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MAN AND NATURE: THE PRAXIS OF ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION IN THE NIGER DELTA NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

As humanity continues to multiply, consume and destroy, our environment will continue to be affected by our choices. The writer, as the imaginative consciousness of the society, draws the attention of all and sundry to environmental challenges. In fact, the relationship between people and the environment has long been documented through literary works. The genre, environmental literature, is a super genre that is rooted in classic pastoral, magic realism, animal metamorphoses, science fiction, and other genres. The genre concern itself with a desire to better a suffering environment, and to improve how the environment is treated by human constituents. Hence, the study analyzes the theme of nature and environment in Isidore Okpewho's Tides. Adopting Ecocritical approach, the paper analyzes ecological consciousness created in the text and the extent of damage done to nature and environment in the Niger Delta region. The study reveals that environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is caused by man's greed and reckless exploitation of natural resources. Also, that environmental pollution in the region is oil pollution and related activities. The findings led to the suggestions that more ecological consciousness should be created by writers from the area and beyond for sustainable environment. Again, that Government should however ensure strict adherence to environmental laws in the country.

Keywords: Environment, Exploitation, Pollution, Niger Delta, Ecocriticism.

Introduction

The relationship between man and environment has long been documented through literary works. Environmental literature is a super genre that is rooted in classic pastoral, magical realism, animal metamorphoses, science fiction, and other genres, but primarily viewed the environment as subordinate to the needs of civilization and human progress. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson began to reinterpret the significance of nature and our relationship to it (M.H. Abrams, 2012).

Although not writing about pollution specifically, these writers laid the groundwork for an evolution in environmental thought and ethics in which the environment was seen as more than just a natural resource. Meeker Joseph (1972) presenting comedy and tragedy as ecological concepts, connects literary and environmental studies as a cohesive field of study. As an ethnologist and comparative literature scholar Meeker helped to pioneer the critical discussion of ecocriticism in what he called "literary ecologies." Following Meeker, Rueckert (1996) coined the term "ecocriticism," arguing for a way "to find the grounds upon which the two communities-the human, the natural-can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the

biosphere" (p.107). These writers and others, like John Muir and Aldo Leopold, helped to educate the public about nature and the environment.

Essentially, the genre concerns itself with a desire to better a suffering environment, and to improve how environment is treated by its human constituents. Hence, this study attempts to interrogate the theme of nature and environment in Isidore Okpewho's *Tides.* This paper adopts Ecocritical approach as its theoretical framework. As its findings, the study reveals: that environmental degradation is caused by man's reckless exploitation of natural resources, and that the aspect of environmental pollution in the Niger Delta region is oil pollution and related activities. The findings led to the suggestions that more environmental consciousness should be created by literary writers to ensure environmental sustainability. Also, that Government should however ensure strict compliance to environmental laws in the country.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism has been considered most appropriate this study. The term, Ecocriticism, had its inauguration in the environmentalist movement of the 1960s and the 1970s and has been called different names; including ecopoetics, green cultural studies, literary ecology, and environmental literary criticism, among others. William Rueckert is believed to have possibly coined the term ecocriticism in his 1978 essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (p.93). As a recent critical perspective to reading and studying works, ecocriticism, according to Cheryll Glotfelty, deals with "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p.329). Since then, ecocriticism has emerged as a field of literary study that addresses how humans relate to non-human nature or the environment in literature. It has gained recognition as one of the fresh ways of explaining nature and the function(s) of art. Glotfelty draws attention to the importance of works that are ecocritical in nature when she says:

> Regardless of what name it (ecocriticism) goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. (p. 45)

The need for the investigation of the relationship between the natural world and humans in literature is, thus, central to ecocriticism. The aim is to raise the conscious level of people that man's existence on earth is substantially dependent on the sustainability of the environment (Ejih, 2020).

Ecocriticism and concepts of ecological degradation in Cynthia Deiterng's essay titled "The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s" paints a picture of a world living in fear of an alarming level of environmental degradation arising from toxic waste productions and dumping on both lands and waters. Hers, as she puts it, is a "descriptive survey of … a progressive preoccupation with … the toiletization of the planet … a shift from a culture defined by its waste" (p.196). This is very much a major problem identified in the

texts for this study where incidents abound of careless dumping of pollutants on water and lands; making the issue not merely an idea but a reality.

