

**The Poet As Protester: An Analysis of the Ecocidal and Exploitative
Portraiture of Niger Delta Landscape in Ibiwari Ikiriko's
*Oily Tears of the Delta***

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Abstract

Consequent upon the environmental and economic crises or genocide that have pervaded her over the years, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has attracted critical attention from both local and international communities. These environmental, economic exploitation and despoliation have led to series of protests and arms struggles across the region against the federal government of Nigeria and the multinational oil companies operating in the region. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines Ibiwari Ikiriko's ecocidal and exploitative portraiture of the Niger Delta landscape in his poetry within the theoretical framework of Eco-criticism since this theory examines the relationship between man and the other non-human elements of the environment. The paper concludes that Ibiwari Ikiriko as a Niger Delta poet calls for collaborative and persistent protests against the gross destruction of the environment and pathetic exploitation of the resources of the region without due compensation or development as the means to forestall the status quo.

Keywords: Niger Delta, exploitation, eco-criticism, multinational oil companies.

Introduction

The River Niger and its tributaries cartographically define the Niger Delta region. The cartographical communities are Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta. On the other hand, Niger Delta is also politico-economically defined – that is based on economic and political reasons. Here we have states such as Edo, Akwa Ibom, Imo, Cross River, Abia and Ondo State. It is continuous with the nine ‘oil producing states’ as defined by the federal government of Nigeria.

Historically, the Niger Delta region has not had its better days. Oil exploitation and exploration started far back as 1958; until date, there has been no viable, visible gleam of development in the region. The enormous things that have characterized her all along are constant shooting, killing, weeping and wailing because of the Nigerian government cracking down on voices from the region who in one way or the other have protested against the injustices meted out to them. This concurs with the view held by Okpo (2012) that:

The Niger Delta region has over the years suffered from environmental crises based on oil spills from oil pipelines. The entire Niger Delta has had persistent cases of oil spills which till date, does (*sic*) not have a lasting solution. Spilled oil from Shell Petroleum Development Company (S.D.P.C), TOTALFINELF, Chevron, Mobil, and account for great ecological declines, it accounts for poor agricultural products. (p. 209)

The above exploitation and experience of the people of the region have stimulated and authenticated a plethora of different attempts by Niger Deltans. The youths, social groups, pressure groups, and writers turn to their pen as weapons against the excessive arrogance of the heartless federal government of Nigeria and her collaborators – multinational oil companies carrying out oil prospection and exploitation in the region.

It is to be noted that these oil firms exploring crude oil in the region are doing so without taking into consideration the environment. The environment is a major source of comfort and inspiration to man and other natural elements. The Niger Delta is the eco-region of Nigeria because of the presence of distinct biodiversity of flora and fauna from which the country taps her revenue. However, the pristine life of the Niger Delta ecosystem has been lost to oil exploration and other anti eco-friendly activities. On the above note, Orlu and Adesanya (2008) categorically states:

This ever green home of birds, animals, and man destroyed by the exploitative and profit driven oil prospectors and the military is a paradox of hunger in the midst of plenty. (p. 67)

The truth remains that any eco-catastrophic activity carried out on the environment is inimical to man and nature. The harsh social realities which the region is being exposed to have invoked critical protests. Those destroying the environment seem to feign the cause and solution to the problems of the region. The beauty of the homeland is gone. The manner in which the government carts away billions of naira from the land without recourse to the damage done to the environment is the same manner in which the life and beauty of the land that was once a home of serenity and tranquility have disappeared without trace.

Man cannot live without the environment; the environment cannot survive without man. This inextricably interwoven relationship between man and the environment is supposed to be symbiotic in nature in such a way that benevolence and compassion should permeate their total ambiance. Instead, man has demonstrated his despicable and vile nature toward the environment. The gargantuan role played by the environment in the social and economic life of man is unquantifiable. The term “environment” embraces all things that are found within a given place. We can talk of any place such as a school, church, market, hospital, classroom, university, and shrine, urban and rural areas. The term also refers to the total set of physical, social and cultural circumstances that surround an individual organism and community (Eboh, cited in Okpo, 2012, p. 208). In addition, the environment comprises of water, air, soil, the green trees, birds, animal, man etc. It is

so sad that instead of our environment receiving worthy treatment and care from the power that be, obscurity and darkness saturate her.

