Environment as Personified Woman: An Ecofeminist Study of the 'Oloibiri' Leitmotif in Select Niger Delta Poetry

By

Ebipreye Egbenpere
Department of English and Communication Art,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Wisdom C. Nwoga
Department of English Studies
Technical College, Agbor
Delta State, Nigeria

Tortivie Sorbo Abasi
Department of English and Communication Art,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract

The Niger Delta environment is seen as a woman's womb which houses enormous mineral resources. The region is punctuated with the exploration of natural resources which rather than improving the ecosystem, has made it unproductive. One of the ways of interpreting this occurrence is by looking at the environment as a woman who has been abused; especially as captured in works of literature. This paper seeks to examine some of the devastating effects which the activities of man have on the environment; the despoliation, deprivation, social injustice and developmental challenges. It craves for ecological consciousness where, like Parker, nature is not a subordinate but a co-inhabitant of this earth ecosystem. This paper employs Françoise d'Eaubonne strand of Eco-feminism which expresses the nexus between the denigration of nature and the "woman". It asserts that capitalism reflects only paternalistic and patriarchal values. This notion implies that the effects of capitalism have not benefited women and has led to a harmful split between nature and women. The scope of this paper is limited to selected poems from Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* and Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket*. This paper concludes that environment can actually be seen as a woman who has been abused, exploited and lost her beauty. It therefore recommends that this beauty can be restored through conservation and environmental maintenance.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Exploitation, Woman, Environment, degradation, Oloibiri

Introduction

> I quench the thirst
> of the desert dwellers
> while my children wallow
> in the crude mud peculiar to my swamp.
> O, I have lived a grey life of despair
> Now with my fertility gone (Sophia Obi 14).

The Niger Delta region is personified as a woman whose womb houses abundance of natural resources. However, like Ikiriko rightly posits, "the oil boom in Nigeria has meant a doom for the Niger Delta" (7). Apparently, the exploration of oil in the region has turned Nigeria's blessing into a curse and most times bursting into blood. On the other hand, the negative resultant effects of oil spillage, gas flaring, pipe line vandalism etc., have made life unbearable for the inhabitants of the region. This must have informed Sunny Awhefeada in "Degraded environment and destabilized women in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*", when he avers thus:

> It is the "harbinger" or poverty, disease, death,
> pollution, biodiversity, loss of means of livelihood, agitation,
> restiveness, militancy: criminality, and varying degrees of
> ecocide pointing in the direction of "Armageddon" (96).

The history of natural resource extraction the Niger Delta is replete with tales of violence and impurity. This region has therefore, remained linear from the colonial era to the present. The ideological vision of all these affect the totality of man and nature. At some point, the protest poets address the issues of oppression and injustice as they have the feeling that the environment belongs to them. These radical poets show concern and commitments to these environmental issues. Many of these poets are from the Niger Delta and they have chosen to compose their poems on the environment which is the major subject-matter. They have attempted to protect their natural landscape. Some of the notable voices include: Ibiwari Ikiriko, Gabriel Okara, G'. Ebinyo Ogbowei, Ebi Yeibo, Ogaga Ifowodo, Obari Gomba, Kaine Agary, Barine Ngaage, Timitimi Rowland Kpakiama, Adolptus Manamuna, Ernest Brisibe, Albert Otto, Humphrey Ogu, Nnimmo Bassey, Tanure Ojaide, Zeb-Ovie Noel, Sophia Obi, etc.

The aforementioned poets find themselves in the line of duty to rescue their physical environment from the enslavements and exploitative tendencies of the oppressors. They

present in their poems a distinct voice of a female (persona) searching for her identity in the middle of the crisis in the Niger Delta.