In view of the above, the paper seeks to interrogate: the author's portrayal of the state of the affected region before the phenomenon of oil pollution, the role nature plays in the lives of the people and the author's presentation of negative effects of extractive activities and environmental pollution on nature and man himself. To interrogate also, is the author's success in bringing the issue of environmental degradation to the front burner, and correcting attitudes that are inimical to the survival of the physical environment. All these shall form the focus of this study.

The Author's Creation of Ecological Consciousness in the Texts

Through protests, agitations, investigative reports of reactions of principal oil explorers and government, consciousness of exploitation and degradations of the area is made in text. Pages 144 to 149 of the novel, for instance, contain vivid expositions of degradation and its consequences. Bickerbug explains, from intelligence report, that following the activities of the oil workers, "there is always an overspill" of oil in the area from some one or two thousand tones per rig" (p.145), and there are several such rigs belonging to different oil companies in the area.

It is a picture of constant despoliation. It is not just about spills from one source; it is from several rigs belonging to numerous oil companies, each struggling to out-exploit the other and be the biggest player in the world economy – "and as the volume of exploration from the various oil companies increase, the volume of oil pollution increases also" (p.146). The spill, Bickerbug explains, is always preceded by "a blowout, an explosion", which produces a constant "tremor" that shakes the entire village "even before the oil drifts to their fishing enclaves and their farms" (p.145).

In his analysis of both sources and immediate causes of pollution of the area, Bickerbug reveals that: "overspill occurs from various other sources. The pipelines taking crude oil from the wells to the reservoirs and barges may spring a leak or get fractured … the oil escapes into the water … the barges and bunkers carrying the oil may lose some of it for various reasons – leakages, overloading, blown gaskets, even corrosion from prolonged chemical action of brine and other things – and again all that oil is emptied into the water" (p.145).

And then, according to the narrator, the oil companies are not interested in finding out measures for cleaning the polluted environment. He queries: "what have the oil companies done to avoid all this pollution or at least reduce it to an acceptable level? Nothing" This, he says, is despite "various international laws for ensuring the safety of the environment from severe pollution and also enforcing the standards for oil explorations and conveyances" (p.146).

The original Niger Delta, of which the fictive setting is a representation, is often portrayed as a place of gross exploitation and despoliation, which is brought about mainly, according to John Enemugwem, by "the seismic services of petroleum prospecting, high pressure pipelines criss-crossing the region, poor waste management, oil spills, gas flaring, and drilling

operations" (p.56). Enugwem further paints this picture of exploitation and degradation in the area:

> Here, the presence of their production platforms offshore, poor waste management, well-blowouts and oil spills have given rise to negative effects. Together with pipeline trenching, they contaminate the sediments and reduce aquatic life, seabed plants, marine mammals and marine birds. During offshore operations, both liquid and solid waste like drilling cuttings, drilling mud and fluids are discharged into the sea. They are not only inimical to the marine ecology but their toxicity had reduced marine species … the oil-based mud contaminate groundwater aquifer and burry the benthic communities of shrimp, crust aces, mollusks, and annelids at and near oil well sites. Generally, well blowouts and oil spills are most feared in every environment. It had endangered marine fauna and rural communities … oil spill in Niger Delta had caused coastal erosion and deforestation of mangroves with poisonous effects on aquatic organisms. (p.57)

Although novel is acknowledged by the writer, to be "entirely fictitious, and … in no way intended as a mirror of any events past, present or future", it no doubt, possesses all the trappings of degradations of the actual Niger Delta environment, which have been represented in several other well researched, non-fictive literary works bearing that same name –Niger Delta – and setting as their objects. Some of these other works include those of Enemugwem as well as those of Dara, Iyayi, to mention but a few. Furthermore, *Tides* possesses that poetic energy, which is central to Rueckert's ecocritical articulations, and of which the critic speaks so glowingly about. After reading the novel, one is brought face to face with the devastation as to become ecologically conscious, invigorated, energized, informed and even motivated towards becoming a 'counterfriction' to those who are bent on destroying the environment for their personal gains. *Tides*, is indeed such a master-piece for energizing one into a quest for what the environment within and outside the Niger Delta, in our age, is like. The novel is also a veritable motivational tool for seeking perspectives of ecological justices from around the globe.

