ECOLOGY AND AFRICAN LITERATURE: PERSPECTIVE FROM NIYI OSUNDARE’S EYE OF THE EARTH AND UCHE PETER UMEZ’S ARIDITY OF FEELINGS.

By

Com Sapele O. Wilfred,
Amange, B. Ephriam
And
Mrs Ajoko Laura

Abstract:

Ecology and African literature exposes the reader to the relationship between poetry, drama and environment. The paper attempts to bring African writers that explain literary terms with our natural environment. Relating Niyi Osundare’s Eye of the Earth and Uche Peter Umez’s Aridity of Feelings to explain the effect of indiscriminate destruction of the ecosystem as well as the struggle for oil exploration in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is the major preoccupation of this paper. The main source of data collection was secondary sources. The paper observes a paradigm shift as African literary writers dwell more on the social-political to nature writing. The paper emphasizes the need to employ poetry to explain the reality of the African degraded environment. This concept will draw attention to some other environmental poets in the literary world.

Key words: Ecology, African Literature, Eco-criticism and Niger Delta.

Introduction:

Ecology, according to Wikipedia, “is the scientific study of the relationships that living organisms have with each other and with their abiotic environment” (1).

Ecocriticism, on the other hand, is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary view point. This goes to say that in ecocriticism, all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of contemporary environmental situations. Ecocritics investigate such phenomena as nature and the human perception of wilderness and how it has changed our history.

Tracing the development of ecocriticism, Vital (2008) argues that the concept originated from North America from where it spread to Europe (87). According to Cohen (2004), ecocritics focused on nature writing; “in specifically environmental texts” (15). Cohen’s submission suggests a deep ecological perspective that celebrates nature. The work of Fried tends to lend credence to Cohen’s position when he submits that the lure of nature contaminated not only by human development, but also by human error is central to the works of some prominent American nature writers, such as: Henry Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey and Annie Dillard.

It is significant to note that the ecocritical project has witnessed a shift from nature writing for nature’s sake to one that is politically and socially committed. Despite this shift in focus, critics have argued that Africa deserves a non-western ecocritical paradigm that accommodates the dynamics of developing post-colonial societies. In
other words, such critics argue that the problem of poverty, underdevelopment and politics of exploitation make impossible for people in Africa to appreciate and conserve the environment as their western counterparts do. Following this Huggan, among others, has argued for a post-colonial ecocriticism, while others like Vital (2008) make a case for an African ecocriticism.

Darah (2008) has noted that "... all classical traditions of world literature are posted by environments, where there are intensive struggles against great evils for the restoration of human dignity" (i). A close look at what is happening in the Niger Delta reveals that there is a great struggle for humanity and freedom from oppression. This struggle is as a result of the human sufferings and environmental degradation the people of the Niger Delta have been experiencing since oil was discovered in Oloibiri in 1956 and the consequent usurpation of the area by the Federal Government and its international allies.

This struggle has taken different forms; sometimes, it is ideological and political and at other times, it is waged through armed struggle. As Darah points out:

The armed idioms range from insurgency and militant groups such as Isaac Adaka Boro’s Niger Delta Volunteer Force of 1966 (revived by Alhaji Dokubo - Asari) to the present Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

It is significant to note that these militant groups in the Niger Delta emerged when the Federal Government failed to give a listening ear to the cries and pains of the people of the region. Following the discovery of oil in the region, many oil companies have found their ways into the region. Through their exploratory activities, the lands in the region have been wasted. The oil spillages and gas-flaring, to a great extent, have destroyed the humus in the soil, leading to infertility. As a consequence, farmers have dropped their hoes and knives, concomitantly; poverty has engulfed the region, creating a situation where majority of the families cannot raise money to send their children to school. With the prevalence of illiteracy in the region, the youth are cut off from having gainful employment in the civil service, and as such, cannot partake in "the sharing of the national cake", what is made possible by the oil that is found or located in their backyards and farmlands.

Apart from the degradation of the Niger Delta soil, the activities of the oil explorers led to the death of aquatic life, particularly fish, which many people in the region depend on as the source of their living and means of livelihood. With the death of the fish following oil spillages in the region, the fishermen in the region are rendered jobless. They have thrown away their hooks, nets and fishing boats. The outcome of this is poverty.

In the midst of all these, the government and its international allies fail to come to the rescue of the people. There is no good road in the region. There is no good pipe-borne water, hospital, market, and so on. The government keeps on making promises that it is not interested in keeping. Rather than attending to the needs of the region, the government uses the money from the region to develop other parts of the country.
These human and environmental degradations in the Niger Delta area are well depicted in the literature of the region, which is popularly known as Niger Deltan Literature.