Background to the Study

Nigeria, after nearly four decades of oil production, had by the early 1980s become almost completely economically dependent on petroleum extraction, which at the time generated 25% of its GDP. This portion has since risen to 60%, as of 2008. Despite the vast wealth created by petroleum, the benefits have been slow to trickle down to the majority of the population, who since the 1960s have increasingly been forced to abandon their traditional agricultural practices. The environment has also received its fair share of neglect and abuse, which has led to a reduction in the quality of land. Annual production of both cash and food crops dropped significantly in the later decades of the 20th century. Cocoa production dropped by 43% for example; Nigeria was the world's largest cocoa exporter in 1960. Rubber production dropped by 29%, cotton by 65%, and groundnuts by 64%.(Okonta and Douglas, 2001) While many skilled, well-paid Nigerians have been employed by oil corporations, the majority of Nigerians and most especially the people of the Niger Delta states have become poorer since the 1960s.

Imperatively, taking into cognizance this reception of a fair share of neglect and abuse of the environment, which has led to a reduction in the quality/fertility of land and the oily nature of the rivers, this paper is undoubtedly understandable and thus significant.

Statement of the Problem

Women advocacy has been appropriated in several ways to salvage nature and the environment due to threats to the survival by humans and non-humans. The Niger Delta has become the epicenter of oil exploration and exploitation activities that have made the environment unkempt and hazardous. This paper seeks to investigate how these issues are portrayed through the poems, "Oloibiri" by Ikiriko and Obi, through a careful analysis the texts.

Significance of the Study

In Niger Delta literature, the environment is a greater deal than every other thing. Though there are other unique sub-branches/divisions like history, politics, violence, militancy advocate, etc. orchestrated by the oil underground, its main focus looks at the interface between literature and female environment, as well as human and nature (ecosystem). The environment is devastated, deprived, polluted, exploited, etc. With the aid of the eco-feminist theory, an investigation will further expose the nuances of the delicate relationship between the exploring man and the environment at the receiving end. This

will form a dependable addition to the existing body of information on the sensibilities built around the environment.

Scope of the Study

The present study is hinged on the primary texts – *Oily Tears of the Delta* and *Tears in a Basket*—as regards their attention to environmental problems in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Within the two texts mention, "Oloibiri" in both texts are discussed. The study is however is not limited to the two collections, and where the need arises, references are made to other texts, both those of the Niger Delta tradition and others of the entire literary tradition.

The analysis is primarily focused on the extent to which the ecological system has been destabilized, using the eco-feminist theory. Besides, the study is made inclusive enough to consider other dimensions to the trend, like political and economic, as the poems may expose and to consider what the human condition is like within the setting of the texts. Moreover, the study extends its scope to the discovery and analysis of various stylistic/aesthetic and linguistic configurations of the poems on the grounds that it is through those elements that the poets call special attention to the nuances, particularities and consequences of destabilizing and degrading the ecosystem.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine the concept of the environment from the feminist perspective where the environment is personified as a woman who has been abused. The study also intends to apply the eco-feminist theory to literary works to demonstrate how nature and the environment are portrayed in the texts, and finally, how to use literary devices to reinforce the subject through the tone and temper.

Theoretical Framework

Theory is a systematic rules of procedure based on an organized body of knowledge used to study a particular subject or phenomenon. It can as well be define as the concept and practice that helps in understanding and contextualizing literary works. According to Valentine Cunningham (2002), "theory has tended to open and reopen the eyes of scholars to textual irresolution, awkwardness, and also the eyes of many, towards meaning in text which was previously unregistered or dimly perceived" (Reading after Theory,41). Literary theory is one factor or aspect of literacy work that has a significant position when it comes to literature. According to Deborah Appleman (2015), "Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts … All literary theories are lenses through which we can see texts".

Another handy explanation to literary criticism is that of Roger Webstar (1996). He believes that:

> Literary theory should do two things. It ought to provide us with a range of criteria for identifying literature in the first place and an awareness of these criteria should inform our critical practice … Procedures which we employ in the practice of literary criticism, so that we are not interrogating the text but also the ways in which we read and interpret the text (Studying Literary Theory, 8).

Literary theory can be said to be hermeneutic which means, or applies to the interpretation of a piece of literature. It examines a cross section of literature from specific era, geographical location, or from writers of specific backgrounds or identifies, to draw conclusion about the similarities and differences in similar kinds of literary works.

