Oil Politics: The Niger Delta as Prey in Sebastan Onyema Obilor's *The Trial of the Masses*

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Abstract

This study investigated how oil politics has relegated the Niger Delta region into a prey that is hunted by predators. By this, we mean that the government and her minions, the oil multi-nationals, constantly rape, milk, suckle on the oil reserves of the region and instead of alleviating the people of the region from poverty, they abandon and neglect them. The oil exploration activities in the region has activated environmental degradation: pollution of the air, land and water, deploration of the forests, reduction in agricultural/aquatic yields. Using the Eco-critical theory and channeling it to Eco-Activism as a strand, the researchers are able to explore how the activism of Kenule, Amadi, Tonye, Taria and the ten others have awakened the consciousness of the people of the region. The study found out that the government plays politics on the people of the region and only works to achieve their interest, thereby leaving the masses to die in abject poverty and penury. It also revealed that due to the constant extractions, the ecology of the Niger Delta is depleted, deplorated and violated. The study concluded that for the oil politics to thrive, the government deployed the divide-and-rule method in order to create instability in the communities so they would enjoy a seamless drilling

without meeting the GMOUs entered into to develop their host communities, as it is prevalent in the Nigerian experience.

Keywords: Oil, Politics, Niger Delta, Ecocriticism, degradation

Introduction:

Literature emanating from the Niger Delta region always reflect the ordeals of the people of the region. It always worn patches of the violations and marginalizations done the region and its people by the government and the oil multinational companies milking the oil in the region. These scenarios foreground the popular assertion that literature mirrors the society. Literary works have over the years, decried the environmental degradation and violation which the region has been subjected to. Chinyere Nwahunanya called the precarious state of the Niger Delta as "From boom to doom". Nwahunanya sees oil in the region as a destructive blessing. Ibiwari Ikiriko described the perpetual agony of the aborigines as "Oily tears." In the introduction of this masterpiece, he lamented thus:

Take a look, dear reader, at the map of Nigeria and behold how the giant country sits, suppressing the Delta which serves it the functions of support and sustenance. As it is on the geographical expression, so it is in the political, social and economic expressions. As I write this, there is no…drinkable water to the population, but siphoning oil and gas to enrich other lands and lives. Upcountry, well, away from the smoke and stench of the oil wells, oil concessionaires of all sort wakes up millionaires on a daily basis. Down the Delta, in the fountain of oil and gas, the natives wake up bereft of their traditional means of livelihood (6).

Considerably, in other countries of the world, oil comes with blessings, development, economic empowerment, and skills generation. But in the case of the Nigeria, the Niger Delta is faced with the direct opposites of the "goodies" that come with the oil. The people are maimed for asking for equitable share, they are left to die in abject poverty and violently marginalized. The region is now known for the constant environment degradations, pollutions, stagnation and abandonment occasioned by the negligence of the government and its crony of evil, the oil exploring companies. All these can be couched in a simple term, "Oil politics!" Unfortunately, the Federal government of Nigeria and the multinationals

practised anti- social politics - a total disregard for the welfare of the aborigines and other settlers in the region, and their environment.

Just like the routine we witness in the political terrain, where after the electioneering, elections and swearing-in, the politicians abandon the electorates and care less about their electoral promises, the Niger Delta region is romanced by the government and the oil companies and once they are allowed to explore, they end up exploiting and manipulating the people to their very advantages. These have placed the Niger Delta as a prey as we see the government jostle to take their shares and forgetting the region which has fed the nation. Suffice us to acknowledge that this economic/environmental quagmire has in all sense resulted to the constant militancy agitations witnessed in the region.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field that studies the relationship between literature and the environment, raises concerns about environmental degradation. According to Orlu, "The eco-critical theory is an exposition of the relationship between literature and the environment since man depends, to a large extent, on the vast resources of the environment for his survival" (24). This is to say that ecocriticism aims at revealing the impact of man's dependence on the earth. To this, Orlu opines that "Eco-critical theory is therefore designed, in the main, to evaluate a literary text, the unending interference of human activities on the environment that have caused enormous crisis" (25). This crisis has resulted to the many strands of ecocriticism we experience today. For the sake of this study, we shall anchor our analyses on the Eco - Activism.

Eco-activism refers to organized efforts by individuals and groups to protect the environment and challenge practices that cause ecological degradation. Emerging prominently in the nineteenth century and expanding rapidly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, eco-activism blends ethical responsibility, scientific awareness, and political action. Through literature, protest, policy advocacy, and grassroots movements, eco-activists seek to redefine humanity's relationship with the natural world. The words of influential environmental thinkers and activists

reveal that eco-activism is not merely a reaction to crisis, but a moral and cultural response to long-standing patterns of exploitation.