From the onset, the Niger Delta-born investigative journalist, Piriye Dokumo, proposes an investigative work with the older journalist, Tonwe Brisibi, (another Niger Deltan), to, as he says, produce an authentic document that is capable of creating awareness of environmental evils in the Niger Delta setting of the novel. In an epistolary mode, the former bares his mind to the latter:

> I believe it is time for us to rouse our investigative skills once again and produce a document that will be unrivalled in authority … What I propose is that we should simply exchange reports … Between us, we should be able to follow the events to their logical conclusion and eventually produce a book that will long remain an authoritative testimony to the plight of our people. (p.3)

Whether Piriye and Tonwe, the fictive characters of Niger Delta origin, achieve the set goal of their endeavour or not, the point remains that in this novel, a fictive document of Beniotu

people of the Niger Delta and the degradations of their environment, successfully, albeit inadvertently mirrors degradations of the actual Niger Delta environment as attested to by works earlier mentioned; thereby fulfilling the poetic role of the artist as the 'mouthpiece' and 'eyepiece' of the society.

The destructive machines of the oil companies and their Nigerian allies are countered in the works using a number of methods, as earlier explained. The methods include agitations, protests and demonstrations by the local inhabitants of the place, and Niger-Delta indigenes who reside outside the place, and so also are the greed and intrigues of the foreign oil companies and Nigerian government officials.

One of the many ways Byron Caminero-Santangelo attempts to assert and illumine ecocriticism as a literary theory is by representing nature, speaking for and about it, "as a subject with rights by finding (listening to) nature's voice" (p.699). It is a method that apparently invests in humans the authority to speak for nature and the environment. It says much about how people should react to ecological issues; for after all said and done, human beings remain the mouthpiece of 'silenced nature'.

Example of informal agitations by the local fishermen and farmers is one given to Brisibe by Mr. Opene:

> They have another one of these machines in the waters near Kuruma. The village has been completely wiped out by the floating oil, and most of the people have resettled in Burutu. There is another one near Birebe. There is practically no fishing life there anymore, because the fishes die and float on the black surface of the water in large numbers. Many of the people come this way from time to time, and we go there sometimes, to see for ourselves. Mr. Brisibe, we live in troubled times. I know that very well. (p.27)

Mr. Opene is not educated but he understands what the presence of the company portends for the ecological culture of the place; hence his decision to solicit the help of an educated person – Brisibe.

Portrayal of Damage Done to Nature and Environment in the Niger Delta Region in the Text

The Niger Delta environment is examined from the lenses of the local people and their fight to reclaim their natural setting and culture from intruding oil prospectors. In this way they not only become the voice of nature, but create awareness of the devastating impact, on ecology, of the methods and implements adopted by the oil prospectors and their local collaborators.

Mr. Opene says, "Oil is money … Money for government. Money for many people. But not our people. And they do not mind what they do to us so long as they protect this money from troublesome people like us" (p.26). Despite Brisibe's assurances that Opene does not look like a "troublesome man", the poor fisherman understands, as he replies: I know, but does it matter to them?" He continues:

> All we went to that machine in the water for was to make a simple complaint. But I could tell you, by the force with which that officer struck me across the eyes, that the tone of our complaint was not the issue for him. His hand told me all I could ever want to know. That was when I realized how much trouble this oil means for our people. (p.26)

The man recognizes that they have to complain to a "machine" in the waters; and what could be the outcome of such an endeavour? Mr. Opene's bitter experiences, his pains and the words with which he utters them inform the tumult within him; an internal tumult that eventually erupts like volcanoes and destroys the surrounding environment, as catastrophic, yet the non-cathartic end of the story reveals.

Besides efforts made by the local inhabitants to create awareness of degradation of the area, there are persons of means and position whose activities revolve in and around Lagos, the country's capital city whose protests are directed to the government of the country. As reported by the city journalist, Piriye, these persons organize themselves into a group with the key agenda: to establish official contacts and a voice with the government of the time; publish articles in national newspapers, detailing in writings and pictures, degradations of the environment, and to carry out open public campaigns. The third major action is manifested in the singular resolve and execution of awareness campaigns by the leader of the group – Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC). The excerpt below reveals some of these efforts:

> Bickerbug Harrison and the CCC have intensified their activities, and they seem to be operating on about three fronts. The first of these is official. Some members of the committee have succeeded in establishing a beachhead with the Supreme Military Council here in Lagos, and have been put in direct touch with the relevant officials at the Ministry of Petroleum and Power. (p.16)

The technological installations and activities – oil exploration and the damming of the River Niger – are uppermost in the minds of the group since these activities constitute the major ecological imbalances in the area. Oil exploration activities, with associated pollution, have led to fishes migrating from the high waters and the death of several others; so that imbalance, in the way people and other organisms in the area have always related, is created. The damming of the Niger River might translate into provision of electricity for the country, but it means less water for fishes to thrive down the river and in the creeks. It means reduction in the water force flowing down to the sea; so that oil spilled into the river remains much longer on the water's surface to kill off aquatic organisms, including fishes, thereby creating ecological imbalance (p.149). The committee's access to the two ministries of petroleum and power is seen to be the right direction. But the question is, how successful is this move? How long before the group and their goals are swallowed up by forces bent on devastating the ecosystem of a place in order to provide comfort for others?

> The second line of operation by the committee connects them with the Nigerian press … nearly every week now there is something or other about the deteriorating situation in the Delta. These are articles – some of them by members of the CCC, others commissioned by them, yet others by various interested writers denouncing the role of the Kwarafa Dam and the oil

> industry … some of the articles, complete with classified information and some very incriminating photographs of damages suffered by Niger Delta communities, which the newspaper has refrained from publishing – at least in the form in which they came. (pp.16 - 17)

While the group at this initial part of the story starts well with efforts not just revealing the evils associated with oil on the one hand, and the damming of the River Niger to the ecology of the area, evidence from the novel reveals quite succinctly efforts made by the oil operators, in collaboration with some unscrupulous persons in and outside the area, to conceal the damaging effects of oil exploration activities.

The third and potentially most dangerous line of action taken by the CCC is the one-man crusade of Bickerbug himself – on the soap box … he placed an advertisement in the *Chronicles* for a public address he would make at Tafawa Balewa Square under the title "The Woes of the Niger Delta" (p.17). The energy invested by Bickerbug translates not just into creation of awareness of dangers to the environment that oil exploration, as practised in the Delta poses; it also awakens the authorities to a realization that the masses are becoming aware of those dangers. Reactions of the authority to this awareness are the subject of another segment of this discourse entitled "Degradation, Subversion, and Containment".

> "Priboye is right about my desire to spend my retirement forced though it may be, in absolute peace and quiet. I know, of course, that there are often constraints on the wishes of men. For instance, the oil rig at Brikama is within relative earshot. The noise from the exploration machines reduces my desired peace somewhat". (p.5)

This is the subtle protest of one who returns to nature and only discovers that even that has been denied him, so that the position by Timothy Clark that there is no more nature, but only environment appears to be true.

Investigative reporting of events, in and outside the Delta, creates the needed awareness of degradation of the area. Methods of investigative journalism and writings are adopted by Piriye and Brisibe as a familiar tool. These principal narrators and chroniclers of events in the novel are both from the Niger Delta and are familiar enough with its two settings, Niger Delta and the capital city of Lagos. One, Piriye, resides in Lagos and monitors activities of the group and individuals engaged in protests over degradations in the Niger Delta. The other, Tonwe, having spent thirty years in Lagos as a journalist, retires to his little village, Seiama, in the Delta hoping to find peace, but is drawn into the politics of oil, degradations and other issues of pollution/ecological imbalances in the area.

The epistolary structure of the novel facilitates progress in chronological timeframe, while the otherwise subjectivity of a first person narrative is diminished by the objectivity of eye-witness accounts of events in the area. The veteran journalist, Tonwe, reports the first protest by the fishermen, thus:

> Briefly, the group had gone to the rig in their village, owned by Atlantic Fuels, to complain that the enormous search-lights which they train on the waters

> around their offshore rig were drawing the fish away. They wondered if there was anything the company could do to save them the trouble; their lives depended on fishing, and they faced certain disaster if the school of fish were forced permanently out of their area of activity. The spillages from the rigs and pipelines had done enough harm to their trade, and the activity of this new rig would only snuff out their lives for good. They were making this appeal to the company to see if there was any meaningful compromise they could reach with them. Apparently these searchlights were trained on the waters from dawn to dusk, and the delegation was asking if the lights could be switched off during those hours of daylight when the fishermen were engaged in fishing. (p.11)