The position of the environment in national development can never be ignored. But the impunity with which the Nigerian State and her multinational cohorts keep treating the issues of our environment with levity indicates the high level and climax of irresponsible and mediocrity of these two institutions. The human rights social crusader and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa was absolutely right when he indicted the federal government and oil companies in the rape and underdevelopment of the Niger Delta region. According to Saro-Wiwa (1992), "... multinational oil companies, namely Shell (Dutch/British) and Chevron (American) have severally and jointly devastated our environment and ecology, having flared gas in our villages for 33 years and caused oil spillages, blow-outs etc., and have dehumanized our people, denying them employment and those benefits which industrial organizations in Europe and America routinely contribute to their areas of operation" (p. 14). These nonchalant attitude and total neglect mentioned above by the federal government and oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region are glaring truths that are staring at us in the face. From the aforementioned, it is obvious that the many woes of the federal government of Nigeria and her foreign exploiters can never be discussed in a single panoramic sweep.

Theoretical Framework: Eco-criticism

As we have mentioned in this paper, the survival of man is from the environment. The environment has immeasurably contributed to whatever men possess today economically, technologically, politically, and culturally. Eco-criticism was a term coined in the 1970s by combining "criticism" with a shortened form of "ecology"... "Eco-criticism" (or by alternative names, environmental criticism and green studies) designates the critical writings which explore the relationship between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities (Abram, 2009, p. 87). Thus, this literary theory examines how man's artistic vision reveals his reaction to man's economic activities in the context of literary texts and the

various negative impacts of such economic reactions (activities) of man. Its main focus perceptively seems to be redemptive as it argues for reexamination and total appreciation of the value and place of the environment in human development and sustenance. In another development, Allison B. Wallace defining Eco-criticism succinctly states that it has to do with:

writing that examines and invites intimate human experience of place's myriad ingredients: weather, climate flora, soil air, water, fauna, rocks, minerals, fire as well as all the marks thereof of human history. (cited in Orlu and Adesanya, 2008:71)

Eco-criticism as we have seen takes on the 'nature-centered approach' to the study of literary texts and it is appropriate since literature is a product of the society on earth. Literature thus, becomes the potent weapon whose effect can influence to an extent the activities of the destroyers of the environment. Writers as well as eco-artists are embittered about the despoliation and defacement of the ecosystem. It is this holistic desecration of the most valuable and inestimable aspect of our natural endowment by man who is supposed to be jealous custodian that has drawn attention and various attacks over the years to rescue and safe-guard the environment from man's ecocidal and depredatory activities. We are all aware of the fact that if the environment is destroyed man is equally destroyed. And we would agree here with the view of Desire (2006) that, "all ecological criticism share the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting by it and affected by it. It takes as its subject makes (sic) the inter-connection between nature and culture specifically the cultural artifacts, language and literature" (95).

Eco-criticism took center stage in the 1990s as a recognized field of literary study following the excessive devastating actions and reactions of man on the environment with a complete rejection of the anthropocentric attitude of human beings over the centuries. Eco-critics however, embrace ecocentrism arguing that all living things together with their earthly environment just like human beings are important and have their own fundamental rights not to be destroyed or molested.