One of the earliest foundations of eco-activist thought can be traced to Henry David Thoreau, whose reflections on nature emphasized simplicity and resistance to material excess. In *Walden*, Thoreau famously asserts, "In wildness is the preservation of the world" (Thoreau 317). This statement highlights a core eco-activist belief: that nature possesses intrinsic value beyond its usefulness to humans. Thoreau's work encouraged readers to view environmental protection as a philosophical duty, inspiring later movements that linked environmental care with civil disobedience and ethical resistance.

The modern environmental movement gained momentum in the mid-twentieth century, particularly with the publication of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring in 1962. Carson exposed the dangers of pesticide use and challenged blind faith in technological progress. She warns, "The control of nature is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy" (Carson 297). This critique became central to eco-activism by reframing environmental destruction as a consequence of human arrogance rather than inevitability. Carson's work directly influenced public policy and led to the banning of DDT in the United States, demonstrating the tangible power of eco-activist writing.

Eco-activism has since evolved into a global movement addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice. Contemporary activists often stress that environmental harm disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Environmentalist and writer, Vandana Shiva, emphasize this intersection between ecology and social equity, stating that, "The environment is not something separate from us. We are not separate from the environment" (Shiva 11). This perspective challenges industrial models that treat nature as an external resource, reinforcing eco-activism's call for systemic change rather than superficial reform.

Youth-led eco-activism has further reshaped the movement's public image. Swedish activist Greta Thunberg's blunt rhetoric rejects complacency and political delay. In a speech at the United Nations Climate Action Summit, she declared, "I

want you to panic … and act as if the house was on fire" (Thunberg). Her language reflects a shift in eco-activism toward urgency and emotional appeal, resonating with younger generations who face the long-term consequences of environmental neglect.

Despite its successes, eco-activism faces criticism for being disruptive or unrealistic. However, activists argue that disruption is necessary when institutional systems fail to respond adequately. As environmental historian Adam Rome explains, "Environmental reform has rarely succeeded without sustained pressure from citizens outside the halls of power" (Rome 214). From this perspective, eco-activism functions as a corrective force, pushing societies to confront uncomfortable truths and reconsider entrenched economic priorities.

In conclusion, eco-activism represents a convergence of ethics, science, and social justice. From Thoreau's philosophical reflections to Carson's scientific warnings and contemporary climate protests, eco-activists have consistently challenged humanity to rethink its relationship with the Earth. Through words, actions, and resistance, eco-activism insists that environmental protection is not optional but essential for collective survival. As the climate crisis intensifies, the voices of eco-activists continue to remind the world that responsibility to the planet is inseparable from responsibility to one another.

Oil Politics

Going by this discourse, we must first ascertain what politics entails. Politics according to Harold Lasswell, in his book, *Politics: Who gets what, when, how?*, politics is basically about "who gets what, when and how." No wonder why he defined it as "the study of power, influence, and the distribution of valued goods and resources within a society" (13). This definition sees politics as a means of resolving conflicts and making decisions about the allocations of benefits (what), by whom (who), at what time (when), and through what means (how). Taking us more into a further realization of this, Lasswell observes that "politics is a struggle for power that emphasizes the practical outcomes of political activity – the sharing or withholding of societal values" (39). We are obviously concerned in this study

with the sharing of societal values because when it comes to the oil of the Niger Delta, the communal values or say dividends are withheld.

In his study, David Easton, opines that politics is the "authoritative allocation of values for a society" (63). What this entails is that politics is a process where decisions are made and enforced on the whole society, distributing resources, statuses, and opportunities (values). From the foregoing, Easton has identified four key role of politics which are: authoritative, allocation, values, society (nation). These must romance for a nation to be politically stable. These duo scholars cited have given us prompt indices for our interpretative analysis.

The Niger Delta region is blessed with oil and other resources like arable farming lands, water bodies, timber and the rest. The oil is Nigeria's must priceless jewel that lubricate her moving parts. But, the essence of such productivity in the region is not met. Taking from Lasswell's definition, the "what" that has always become problematic is the sharing or allocation of dividends or benefits accruing from the oil exploration by the government and her agents; the "who" refers to the community, the host-Niger Delta, and the government because the oil companies are government agents. Also, lifting from Easton's postulations, we can adhere to the fact that the government waxes supreme "authoritativeness" that permeates the proper "allocation" of the "values" to the "society" - the Niger Delta region.