The entire novel is in fact based on the investigative reports of the journalist, without which nothing would have been known of those places. In the novels in focus, the circle of the privileged is occupied by a few beneficiaries of policies made by the government of the day (the military government officials), with their handpicked 'representatives' of the people, and the business-oriented oil company owners. Events in the story reveals succinctly moral inclinations of these people as they relate with the poor and distressed fishermen who are denied their natural source of living and whose dwelling places are polluted:

> The delegation sought audience with the white engineer … they had gone in their canoe to the off-shore rig, but were not allowed to moor the canoe so as to get onto the rig. The Whiteman simply sat away off from them, cross-legged and pipe in mouth, while the mission of the group as well as the Whiteman's response were relayed through an interpreter …
>
> They reply of the white engineer was uncompromising. He was fed up, he said, with these agitations and representations from illiterate natives who knew nothing about oil industry was trying to do for them. What, he asked, did the inconveniences suffered by a few scruffy fishermen matter to the gene4ral prosperity which oil had brought to Nigeria? He had no business with them, he said. If they had any complaints they should address them to their government, who had given his company the franchise to explore oil here. There were businessmen, and had no interest in political or social welfare, unless there was a visible need to pay compensation to families or communities whose land had been appropriated for exploration purposes. As it were, their business around Ebirima was strictly offshore and he didn't see any reason for them to curtail their operations just because a bunch of ignorant fishermen now caught fewer fishes than they were accustomed to. He said he hoped he would never see them again at the rig. (p.120)

This is precisely the problem with silencing and ignoring the other; a situation that portends no good. Starhawk writes that "our conscious or unconscious willingness to write off those we identify as "other" … keeps us … divided from those who might be our allies" (180). The petroleum engineer could have chosen to make the fishermen allies, by listening to their complaints and seeking amicable means of its resolution, instead of resorting to the use of brute force, as the ignorant persons in a military government.

The ecocritical position articulated by Orkpe Nder (a review, which according to him was first posited by Buell and echoed by Caminero-Santagelo) is that "The degree to which a piece of literature strives to represent non-human nature … give[s] it a voice, invest[s] it with value, emphasize[s] human interdependence with it, decenter[s] the human, and alleviate[s] environmental degradation" (p.3). The novel *Tides,* embodies strong emphasis of this human interdependence with, and dependence on nature. However, interdependence of organisms as portrayed in the novel is only to the extent that human beings retain the responsibility of determining the extent of the interrelatedness. The candid fact is that not much, if any, of 'decentering' of human is visible in the novel. The fishermen's protests, as reported by the journalist, have more to do with their loss of means of sustainability – fishing and subsistent farming – than with preservation of ecological balance, a notion alien to their primeval thoughts. Human beings depend on the natural environment for survival, so that any imbalance in that environment and relationship brings about great crisis; a situation which points yet to another fact – an African form of ecological discourse may yet have to evolve.

It is in the fishermen's best interest to protect from degradation the environment in which they live and from which they derive their means of sustainability. But the capitalist, multinational oil explorers have a different view; and this brings about an unresolved crisis that renders the issue of degradation and its consequences perpetual occurrences, and portends doom for our world.

Conclusion

Okpewho, through his text, has sufficiently created the right kind of impact that is needed to confront the present global environmental realities. Through well-crafted characters, events and incidents, the author has been able to shed light on the disturbing contamination and degradation of the Niger Delta due to oil spillage and gas flaring. He, in fact, paints a dark picture of an environment trapped in irredeemable ruins, showing the roles played by the law enforcement agents, Government (and its officials), the transnational companies and the militants on one hand; while also showing the grim effects of the reckless actions and inactions of these forces on the environment, the society (man), and other living things on the other hand.

The abysmal state of the environmental degradation portrayed in the novel is a condition to be bemoaned and mourned over. No room is created for a revival or restoration of nature to its original glorious state. Neither is any suggestion made as to how the ecological challenge could be overcome. However, there is need for more environmental literature from the Niger Delta region and beyond so that people could be adequately sensitized on the need to be more eco-friendly in their daily interaction with the environment. Government and environmental agents could also strive to ensure that individuals and organizations comply with environmental laws in exploration activities to ensure environmental sustainability.

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