

**THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH: INVESTIGATING THE
LETHAL CONSEQUENCES OF ENVIRONMENTAL ABUSE
AND EXPLOITATION IN IFEOMA OKOYE'S *THE FOURTH
WORLD***

Chike Okoye, PhD

Department of English Language & Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: okpilimbem@gmail.com

&

Chisom Loretta Asika

Department of English Language & Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: chisomasika18@gmail.com

Abstract

Environment refers to the totality surrounding a substance or a person's existence and the way they relate to the world. It is no longer news that our environment is under pillage and constant abuse, a situation that has not only become worrisome but threatening too. This has also made ecological issue one of the most discussed issues in recent times as man sits on a ticking bomb due to constant exploitation and abuse of the environment. As expected, writers, both African writers and writers elsewhere have all taken turn to explore, capture and treat the problems of exploitation as it affects society. This paper investigates the lethal consequences of environmental abuse and exploitation not just on the environment but on individuals as fictitiously but conscientiously explored in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*. The crux of the argument in this study is that the problems of environment transcend from physical

pollution to other social problems that pollute the lives of individuals, thwart their desired lives and dreams and at the long run contribute to an unhealthy society. With eco-criticism as theoretical anchor, the study concludes on how these occurrences proved pivotal in altering the lives of the citizens, with society at the receiving end of it all.

Keywords: Environment, Exploitation, Degradation, Pollution, Abuse, Poverty

Introduction

It is no longer news that the earth and its treasure base is experiencing a siege from all aspects of human endeavours ranging from misuses, and degradation of environment, which have become so easily spotted and there are disruptions every day, and almost everywhere. Other instances abound making environmental concern one of the most discussed global issues around the world today.

Environmental degradation has been recognized by many critics, scholars, individuals, international organizations as one of the major threats facing the planet, as man's activities continue to compromise and bastardize his environment in such as alarming rate that it has not only become disheartening and dehumanizing but unhealthy and threatening too. Exploitation on the other hand, is the action or fact of treating someone unfairly in order to benefit from their works. It can also mean the use of natural resources for economic growth, sometimes with a negative connotation accompanied by environmental degradation. Writers, both of the African writer and others from elsewhere have all taken turn to explore, capture and treat the problems of exploitation as it affects society. As opines by William Slaymaker:

Black African critics and writers have traditionally embraced nature writing, land issues and landscape themes that are pertinent to national and local cultural claims and that also functions as pastoral reminiscences or even projections of a golden age when many of the environmental evils resulting from colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous resources have been remediated. A review of any number of bibliographies, literary histories, and anthologies of black African literature and criticism in the past several decades will bear out this intense interest in the local recapture of a violated nature. (Echoing Others, 683)

To paraphrase Ikechukwu Asika, man's exploitation of his environment for economic and political gain is to these writers one of man's effort to undermine the value and quality of better life and to destroy it by its greed and excess ambition. Just like man is free, nature ought to be free in other for both to achieve the complimentarity and symbiotic relationship expected for each survival and comfortable existence (Poetry and Social Activism, 43) Thus, environmental literature has been in the increase overtime as writers and scholars have continued to see the need to use the medium of writing and literature to project the cause of man and his environment. It is the glaring fact that stems the interest of this study to investigate the other shades, and human side of the environmental abuse and exploitation as situated in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*.

Ecocriticism as Theoretical Anchor

By analogy, as Anne Dobie reveals, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how man's relationship with his physical environment is reflected in literature. It is credited to William Rueckert who used it in his 1978 essay, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in which he showed the pertinent relationship between ecological ideas and the study of literature. (238)

Ann Dobie draws out the conceptual underpinnings around ecocriticism as a theoretical anchor as outlined by Glotfelty. The three analogous patterns of Glotfelty reveal the underlying basis which ecocritics have found useful in their engagement, which is also part of what informed the choice of the theory as the theoretical anchor for this study. One of these, according to her, is an examination of how nature is represented in literature, thereby raising public awareness of attitudes toward the natural world. Among the questions to be considered in this first pattern that formed the core of ecocritical discourse are: How is nature affected by human beings in the text, and how are human beings affected by nature? Guided by this theory, this study hopes to provide answers to such questions in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World* as core aspects of ecocriticism as theoretical anchor.