Suffices us to reflect how this politics is generated in the play text of analysis:

> **Obomanu**: ... Mr. Bush said that they have discovered oil, gas and water under our ground and that if tapped, our community will derive pipe bone water, electricity, hospitals, and employment opportunities … construct good road network for our communities … if we allow Mr. Bush to start operation, our community will be transformed (31).

These accounts for the countless promises made to the region to allow them to explore oil but at the end, just like the failed political campaign promises, the wishy-washy aptitudes die before they hatch. Obari Gomba's poetry. "Shell's Love" reveals the satirical stance of these promises as we are told:

SHELL LOVES THE DELTA! SHELL WEARS!
A very strong killer-love. The duty-roster says so
…
SHELL SWEARS IT TAKES ONLY STRONG LOVE
TO DRILL BARRELS OF HOT CRUDE FROM CORPSES. (lines 21,22,41&42).

To our greatest chagrin, we found that the same people who want to develop the communities end up dividing the communities by their usual formula – "Divide and Rule". This necessitates that they buy some people over in the communities and use them to instigate crisis. While they are fighting; the oil company is busy drilling oil at ease and use the crises as reason for not fulfilling their pledges. Aminu Wale, a representative of the government informs us thus:

> **Aminu Wale**: ... We know how to penetrate the community. We should ask Chief Amadabo to form Community Development Committee. Youth leader, woman leader. This will trigger confusion, quarrel, mistrust and total divide and rule in the event of this, our men will move into the bush and start operation (55).

This antagonism created by buying over some greedy few in the community breeds disunity and at last things fell apart. After all, in Gomba's "Confession of an Oil-Thief", we are made to hear this:
They have the oil but we love the money.
Who will talk of oil if not for money?

The president says to his henchmen. (lines 7-9)

Oil politics is actually the politics that has formed the very walls of the Niger Delta. Some greedy fellows fall to the antics of government and the company like Amadabo, Green, Jaja and Wobo. But the end product of betrayal is usually death. The interest of government is supreme as the prosecutor laments "My lord, the interest of government must be protected" (74). This opens our eyes to the kind of politics that has maimed and destroyed the judicial system of the nation.

Endurance Nadukoro, an Ogoni born, wrote on his Facebook page and captioned it thus: "Was Ken Really a Hero or a Murderer?" The writer recalls history which

to the world was captioned "The Giokoo Murders of May 21, 1994 or the Ogoni Four murder." He informs us thus: "On that day, a group of Ogoni leaders was holding a meeting at the palace of the Gbenemene Gokana (the traditional ruler) in Giokoo. Gen.Sani Abacha through the then Governor of Rivers State sent four delegates to the Gbenemene at Giokoo, a four man committee meant to discuss about the growing tension in the region and to further sort for a dialogue on the Shell and GOKANA fall out which would have birthed the bill of right because the Tensions in Ogoniland were at a breaking point due to disagreements over how to handle the struggle against the military government and Shell due to our Oil. But the military force stationed outside GOKANA stopped and rerouted Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa from entering GOKANA, because they felt his presence would have halted or stunned the process. In a twist of event, Ken Saro-Wiwa raised a false alarm that echoed through the villages of Gokana, his voice had instigated the youths, stating that vultures are gathered in Giokoo! A mob of youths, reportedly angered by what they saw as "moderate" or "pro-government" stances, attacked the palace. In the ensuing violence, four leaders often referred to as the "Ogoni Four" were lynched. They include: Chief Edward N. Kobani, a former commissioner and founding member of MOSOP; Mr. Albert T. Badey, a former Secretary to the State Government; Chief Samuel N. Orage, a former commissioner and brother to Theophilus; andn Chief Theophilus B. Orage, Secretary of the Gokana Council of Chiefs and Elders. Sani Abacha saw this as a threat and insult to him, and swore never to set Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa free, hence, the plot for his arrest and trial was intensified. Ken was a man who feels cheated whenever he's being left out or not carried along, he has a suspicious feelings that a meeting where he isn't present or his spies are denied entry such a meeting was not for the progress of the Ogonis, he became a self-acclaimed Messiah faulting every political steps to bring peace, using hate speeches at occasions. Brewing enmity in the land. Turning the people against the political sect in Ogoni. These are the other side of Kenule you were not meant to know, or you were not taught about."

The agitation by the Niger Delta activists has projected the likes of Isaac Adaka Boro, Kenule Saro-Wiwa, Alhaji Mujahid Asari Dokubo, amongst others. This play is a reenactment of the historic deeds of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni-born environmentalist, who was massacred on 10th November 1995 along with other

agitators. What Obilor does in this play is to add flesh and resurrect the spirit of Saro-Wiwa as well as give an all detailed account of what transpired to exonerate Ken Saro-Wiwa, and settle the rigours which were misappropriated to justify the position of government. This dramatization gains recourse as President Bola Ahmed Tinubu posthumously pardons Saro-Wiwa and awarded him the National honour of Commander of the Order of the Niger (CON) in 2024.