It is on this premise and background that this study adopts the eco-feminism literary theory. Ecofeminism is a theory that was established by a well-known French feminist scholar known as Françoise d'Eaubonne. It has strands of the feminist movement and eco-criticism – an amalgam of eco-criticism and feminism. This means the above theory examines the interconnection between women and nature, and both a commitment to the environment and awareness of the interlock between men and nature.

In this theory, we come to discover and understand numerous strands of the subdivisions such as materialist eco-feminism, spiritual eco-feminism, vegetarian eco-feminism, etc. There are also large number of eco-criticism theorists. Prominent among them are: Greta Gaard, Judi Bari, Mary Amaolor, Adrian Parr, Carolyne Marchant, Sallie Mc Fague, Maria Mies, Via Plumwood and many others. The philosophy behind the theory is that it places the value of the earth, nature and women as sacred beings, and advocates for their dignity. It is, however, imperative to bring to the fore that eco-feminists examine tender effects cases to demonstrate these patterns of exerting unfair dominance over nature and women by its social models.

Eco-feminist theory asserts that capitalism reflects only paternalistic and patriarchal values. This notion implies that the effects of capitalism have not benefited women and has led to a harmful split between nature and culture. In the 1970s, early eco-feminists discussed that the split can only be healed by the feminine instinct for nurture and holistic knowledge of nature's processes.

Since then, several eco-feminist scholars have made the distinction that it is not because women are female or "feminine" that they relate to nature, but because of their similar states of oppression by the same male-dominant forces. The marginalization is evident in the gendered language used to describe nature, such as "Mother Earth" or "Mother Nature", and the animalized language used to describe women. Some discourses link women specifically to the environment because of their traditional social role as a nurturer and care giver. Eco-feminists following in this line of thought believe that these connections are illustrated through the coherence of socially-labeled values associated with 'femininity' such as nurturing, which are present both among women and in nature. Hence, an analysis is rendered in Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* and Sophia Obi's *Tears in the Basket* to prove this assertion on the basis of eco-feminism.

Review of Related Literature

It is incontestable fact that the peculiar problems of the Niger Delta have not gained an important reception and attention by literary critics and scholarship. Many literary works including that of Ikiriko and Obi have been among the lot that are yet to receive enough attention. Therefore, the eco-feminist approach as it applies to this study makes a skeletal presentation of the condition of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta.

As we have earlier observed in this paper, Ecofeminism was coined in 1974 by French feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne, expresses a connection of the ecology and women. The philosophy of ecofeminism specifically emphasizes the way both women and nature are treated by the patriarchal society. Sussan Griffin explains that "ecofeminism is a movement that focuses on the historical linkage between the denigration of nature and the female". Stating further, she says that "Ecofeminism continues the progression within traditional feminism from attention to sexism to all systems of human oppression such as racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism" (9).

Ecofeminism appeals for the right of every living thing to exist, while also campaigning against masculinity and the mentality that devours and destroys the bodies of women and their sexuality. Indeed, the loss of farmlands and aquatic life, violence from the military, rape and brutalization bring forth a trampling on the rights of the people and untold misery on the lives of women and children. These despoliations wrought on the environment has indeed jolted writers into a painful consciousness of our dying world and in line with Nnimo Bassey's insistence in "The Land is Dying", writers have deployed creative energy towards "promoting the cause of environmental conservation, remediation and restoration".

Chris Onyema observes in "Jungle and Oil Green: Currents in Environmental Discourse" that "much of the recent eco critical discourse in Nigeria is focused on works by writers from the inland Niger Delta area in a way that tends to give Nigerian eco writers a monochromatic view of distraught sensibilities from eco oppression, toxicity, and pollution discourse"(189). Arts for Arts Sake does not apply in the grid of contemporary writers. Writers engage themselves with what happens in the society. Through their works, critical analysis of the trends that rock the society are projected, for according to Saro-Wiwa,

> Literature must serve society by steeping itself…by intervention, writers must not only write to amuse or take a bemused, critical look at society, they must play an interventionist role…the writers must be engaged, for the word is power and even more powerful is it when it is expressed in common currency (81).