Environmental Abuse and Its Aftermaths in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*

Ifeoma Okoye is one of the environmental friendly writers in Nigeria whose literary work has continued to beam the light and form the matrix of environmental discourse from a literary viewpoint. Her novel, *The Fourth World* is a masterpiece. The novel narrates the tales of greed, injustice, incompetence, corruption,

insecurity, exploitation, discrimination, bad government and lots of myriads of issues affecting the nation. A journey through the well-paved path of *The Fourth World* is as interesting as it is thought provoking. As Ernest Emenyonu supports:

The Fourth world is peopled by the true ‘wretched of the earth,’ who squat in shanties, slums, and unsightly make shift abodes under the bridges day and night in both developed and developing worlds. They are the homeless who have no place to lay their heads in both the most affluent and not –so-affluent nations of the modern world. If full view of the billionaires in the advanced world, they feed off discarded left-overs in garbage containers. The inhabitants of the Fourth world wear a badge of common identity- poverty- which is their common denominator. They cross all racial boundaries and are not restricted by gender, tongue or clime... (vi)

The Kasanga Avenue, is a main street of Kasanga settlement otherwise known as the Fourth world or urban jungle and captures a vivid picture of hardship and continuous suffering, an environment of flooding, darkness, where there is no direct access to public transport and there is also no electricity because the residents were poor and could not bribe the electricity officials (Odinye, 2018). The narrator explains that the residents had to walk for forty minutes on average to get to the Four o’ clock market, from where they could take a transport to any other part of the town. The market was the residents’ only link to the rest of the Enugu and civilization (Okoye 103).

One of the characters worthy of focus in our study of the impact of the environment on characters in the novel is Chira. Chira is the

protagonist in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*. Through Chira and the lenses of other characters, the full impact and effect of environmental abuse, not just on the environment but on the characters comes to full glare. In the novel, through the depiction of the writer, we learn that Chira is an intelligent, hardworking and softhearted young woman whose ambition is to rise above her deprived background by acquiring a good education. This was her dream and she struggles to acquire it until the death of her father truncates her education even before she finishes secondary school and places on her young shoulders the heavy burden of having to look after her ailing mother who will no longer do anything for herself.

The loss of Chira's father is fingered as the chief cause of the several problems the character faced and encountered in the course of the novel. Like earlier stated, it cost her education and exposed her to the challenges of taking care of her sick mother and siblings at a very tender age. This is not devoid of external factors and consequences as many men willingly wished to exploit the situation to their often selfish interest. The death of Chira's father proves pivotal in navigating the ship of Chira's destiny to an opposite direction. One would wonder what the environment got to do with the death of Chira's father which invariably affected her. The answer is not farfetched. The environmental abuse and degradation is seen in the novel as a contributing factor that catalyzed the death of Chira's father. The main hospital, the government owned hospital where Akalaka, Chira's father was admitted clearly depicts environmental degradation. The environment of the main hospital is strictly dirty. The drainages are blocked and thus breed mosquitoes which declare war on patients and people who take care of them. The writer captures this thus:

The mosquitoes hiding in the blocked drains in the hospital premises resurfaced in their hundreds in search of human blood. They declared war on Chira. She hated them, their bites made her skin itch and if she dared scratch the spots, she ended up with tiny blisters that left black scars when they healed. She had been Nicknamed 'patch leg' at primary school because of the hundred of mosquitoes' bites scars on her leg. (*Fourth World*, 34)

It is sad to realize on paper that the government of Kasanga claims to spend billions of naira in providing healthcare facilities and drugs, yet the masses have no access to them. The hospital is poorly managed to a point that you go outside the hospital to get some things needed for your treatment. This situation is not only an aberration but a crime against the collective wellbeing of individuals in society. Despite the taxes, revenues and allocations received by the government, the people have nothing to show for it except a forsaken environment where a death trap is erected in the name of a government hospital. Hence, the nonchalant attitude of the health care givers and government, the negligence and abuse of the hospital environment led to the death of many patients, including Akalaka, Chira's father who later becomes a victim of the vicious circle of decay and hypocrisy. The situation in the hospital is so bad that even the mortuary is not functional, so Chira is asked to transfer her father's corpse to another mortuary as the one in the hospital is not "working properly". If she does not comply, the corpse "...will turn to rotten meat in twenty four hours..." if left in their own mortuary (*Fourth World*, 63).