One the renowned poets from the region is Gabriel Okara. His poetry is a tribute to the travails and tragedy of the Niger Delta water-logged areas.

The lachrymal tone of Okara’s "The fisherman’s invocation" and "the cry of the river nun" as noted by Darah, "is self-evidently a protest against environmental degradation and violence." (10).

Also, the poetry of Tanure Ojaide and Odia Ofeimun fit into the tradition of outrage against political injustice, exploitation and environmental disasters. From the works of Ojaide, one can notice an abiding concern with the fate of the Niger Delta people. Examples are Labyrinths of the Delta, Delta Blues and Home Songs, The Eagles Vision, The Fate of Vultures and other Poems and The Blood of Peace. Many of the poems in these collections are verbal missiles aimed at political despots whose rule have brought misery and distress to the region.

We also have Ogaga Ifowodo’s "The Oil Lamp" which is dedicated to ‘the thousand and one/gone in the struggle for a liveable / Niger Delta/a just Nigeria"(i). The first section of the poem is a narrative elegy for the over 1000 persons who perished in the 1998 oil pipeline fire disaster in Jesse, Delta State. Other sections are devoted to Ogoni and Odi, two other places where the ferocity of the military might of the Nigerian neo-colonial state was visited with heavy casualties.

Sophia Obi, a young and budding Niger Delta poet expresses the pain inherent in the continuous oil exploitation in the area specifically in Oloibiri, her own town, where oil was discovered first in commercial quantity and exploited in 1956. In Oloibiri, the poet persona decries the exploitation of oil in and the abandonment of the place after oil exploitation which has left the place desolate. In stanza 1, her sight of Oloibiri is explained as:

Desolate like a wealthy aged whore
Wrapped up in gloomy attire,
I lay on the altar of a faded glory
Oily tears running through my veins....

Pollution takes its toll too. The exploitation of oil has always been followed by heavy pollutions both in air and water. The stench of crude is quite dangerous and the water sources are made useless with oil wastes:

Along my coast,
The smoke and stench
Of my crude flow desecrates
My marine reserves.
Moreover, neglect and abandonment by the federal government and the foreign oil companies endangers the former oil haven as it draws close to extinction. The federal presence is only noted in the criss-cross of “zebra string of pipeline running through” the “belly” of the town but roads are so dilapidated that people find it difficult access the town.

In another poem, “Swamps of Our Time”, she wonders what will finally become of Niger Delta since it has become a forgotten land. Taking an excerpt from the second stanza:

O’ delta of our beginnings, how has the past left you?
How is the present treating you?
What is the future of your ecosystem?

In “Tears in a Basket”, she bemoans the ancestors for giving away the Niger Delta land and its resources “on a stained platter of gold”, at a cost spearheaded by greed, avarice and selfishness and reap in return, “muddy water”, crude filled environment, noise and air pollution, loss of cultural heritage and the destruction of the entire ecosystem.

Onyema (2008) reminisces with nostalgia in his Crude Waves of the Delta on the peace and tranquility that existed in different communities comprising the Niger Delta as well as the cordial and fancied existence of the ecosystem when “...the mudflat whispered freely to the crab// and the water snail trading in things// unknown recoiled, shy... the edible periwinkle// glided from mud to mud// and hissed in the sweet bluff....” But with the advent of the oil exploiters, “the song changed”, he laments in wave two:

Crude crusted stench of oil raping
the virgin perfume of yesterday,
now squelches the fisherman’s invocation
of Okara’s Nun, and kills our sea of hope,
like a thousand creek creature creaking in crush of crabs
now scrambled by flare of skies festooned
with clouds drugged with arsenic.

The water bodies are affected too as the streams dry up and the few remaining become “sluggish ripple// of blackened stream of crude pollution” and therefore exhibits “watery pangs of death” (8). Also, the creeks become useless. Neither sand nor aquatic plants/animals can be got. He captures this in the extract:

Ibeocha has been bleached brown and white
and turned to Ashland,
The entire vegetation is destroyed, the occupations abandoned in absolute hopelessness and the result is that:

I still watch helplessly
as the dying,
the starving,
the sick,
the raped,
the sacked,
the unemployed gather,
wearing wry grimace,
like the writhing face
of Kolokuma creek.(101)

The question vibrating in the heart of the poet is that of uncertainty of the future of the Niger Delta children since “... they will not go to school// because there are no schools
and no pupils// there are no students.