Environment as Personified Woman: The 'Oloibiri' Leitmotif

As Gabriel Okara underscores, Oloibiri, where oil was first discovered in commercial quantity in Nigeria and exported in 1956, has been abandoned as an old spent lady, when the oil wells went dry (7). Accordingly, in the well weaved Sophia Obi's poem, "Oloibiri", Okara points out that Obi "indicts the multinational oil companies of exploitation and articulates all that is to be said about the life-threatening predicament of the communities in the oil producing areas of the Niger Delta (7). One is not taken aback when the persona of the 'old spent lady' laments:

> I lay on the altar of faded glory,
> Oily tears rolling through my viens
> To nourish household in the desert (13).

In the above lines, Sophia Obi, a native of Oloibiri, pours her heart out on the sorry state of her town now abandoned by the government and the oil multinationals. Oloibiri, therefore is likened to a used and abandoned prostitute who is left to her fate. Noteworthy is that such a prostitute was once a virgin with all her resources intact.

Obi's 'Oloibiri', through the use of personification, raises the status of the persona showing the mood, tone, and temper. The implication and inclination is to make her audience aware of this. In other words, to draw the attention of her readers to the predicament of women and what if feels to be free from abuse and exploitation. She says:

At last, I am free
Free from bondage

'Freedom' here, implies the dryness of the oil in Oloibiri land; the woman's womb that houses the resources. The implication of this is that, there is nothing to drill and exploit from her anymore from the government and the oil companies. What is left would at best be described 'filth'. But the rhetorical question is, is Oloibiri actually free? What could freedom mean to the poet or the poet persona? One can therefore, liken this as a portrayal of a woman's voice celebrating her freedom after being enslaved in the hands of her heartless husband (Federal government of Nigeria). She (the environment) was abused by this same so called husband of hers that invariably has abandoned her for other women who he will still abandon as it is artistically depicted. Also in another stanza the persona says:

I hear the echo of years gone by
In my vicinity, the quake of discovery
A zebra string of pipelines running
Through my belly
Causing me to ache from relentless exploitation (14).

From the tone of the eco-feminist persona, we identify that temper as that of frustration, sadness and confrontational due to the damage done to the woman's womb (ecosystem) consistently. She says again:

Yet I quench the thirst
of the desert dwellers
…while my children wallow
in the crude mud peculiar to my swamp.
O, I have lived a grey life of despair
Now with my fertility gone (14).

The persona boldly puts an end to the desire of greed and squandering tendency of her husband in the north who greedily collects all her produces without leaving a peanut for her, not even for her children. She goes ahead to, through the use of metaphor and personification, reinforce the extent of destruction inflicted on her body (the environment), including the despoliation and degradation done by men with the activities of the multinationals. She laments here that;

Now with my fertility gone,
I carry a begging bowl
Unable to form a sovereign body to build
a monument to my forsaken glory (14).

The poem is originally set in a typical and tropical Niger Delta riverine village where the oil-underground has caused so much pains to the womb up to the extent that she cannot have a voice of her own to liberate her dignity wealth, pride, and so on. This is adumbrative; stating the lack of social and modern amenities such as electricity, good and portable pipe-borne water, etc. to improve the condition and living standard of her people. In the end she sings a new hope:

Awakened by the oily tears of the Ijaw Nation
I hear the laughter
I hear the celebration
That comes with controlling the blessings
Of my God-given inheritance (14).

Okara while summarizing the implication of the above stanza opines that, "Sophia Obi predicts eventual victory of the struggle for the control of their resources by the oil producing states of the south of Nigeria. Thus she has thrown her poetic weight on the side of the resources control advocators" (8).

The poet Ibiwari Ikiriko through the persona's tone and temper introduces the poem "Oloibiri" to his reader with the images of degradation and underdeveloped environment that once fed the nation. The persona reveals Oloibiri as one long neglected by the federal government of Nigeria to the welfare of traditional occupants of the Niger delta and the indifferent attitude of the multinational operatives; Thus:

Oloibiri street
Would have been tarred
With gold if ours
God's own country were (30).