In the novel, *Fourth World*, the author exposes us to a very troubling situation as we are meant to see how the problems of environment,

in several ways contribute to the plight of the teeming population as is the clear case of the inhabitants of Kasanga in the novel. The citizens only depend on their hard work to survive the various shades of hardship posed by fate, government, nature and the environment. Chira lives with her parents in a "tiny room with its minimal ventilation and perpetually leaking roof... no conveniences" (*Fourth World*, 29) in Kasanga Avenue located in the most neglected and filthiest part of town, the flood rampage has created deep gutters that have merged with the road in a way that it is difficult to differentiate the road from the gutters. Consequently, residents wade through dangerous expanse of surging muddy water which causes many deaths as they are continuously being carried away by flood. During the rainy seasons, residents stay in their precarious houses to avoid being drowned like those who died in one of the floods named the 'Great Floods'. It was a tragedy that would have been averted if, according to a journalist, the "government was alive to its responsibilities" (*Fourth World*, 147).

Indeed, the novel presents vividly the various forms of environment abuses and exploitation and how it affects characters, mostly the female folks. In the novel, we see how Chira and her mother, Kodili resort to doing menial jobs to survive. They plait women's hair under a tree near the market since they could not afford to rent a shop at the four o'clock market. In depicting the above experiences, Okoye raises a growing concern for the poor who find comfort and shield under a tree to eke out a living; but yet the same environment that tries at some point to give shelter to the down trodden and lower classes in society is destroyed by the government in a deliberate deforestation with no plan to replant new trees and arrest the ecological menace taking over the world (Odinye, 2018). The concerns of the government and the owners of the means of

production is to erect new building and business centers that will ensure steady economic boom with no concern about the women whose source of livelihood is temporary cut short and the environment they destroy. The trees are cut down and by so doing, these women's temporary place of trade is destroyed and the business badly affected. They have to find new shades and new places to set up which takes time and limit business. All these are problems the women have to endure. In Mama Egodi's words to Chira, she says:

They razed everything to the ground. That tree under which you set to plait women's hair, the mechanic shops, nearby the stalls, the kiosks, all were razed to the ground kpatakpata... a rich man that bought the place is going to build a big hotel or something there. (*Fourth World*, 144)

The above act depicts landscape pollution which is viewed in this novel as one of the damaging problems of the society. The rich disregard, exploit and manipulate the poor who are defenseless because they are wealthy. Even when the environment begins to fight back, these rich men are well protected from it all in their air-conditioned mansions and solid buildings. This action only worsens the already unstable life of the residents, as the affected people are sent back to homelessness and a market of unemployment. More so, the federal government tends to neglect such areas like Kasanga Avenue abandoning them to perish in such slums and abandoned areas. If those areas were strictly planned and developed by the government, there won't be a problem when it rains. Whenever it rains in these areas, it was very unwise to come out and even after the rain; Kasanga Avenue becomes a dirt dump for anyone who cares to see. These are dirt and refuse gathered from various parts of the town and emptied in the Kasanga Avenue since

it is the way the Avenue was planned and the flood cannot help it but to frustrate the inhabitants further. This is as the writer depicts:

Only a few of the residents were able to find standing or sitting space on the narrow strip of land between the shanty and the wide gutter in front of it. The rest stood on the street across the gutter. It had rained earlier in the day and as usual the gutters, overwhelmed by the flood water, had distributed their filth contents all over the area, leaving the mess behind as the water returned to its normal level (*Fourth World*, 59).

The above extract is to show the height of environmental decay that was seen in Kasanga Avenue. Looking at the effect of such environment to kids and the people living in Kasanga Avenue, it could cause a deadly ailment or untimely death because of the kind of environment that they were exposed to. Chira many times wonders if the Avenue is a cursed place for those who committed some serious crime against their nature, if not she wonders what fate confines her to the dungeon of a place that seems to be the very replica of hell on earth. Chira once laments thus:

...As a small girl, she had played with her friends around the deep gutters, often retrieving from them discarded items like empty plastic bottles and cans and selling these treasures to dealers. These days the mere sight of the slimy, greenish scum that floated on the surface of the gutters made her cringe as if someone had emptied a can of mucky and wriggly worms all over her... she had come to see Kasanga Avenue as a cursed place, as a place where people had been deprived of good education, good health, good jobs and basic amenities; where they were

deprived of dignity and honour. A place where people's toil would never bring any improvement to their lives. (*Fourth World*, 84)

