, macrocosm of Sierra Leone: "heart of the spirit born of that love dressing continents with garlands" (11).

Such is the kind of intimacy and harmony that will enable the poet to dress his continent with "garlands of love." This intimacy and harmony is again vividly illustrated by the alliterative /s/ and /m/ in the words, "Eyes," "essence," "Sargassian Sea," "moulding my moody" and also through the repetition of words and phrases together with the preponderance of the exclamatory device.

The collection, *The Graveyard Also Has Teeth* is divided into two parts, with one entitled "Poems in Conversation with Sierra Leone." In this section, there are fourteen poems in which the poet underlines his attitude to his country, through a description of the political and social situation. The poet loves his country but detests the malpractices of the politicians who have reduced the country to a graveyard, "a ghetto of silence." By exposing the inconsistencies in the country, the poet wants to see a change that will benefit the majority of the people.

In "On being a poet in Sierra Leone," poetic duty is defined. The poet's role in his country is crucial, in the sense in which he has the onerous task of reminding the country to constantly examine itself and live up to its image in the context of Africa and the world. The poet states, "My country you are my heart." The "heart" image delineates the vital and intimate relationship he enjoys with his country. The technique of juxtaposition employed in this poem functions at two levels. It captures at once, the tensions in his country and what the poet calls his "love-hate" relationship with Sierra Leone. He loves his country, but hates it for allowing itself to be "devastated" by "salubrious politicians." Yet, the lover desires nothing but the welfare of the beloved.

> I who have so loved and hated you
> my country…
> I want to be your national symbol of life
> …………………………………………
>
> I want once more like the common man
> to love a woman without dying of love. *(The Graveyard* 51)
>
> Love seeks the best for the country-lover and defines the poet's role in the context of change:
> I want to be the albatross learning and living your fits
> I want only to plough your fields
> to be the breakfast of the peasants who read
> to help the fishermen bring in their catch. (*Ibid.*)

The "albatross" image is significantly used in this context. As a symbol, it goes beyond denoting a large sea bird to connoting something that causes persistent deep concern and anxiety, particularly because it is difficult to accomplish. The struggle to see the country liberated from the throes of exploitation is taxing but the speaker's concern to see this happen is fuelled by the love for his lady-land.

In "The Traveller" (Concerto 5-6), the speaker's desires to restore the dignity of the beloved are thwarted by the lover.

The beloved here is the country-mistress who has betrayed the poet-lover by refusing to join him on his quest for roots. Her mute acceptance of the violence done to her, by the politicians, contributes to exacerbating the pain and agony in the lover's soul. Mythological references to Jason, who sought fruitlessly for the Golden Fleece, qualify his fruitless attempts to clothe his beloved with honour and dignity. The reference to the relationship between the Greek god Zeus, and his runaway lover, Medea, aptly illustrates his own relationship with his country, the woman of his heart.

Even when he turns to a physical mistress for relief, he discovers that she too can be as unfaithful and unreliable as the lady-land. He therefore blames himself for being gullible to the frailties of womanhood in particular and to love in general: "My soul too open too trusting to resist the treachery of love / having known love I lost my soul in the flame."

The diction and figurative language of this poem evoke the hostility and destructive capacity of the world of love; "thorns," "flames," "chariot of flames," "chew," "grape," "rot," "ruthless." The ironic overtones in the line "my soul of iron and nails" strongly convey the susceptibility of the soul to love and consequently to disappointment even in its "hardness."

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the place of the environment (landscape) in the vision and vitality of the poet of revolt. Our analysis shows that this element as a primordial symbol in the artist's vision of revolt, finds a deep resonance in Syl Cheney Coker's poetic imagination. As a metaphor of revolt at the personal and collective levels, it has been exploited in his poetry from a number of different but interrelated perspectives such as topography, history, social practice and politics as well as relationship.

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