Bringing the implications of oil politics to bare, one will accept that Kenule, our protagonist and his other accused brothers were victimized to show the superiority of government and to warn others of the impeding dangers of speaking up when the hurly-burly is done. In this, the judiciary becomes not just a rubber stamp but a tool to perfect the political gimmicks of government. After not finding Kenule, Amadi, Tonye, Taria and the other ten accused of the death of Amadabo, Green, Jaja and Wobo, not guilty, a special court session is organized in absentia of the accused and their defense counsel.

(Court resumes without the suspects and their lawyers)

...

Prosecutor: My Lord, there is a letter from the governor's office because of this case.

(He hands the letter to the judge)

Judge: (Opens the envelop, reads and later reads it aloud). The honourable Judge; this case should be given accelerated hearing. The president has interest. The government is not interest(sic) in the case because they killed their brothers and burnt their cars and houses, but it touched on the economic based of the nation. Oil. No oil, no nation. No nation. No government. They must pay the price with them heads, Be careful. No lapses should be entertained. (74-75).

This forms the very essence of our discourse. The government that swore to protect lives, has no interest in the death of their agents but only on the real deal-oil. Yes, we agree that if there's no oil, no nation, but why is the region producing the same oil that feeds the nation languishing in rot, underdevelopment, abandonment and sick?

The above raised question will take us back to Oloibiri. In Nigeria, oil was first discovered in Oloibiri on January 15, 1956, by the Shell-BP. This discovery marks the beginning of Nigeria's oil industry and its transformation to petroleum-independent economy with the first export in 1958. Fast forward to today's Oloibiri, we will accept that Oloibiri had been raped, and abandoned. In the text of analysis, we are told thus about Oloibiri:

> **Tonye**: This people are deceitful. I traveled to Oloibiri last week and there is no life there … (31).

We shall appreciate the statement, "there is no life there" when we bring in the views of Biriye, one of the characters in Oyeh Otu's *Shanty Town*:

> **BIRIYE**: ... do you have another one waiting for me at Oloibiri, a community raped and abandoned like an empty shell on the shore of a swamp after an oil spill (30).

This is not sufficient to report on the state of Oloibiri, Sonye, Biriye's wife informs still:

> **SONYE:** ... If only NDDC could start work on that road they abandoned three years ago. The boreholes the governor promised to construct to forestall another outbreak of cholera are nowhere. Go and see the type of wells and creeks human beings drink water from. (She shudders and snaps her fingers) kai we are not going to that village [Oloibiri]. Not yet. (wipes tears) … (5).

The crux of the politics in oil business is apprehended as the verdict of Tonye, "it is simple. The oil that is being extracted or exploited from Oloibiri and sold is used to develop these towns and the goose that lays the egg is allowed to die to hunger" (32). It is politics that has made the Delta region to remain underdeveloped, economically unstable, infrastructurally deficient and politically maligned.

Obilor's dramaturgy is appreciated as it encompasses the travail of the people of the region. He is tactical in naming his characters to represent the entire Niger Delta communities or say ethnics. It is in view of the above that we welcome his ingenuity in naming the play "The trial of the masses". For in the real sense, the entire people of the Niger Delta are tried at the altar of government's political ideology that only favour it.

The Niger Delta as Prey

Before we dive into the present state of the Niger Delta region, we shall first establish a cord on the pristine nature of the region before the advent of oil exploration. By the use of "pristine", we refer to the natural state of being of our environment before humans began their greedy oil exploration. Udom, et al, observe that the region's ecosystem contains one of the highest concentrations of biodiversity on the planet with four of ecological zones: coastal barrier islands, mangrove swamp forests, freshwater swamps, and lowland rainforests (117). The scholars upheld that oil production has negatively affected the region due to unprecedented oil spillage which has made it one of the most polluted in the world (212). In this, the air, ground and water of the region have lost savour and productivity as the people of the region are mainly farmers, fishermen/women.