Ibiwari Ikiriko's Ecocidal and Exploitative Portraiture of Niger Delta Landscape

The poet whose work is studied in this paper is in harmony with Wordsworth and Coleridge who avers that, “poetry is the image of man and nature” (qtd. in Orlu and Adesanya, 2008, p. 67). This is the core reason many writers like him are propelled to use literature as a weapon against the injustices perpetrated on the environment. It is very conspicuous that Ikiriko's vision in *Oily Tears of the Delta* is protestant like other Niger Delta poets. This protestant and militant position so to say is the direct result of the inimical environment or the social milieu which the author finds himself and as such it becomes imperative and even impossible for him to alienate himself or his craft from attacking or addressing the Olympian predicaments of his homeland. These predicaments of the people are manifestations of living in wealth and dying in abject poverty. In other words, it is demonstrated on the part of the federal government and her cohorts a high level of human rights denial, economic marginalization and political alienation. This pathetic, dismal situation is graphically captured in a poem entitled “Oily Rivers” in which the persona sounds like the persona in Samuel Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*:

I am of
the Oil Rivers,
where rivers are
oily
and can
neither,
quench my thirst
nor
anoint my head. (p. 20)

Biblically, ‘anointing’ we are told breaks the yoke. The yoke of poverty, scarcity, emptiness, lack and want. But here the lyric speaker is profoundly dumbfounded because the reverse becomes his case. The anointing could not reach him because the multinational oil companies

and the Nigerian government have resolved to marginalize him perpetually. This stanza evokes strong emotions from the being. The poet laments the fact that oil wells are ubiquitous at his backyard; yet, he cannot lay claim to any; he is seeing his wealth and prosperity pilfered with impunity but he is so powerless that his own powerlessness has transformed into a weapon against him.

While Ikiriko represents this gross exploitation poetically, Ken Saro-Wiwa (1963) on the other hand captures it in a prose form. The renowned environmentalist stridently declares, “it is ironical that the discovery of oil on our land has brought us nothing but misery, hunger and pains” (p. 11). The point stressed here is that the ‘oil boom’ in the region has become the ‘doom’ of the region and the people. There is the looming picture of a slow death as the land becomes gloomier and her people depressed. The neglect of the Nigeria government and oil companies to the environment and the people has exceeded its limit. The people suffer from hazardous effects of oil prospection and no one seems to recognize the fact that evil done to man is evil done to the environment. Dumka Bie (2013) in *Night of the Niger* explores the devastation committed against the environment and the people by multinational oil firms and the Federal government in a poem entitled “I am the Voice” where the speaker states:

I am the voice
Crashing and cursing
From deep down of the Delta
From my thatched tent
.....
For the destruction
Of my farm lands
For the death of my crops
For the poison of my waters
For the hanging of my sons. (p. 73)

From the above picture, it is a truism to admit that the Niger Delta people whose major occupations are fishing and farming are only surviving by the grace of Providence because the farmlands are destroyed; the waters are equally destroyed. Everything that would

make life worth living in this part of the world is in complete shambles. The biodiversity are in annihilation due to man's egotism. The Niger Delta people are the exploited, the have-nots, the dispossessed, and the displaced in their land of plenty – what an irony! The exploitation of the region without due compensation has resulted to series of unrest where thousands of exploited youths had to embark on arms struggles from anger and frustration. Bie's lines here are asymmetrical and antithetical to Ngaage's lines. This is due to contrast in temporality and experience. In one of Ngaage's poems entitled "Casting Net" Ngaage reflects on the primordial, pristine and unadulterated state of the Niger Delta landscape before the advent of crude oil exploration and exploitation – a time when people were happily engaged in their fishing and farming vocation. The poet in sublime aesthetic and onomatopoeic words expresses:

Waa-aa, the net sounds, sinking deep
Deeper, deeper and sits on
The bed of the sea; he steers the
Net round, he locks the cells.
Fishes weigh it down; he pretends
To yield to the tug-of-war exercise
Then, pulls again, again squeezing the
Ball to entangle them in the complex web. (p. 21)

These lines echo Okara's lyric speaker in "Piano and Drums" which in utmost the same artistic and aesthetic trajectory reflects the primordially serene and beautiful state of Africa and the Niger Delta before the emergence of colonialism, imperialism, and crude oil exploration. Now the fishermen and women no longer have nets in which "fishes weigh [them] down." Ngaage's lines capture the Biblical narrative of the Messianic encounter with Simon Peter, James and John in which their catch weighs their net to a breaking point (Lk. 5:1-7). This was the beauty, prosperity, serenity, and abundance that characterized this region before the evils of crude oil exploration and exploitation.