Finally, the poet has a message to pass across to the exploiters:

Tell them they have killed our waters,
Tell them they have killed our farms,
Tell them they have killed our air,
with crude and killed the farmers
and killed the fishermen in us. (125)

Beyond all these, it is necessary to pay particular attention to the works of our focus poets, Niyi Osundare and Uche Peter Umez, as both of them attacked ecological issues though from different points of view.
Osundare is a seasoned playwright and poet. His inclination to romantic poetry marks him out as an environmental poet. Among his poetry collections, *The Eye of the Earth* stands out to deal precisely on environmental issues. In fact, at the back cover of the collection, we have a typical explanation:

The poet raises vital queries, amplifies crucial fears about the state of the earth, our home. With nuclear dust in the hearth and acid rain on the roof, just how will tomorrow’s children live?

This vital question I believe is the motivating factor behind the poems in this collection. So in a different perspective from what the Niger Delta poets do on ecology, Osundare writes on same topic buttressing rather, the damage done on the earth and environment outside oil exploration and exploitation. In the first place, it is important to note that Osundare’s “earth” is beyond the land/ground but extends to the earth as a planet. So when he writes on the plundering of the earth, he does not only mean the destruction of the lands, vegetation and humans but also the factors that make up the planet which have been abused by the introduction and use of technology.

Generally, Osundare’s *The Eye of the Earth* extols all the work of nature-sunshine, vegetation, the weather, harvest, rural dwelling, farming and rainfall which he pays more attention to. The poet recounts with indignation and disgust, the calculated destruction targeted and carried out on the earth through deforestation, bush burning, industrial pollutions, adaptation to foreign lifestyle and so on. He does not forget to advise humanity on the usage of the earth and all that nature has provided us with and at the same time, he maintains that come what may, “Our Earth Will Not Die”.

Citing from the poems, the writer is met with the eulogy or the “oriki” of the earth as the first poem- “Earth”. In couples of antithesis he highlights the properties of the earth (the soil).

In the second poem, “Forest Echoes”, the persona with nostalgic reminiscences recounts the experiences of the relationship that existed between all the ecological factors. His remembrance chronologies from thick forests full of tall and thick bark tress to “budding herbs and ripening roots” which also served medical purposes to the people. The different types of birds which served as nature’s clock together with the creeping animals are not left out. The bumper harvest of all crops made possible by fertile grounds as well as the rich forage which fed the herbivores; the natural mansions of the ants, the anthill, a wonder to behold are not left out. Importantly, he mentions the preying of the greater animals and plants on the smaller for survival – all work in accordance to the pattern of nature and for the good of the earth. But in the conclusion:

And now,  
Memory  
Loud whisper of yester – voices  
Confluence of unbroken rivers,  
lower your horse of remembrance
Let me dismount.

an indication of a joyful remembrance to a painful reality.

Also, in “Harvest call”, the poet draws the attention of the reader to some communities known for great and bumper harvests of different crops. Iyanfowogi is known for yam cultivation, preparation and consumption; Oke Eniju for plentiful corn; Ogbese Odo for blooming harvest of cotton as well as knitting of sorts of wears. But the fourth part is a lamentation on the disappearance of all these rich produce:

But where are they?

Where are they gone:

*aoso, geregede, otili, pakala*

which beckoned lustly to the reaping basket....

It is unfortunate that those natural foods which served the African continent as food and medicine have disappeared while they have been replaced by foreign meals which do not suit our digestive system thereby enriching the economy of the foreign nations.

The poet persona insists we go back to the farming of our natural foods as God has made our soil responsive to the farming of our natural crops.

In another poem, “Farmer-Born”, he recounts how enjoyable life has been with the symbiotic relationship he has with his natural habitat. Mention is made of the natural succulent foods and fruit, the serene and unpolluted environment with its coolness and shade provided by the trees. But behold the arrival of the foreign lifestyle inherited through foreign education has made him abandon and reject the farming and natural living for a lifestyle he does not understand.

Farmer – born peasant – bred

classroom – bled

I have thrown open my kitchen doors

and asked hunger to take a seat,

my stomach a howling dump

for Carolina rice.

In “They too are the earth”, the poet goes beyond the vegetation and focuses on the humans, degraded, wretched, abandoned, pitiable humans who in fact, are termed “wretched of the earth”, borrowing from the words of Frantz Fanon. The first stanza is an expose of the pitiable plight of the paupers while stanza two defines the downtrodden hard labourers; “the millions hewing wood and hauling water”. He goes ahead in stanza three to bewail the fate of “thousands buried alive in hard, unfathomable mines”, mines most probably orchestrated by man’s use of weapons of mass destruction against his
fellow. What of those “old dying distant deaths”, abandoned in uninhabitable villages and hamlets for the mad throng to the cities.

In a heart rending final stanza, he questions:

Are they of this earth?

who fritter the forest and harry the hills

Are they of this earth

who live that earth may die

Are they?

The misfortunes encountered and explained in the first four stanzas obviously are the handiwork of the heartless individuals “who fritter the forest and harry the hills”.