The Niger Delta remains Africa's largest Wetland and the third largest in the world, characterized by a complex network of marshes, creeks and rivers. The mangroves and forests housed medicine, building materials and fuel, the arable lands support cash crops and fishing was on high. There was abundance of aquatic animals and others. At the opening scene of the drama, we, through the authorial, see a man who brings us to the natural setting of Asakurube land:

"I have been in this natural village a happy and successful farmer.
I have never gone to anybody to borrow money or food.
I have all it takes to be a fulfilled man.
I am proud of my prowess
…
I feed them from the produce of my farm
I have trained them both locally and overseas
Those who wanted to be farmers I have trained
Those who wanted to be educated I have framed
What else will bother me? (1)

The fulfillment in the voice of the speaker directs us to the confession of other characters. These all bear witness that the region was more peaceful, enjoyable, pristine before the advent of oil exploitation.

Tombari: … My yam tendrils are very lively and there is hope for bountiful harvest this year … (3)

Nkwo: … I went and inspected my fish traps and set my hooks. This is the time for mudskippers and sharks. I had a very favourable catch today and made enough money that can pay my children's School fees (3).

…

Odoemene: I have no regrets. I have made a fortune out of it….
I have a roof over their heads. I have trained them, provided for them as a father (5).

All these attests to the extravagances the people enjoyed in their respective businesses like, farming, fishing, timber, palm oil, etc. but when the oil dragons came with their barrels, the glory of Asakurube died and it has never been the same till date.

Upon resumption of oil extraction, twenty-years down the line, Asakurube is left to face the tribulation of Oloibiri. life no longer exists and the people who were proud of their achievement lament the death of progress and productivity.

Nkwo: I am not what I have been since the arrival of this oil people in our town. I don't even know what to do.

Tamuno: How would you be, when nothing works ...

Tamuno: … Look at me at this time of my life. I cannot feed myself. I cannot function as a man in my house … (57).

With the constant cry and the direct accusation on the environmental degradation, we can summarize that Asakuruber is no more and has joined the rest communities that were raped to death.

At last, the community has become a prey. Predators, government and multi-nationals, feed on them for survival. The Niger Delta being referred to as a pry connotes the exploitation, marginalization and abandonment of the people and the region by powerful external forces like the government and companies. They prey on the region's oil reserve and lead them to environmental devastation and degradation, poverty, underdevelopment and all that negate life. With this, natives of the region feel they are victims of neglect, violence, and pollution. Using the term

"prey" is basically a metaphor for the region's historical exploitation and the ongoing struggle for self-determination and fair resource distribution, and highlighting how oil wealth ironically fuels underdevelopment and suffering in the region.

Environmental pollution becomes activated as we witness in the play through the characters:

> **Odoemene:** … Nobody is a stranger in this land who never witnessed the atrocities being perpetrated by the oil workers and government …. The women cannot harvest their crops because they are rotten or the men will touch their front and back. There is no sacred days or places in this land.
>
> **Tamuno:** Our River is polluted. There is no good drinking water, no fishes in our River because of oil spillage.
>
> **Nkwo:** Our palm fruits cannot yield enough palm oil for our food.
>
> **Tamuno:** The raffia palms do not bring enough palm wine (64-5).

What this portends for the community of Asakurube in particular, and the Niger Delta at large, is that the government do not see the region and its inhabitants as humans if not they would have proffered ways to ameliorate their suffering. Fast track to the Kenule trauma, the international communities ruled that the Ogonis should be compensated and that a hydro-carbon cleaning of the Ogoni environment be carried out but it is abysmal to note that for close to 30 years after Kenule's lynching, that vision is still unrealized. This is a confirmation to our assertion that in oil politics, the Niger Delta is a prey and a victim of circumstances.

Conclusion:

Discussing the Niger Delta literature is a journey that once engaged in, becomes herculean to disembark on. The reason is not far-fetched. It is because it reflects a people's sensibilities; this is not fantasy nor a fairy tale but a reality of an abandoned, neglected and oppressed region. Today, our environment has not regained from the loss of nutrients as the constant exploration, extraction, flaring has wrecked dire consequences on the region. A region known for its vast fish

produce, and agricultural harvest is looking for what to eat. And developmentally derailed.

The Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa historic reenactment by Sebastian Onyema Obilor has re-awakened a new consciousness in the region. That consciousness is that his arraignment, conviction and subsequent murder was a trial of the masses. Like the protagonist, Kenule, rightly says before the court that "I am only a messenger and can die like other messengers before me! What is paramount is that, you can kill the messenger but you cannot kill the message ..." (79). The death of Isaac Adaka Boro and Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa has never stopped the agitation of the people of the Niger Delta. The clamour for resource control and or, a reconstitution of the region into national agenda still ranges on. Today, the NDDC is a brain child of these agitations.

It is no longer fictional that when oil is at the centre of politics, the people's welfare is gambled and trampled upon by the powers that be. What is seen in the N'Delta is a reflection of the predator's methods in preying on their victims.

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