The Niger Delta region is without equivocation the treasure base of the country which has from antiquity become the flashpoint of

numerous violence and confrontation with incessant loss in human and material resources owing to the people's demand and agitation for favourable deals and fair treatment for themselves and their environment from the Nigerian government and the various multinational oil companies whose multifaceted depredations and anti eco-friendly activities have led to environmental genocide, abuses, crises and pollution.

It is these social ills and environmental degradation that inform Ikiriko's protest or militant vision in his poetry. Protest has been part of man and literary creation and would continue to be as long as political leaders maintain the socio-economic status quo of deprivation and exploitation. Nwachukwu Iweka (2012), commenting on the militant and protest theme of the poem "If We Must Die" by the Caribbean writer Claude Mckay, asseverates:

it talks about theme of the need for the oppressed, irrespective of race, colour or religion, to struggle for their rights to self-determination or self-definition. One notices that the poem persona is defiantly militant. (p. 19)

Consequently, it is a natural tendency that writers must protest against the evil prevalent in their societies because whatever affects the society equally affects them. In the poem "Devalued" Ikiriko makes a clarion call on the Niger Delta people to take their destiny in their own hands. The poet sounds a warning note when he says:

And our tomorrows
Are mortgaged by
Home brokers to foreign clubs

So, finished we are
Unless we gather in concert
To break these brokers. (p.15)

The implication of the above lines is that the people are aware that the future is bleak with no hope of a tangible means of livelihood because those things that are supposed to make the future beautiful are gone. To obviate this impending danger and extreme eco-genocide by ecological,

economic and social genocidaires, the people must plan together, consult together, and agree together to ‘break’ (attack, fight, protest) against the ‘brokers’ (the mediators, those who are in agreement with the plan of destroying and exploiting the land). Accordingly, the image of ‘breaking’ in the poem conjures up the pictures of death and destruction. This we would agree are the agitations we have seen in the Niger Delta region all along.

In “Okara’s nun,” the poet protests against the destruction of the environment. This he graphically represents with imagery and figures of comparison as he paints the picture of environmental degradation. In his anguish, the poet persona laments:

Okara’s
Silver-surfaced
Nun
Is no more

Now
Crude-surfaced
It limbers
Along lifeless,
Like dead wood. (pp. 25–26).

The poet, hence, protests against the devastation, unequal treatment of the people and the ostensible apathetic nature of the government having affirmed the people’s rights to their environment and resources. The lines above aptly present the pathetic and traumatic vision of a hopeless, homeless and endangered people and environment that are rendered incapacitated; a people whose major source of income is agriculture and then their land is destroyed with impunity. Ikiriko’s poetic vision in this collection is purely protestant to combat the social and environmental decadence that are witnessed in the region. Africa is a continent characterized by greedy leaders, tyrannical, authoritative and manipulative people with power who are only concerned about themselves. The devastation of the environment is symbolic of the socio-political and economic decadence inherent in the society as a whole because the environment is a source of human inspiration.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have been able to establish so far how Ikiriko’s poetry especially his *Oily Tears of the Delta* is a protestant poem that portrays the ecocides and exploitations of the Niger Delta environment and her people. As such, it authenticates the fact that the poet is a protester against social injustices of his society and his clarion call on the people for unification in tackling the problems of the region. In the first poem of the collection titled “Evening already,” a hundred and thirty-six line poem, the poet deliberately summarizes his arguments in these end rhymed words: ‘*already*’ and ‘*ready*.’ These words are signifiers – and the signified is that with persistent, consistent and collective efforts intellectually and otherwise by the people, the protracted malaise and social status quo of the region would certainly come to an end. Its connotation is collaborative efforts in unity as a panacea to the social problems confronting the region.

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