The poet renders his solemn advice to every user of the “earth” in “Ours To Plough, Not To Plunder”. He beckons on every one to desist from plundering and exploiting the earth for we are only to plough it. The ploughing of the earth will once more put food on our table, nourish us, the legumes spread will serve as prevention to erosions, the microorganisms in the soil will enhance the productivity of the tubers and so on. In a calm but firm voice, he affirms:

This earth is

ours to work not to waste

ours to man not to maim

This earth is ours to plough, not to plunder

Finally in “Our Earth Will not Die”, the poet defiantly maintains that despite all the attacks launched against the earth, “Our earth will not die”.

Every day and everywhere, there are reports of lakes drying up. The water bodies which served different purposes ranging from reservoirs for irrigation to habitation of aquatic animals are “lynched” and dried up. Industrial wastes pollute the water and kill all the inhabitants.

The natural rain is also polluted by the activities of industrialists. So when the acid rain falls, it destroys the trees and forests, not only deforesting but also giving chances for erosion.

The effect of the use of nuclear weapons- the aftermath of technology is not undermined. These poisonous substances in the air are let down on man and his environment, shortening their lifespan. What is the effect?

Fishes have died in the waters. Fishes

Birds have died in the trees. Birds
Rabbits have died in their burrows. Rabbits

But in a hopeful disposition, the poet defiantly believes that the earth will stir alive again to play its roles and perform its functions – “Our earth will see agai

This earth, OUR EARTH

Looking at Umez’s Aridity of Feelings, one discovers that he uses the collection to present facets and slices of experiences that depict the human condition in contemporary Nigerian society. He uses figurative texts that capture aptly the depths of his emotions about his society.

A selection of poems in this collection show the poet’s propensity to cry out not only at the devastation of the environment, but also at the dehumanization of the human mind through these acts which are inimical to the wellbeing of the citizens and the progress of the country. Nnamdi Anumihe notes that

This commitment situates his themes within the domain of ecocriticism and gives him an environmental vision to observe, record and analyse the disposition of not only the Niger Delta landscape, but the entire Nigerian Society.

In Umez’s first poem in the collection, “I sing my thoughts,” he writes to share the privilege of experiencing slices of his creative vision which conceives of the entire society as victims of inept leadership and bad governance, inordinate ambitions, perverted desires, immorality, bribery and corruption.

Unscrupulous quest for sensual and material gratifications:

I sing my thoughts, which spawn my head

And like motley butterflies

Across my vision {1}

His song, as well as his vision, indicts the perpetrators of our afflictions — the leadership of the country and their likes who occupy positions of responsibility, yet fail to live up to the expectations, Umez describes them as:

The greed-toothed hearts of crooks

Our hallowed stools {2}

In this next poem, “For her, for me;” Umez joins the desecrated earth mother in weeping tears of pain:

Is a melodious song of pain eye

Her tears are flowing hot lava land {5}

In “we no longer weep”, Umez dwells on the plunder in the Niger Delta region where oil companies have so devastated the land that all life in the environment is threatened with
extinction. The poet laments not only this affliction, but also captures the frustrations of
the inhabitants who initially are resigned to their fate, following the total neglect of their
lot by the leaders of the country.

We no longer weep
Empty basket
Thread bare nets, glum fishermen
Nagging waves,
tattered children, restive youths groaning
Bellies, drooping breasts, parched faces
Lament for the plenteous past?
Protest against the pestiferous presents?
Man out elegies for our forlorn future?
Our lives are sheil-ed stalks of shived sap {6}

Reflecting on these poems, Anumihe has this to say:

The coinage 'sheil — ed', is vintage of Umez's creativity per
excellence because it captures and conveys imaginatively, the
devastating impact of exploitation carried out with ruthless
abandon and military precision by the oil companies in the Niger
Delta Area {4}.

From Umez's poems, one can really understand why the Niger Delta youths should be
restive. In fact, the Amnesty deal they had with the Federal Government is not enough
compensation for the years of deprivation and exploitation of their homeland.

Looking at Osundare's The Eye of the Earth and Umez's Aridity of Feelings from a
comparative view point, one will say that both poets, despite the difference in their
perspective, dealt immensely on the theme; appreciating nature and identifying the
areas of ecological devastation as well as proffering lasting solution to the ecological
predicaments.

It is necessary to conclude by saying that there is a need for man to have a healthy
relationship with nature. The Nature is for us, just as we are for nature. This is the
central thesis in ecology, which focuses on man's interaction with his environment. In a
situation where man by sheer greed decides to violate the stability in the ecosystem,
there are bound to be immense repercussions. African Literature, particularly the ones
that come from the region articulated all these experiences for us and go further to warn
us on the implication of ecological degradation and the need to live harmoniously as a
Nation.
References