In this stanza, through the use of metaphor the persona refers to Oloibiri as a feminine gender, whose components such as lips, face, ear, and laches would have been decorated and made up with different kinds of cosmetics, jewelries, and etc. made of gold. Therefore,

Oloibiri here in the fourth line is being referred to as a woman whose body is the holy temple of God which now has been destroyed, demoralized by a man (multinationals).

A careful attention should be given to this first stand especially the line 3 and 4 (…if ours/God's own country were). The burning question towards grasping the voice's message is, is our country not God's own country? Has God abandoned Oloibiri, the once elegant mother to her fate? Is Oloibiri now cursed? Why has she not been adorned with gold and diamonds despite being the hub of resource extraction? There is a deliberate use of irony and sarcasm by the poet here. Remember, the United States of America is referred to as "God's own country", yet, the extracted resources from Oloibiri forms part of what is used to develop the country. Whilst the generators of the resources wallow in penury and retrogression. Then we ask again? Is Nigeria not God's own country? The truth is that Nigeria is. Only a country blessed by God could have such abundance of mineral deposit in her land as Nigeria has.

The poet goes ahead through his persona to express the sad state of things and horrible activities as:

> Instead the mineral
> Is tilled and used
> To lubricate sex
> And crime and bigity
> Everywhere else" (30).

Again, the persona represents disappointment with a mild tone as he refers to the "mineral" to a woman's breast full of milk, feeding many mouths. The mineral or crude oil in this case sustains the livelihood of many states in Nigeria and beyond. Also, this same wife that feeds her husband and many children suffers neglect and lacks the needed attention by her husband, inlaws, children, etc. Rather, she is stocked for only sex purpose, and violating the laws against established elsewhere to protect women. "Crime and bigity" have become the order of the day. The persona's temper becomes sad to see his states in a condition that is prone to odd only appearance.

Conclusion

The position of this paper is that the environment can actually be seen as a woman with a womb who has been abused and has lost her beauty. This paper underscores the vital point that this lost beauty can be restored through conservation and environmental maintenance. Also, the selected poems show a commitment to re-imagine a planet where all life forms,

human and non-human find themselves protected against violence, destruction, annihilation, disease, abuse and mistreatment. Female ecological theory borders on accounting for the debilitating effects man's activities have on the environment (personified as woman in this paper). This paper circumnavigates the deplorable conditions of women and the evil effects of the activities of man. These activities are brought about by socio-economic and political motives the Niger Delta. The truth remains that women's advocacy to preserve nature and the environment may easily be the best. The poems have been used to draw the attention of the concerned reader to sympathize and empathize with women, to save, protect and prevent nature from destruction as a feminine being.

Works Cited

Appleman, Deborah. *Critical Encounters in Secondary English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*. Teachers College Press, 2015.

Awhefeada, Sunny. "Degraded environment and destabilized women in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow". Ecocritical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes*. African Heritage Press,
2013.

Bassey, Nnimmo. *Reporting the Nigerian Environment*. Kraft Books, 2010.

Griffin, Sussan ."Split Culture". *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*. New Society Publishers, 1989.

Ikiriko, Ibiwari. *Oily Tears of the Delta*. Kraft Books, 2000.

Obi, Sophia. *Tears in a Basket*. Kraft books, 2006.

Okara, Gabriel. "Forward" in *Tears in a Basket* by Sophia Obi. Kraft books, 2006.

Okonta, Ike and Douglas, Oronto. *Where Vultures Feast-Shell, Human Rights and Oil in the Niger Delta*. Sierra Club Books, 2001.

Onyema, Christabel "Nightingales in Flight". *From Boom to Doom. Protest and Conflict Resolution in the Literature of the Niger Delta*. Edited by Chinyere Nwahunanya. Springfield Publishers, 2011.

Roger, Webster. *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Arnold. 1996.

Saro-Wiwa, Ken Jnr. *In the Shadows of a Saint: A son's Journey to Understanding His Father's Legacy*. Steer Forth Press, 2001.

Valentine, Cunningham. *Reading After Theory*. Wiley-Blackwell Manifestos, 2002.