The above excerpt shows the level of poverty and decay in *The Fourth World*. The dirty environment of Kasanga Avenue takes toll in their lives. The environmental decay did not just end with their environment but also their lives because the living condition of the people is nothing to write home about. People suffer from hunger and need. Begging was a normal thing in the 'the fourth world' of Kasanga Avenue. Mana Egodi's children, Egodi, and Donatus, who lived in the Kasanga Avenue and was greatly loved by Chira, are killed by a racing lorry as they tried to cross Obiagu Street. They were coming back from hawking bananas. Their death shocked the entire Kasanga community. Though some blamed Mama Egodi for such evil that befell her, the truth still remains that poverty made that possible. If they do not hawk, they will not eat or even go to school and it is the business that claimed the lives of these children. This is the kind of miserable life that was obtainable in that avenue and mama Egodi is in no way meant to be blamed for the fate of her children. The government should rather be blamed for not providing a good living condition for the poor. The negligence of these children is capable of triggering some negative actions from these children which is unhealthy to any growing and developing society. Another good example of the effect of environment degradation is death resulting from the excess flooding and rain. The inhabitants of Kasanga has not only their poverty and desolate environment long abandoned by the government to contend with, they have nature to combat with in the form of rainfall that flood the entire avenue, carrying away roofs and windows and at some occasions, human beings which is common in Kasanga Avenue whenever it rains. This is possible because the government has failed to provide the needed

drainage system and canals that could channel and have taken care of the menacing effect of the rain. It is sad and heart wrenching for one to try to picture the fate of these citizens trapped in a ghetto with no visible escape route. The writer depicts Chira in one of the occasions it rained heavily thus:

She watched the flood cascade down Kasanga Avenue like a mountain river. The deep gutters and the road had fused into a dangerous expanse of surging muddy water, not a soul was in sight. All had taken refuge in their precarious shacks. The year before, a small girl and an elderly woman, both residents of the avenue, had perished in the Great Floods of Kasanga Avenue, as the press had named the annual deluge. (*Fourth World*, 146)

It is excruciating to realize that people from ‘the fourth world’ of Kasanga Avenue perish yearly from the unplanned building and over flooding which actually can be avoided if necessary measures are taken by the government. The journalist indicts the government and attributes the deplorable living condition in Kasanga Avenue to bad and insensitive leadership.

In the end, Chira is dispossessed of the family land that could have funded her education, and her request for a loan from her best friend’s father is turned down, with her ambition temporarily tucked away. Chira later finds a job. Her salary is meager but she must somehow manage it to support the household and pay for her mother’s medical treatment and inconsiderate demands. As Chira and her mother are about to be thrown out of their shanty for non-payment of rent, a possible savior arrives in the shape of Maks, a wealthy but shadowy businessman. He covers the family debts and proposes marriage to Chira. Chira is torn between marrying this

strange, possessive man and holding on to her dream- to continue her education and make something of herself, a pursuit she is sure this marriage will deny her. Chira's eternal desire to be educated and self-reliant, her humiliating encounters with the wealthy people that cross her path, the disturbing traits she discovers in Maks, and his inexplicable behavior the first time she visits him-all combine to make her seriously question the wisdom of marrying him. She finally makes a decision which is not to marry him but at the same time lost her mother to the cold hands of death because Chira could not afford her medical bills and of course Maks was no longer willing to help because of Chira's decision not to marry him. We see how the ebbs and tides of time continue to toss Chira towards an 'undesired' and 'undeserving' end all consequences of environmental abuse that does not only shatter characters dreams and ambitions but thwart their collective destinies towards an anti climax. This is a situation that could upturn the much desired harmony and decorum desired for a prosperous and harmonious society. this is in tandem with Onyeka Iwuchukwu's conclusion thus:

Generally, developing societies of the world like Asia, Africa, and sometimes, South America are referred to as third world countries. Ifeoma Okoye insists in *The Fourth world*... This fourth world is not located in a specific region or continent, so it has no specific name. It is "...a world whose citizenship is not defined by race, color, geographical location, tongue or creed...the universal world of the poor found everywhere on earth... a world of voiceless humanity, the ignored and despised found in rich as in poor countries....poverty is their unmistakable identity. (*Fourth World*, 266)

Ifeoma Okoye elaborates fully the impact of environment on characters in various guises which forms the crux of our discourse in this paper. The writer does well to explain the symbolic meaning of ‘the fourth world’, the psychological trauma and mindset of those living in Kasanga Avenue thus:

Kasanga Avenue was a destroyer of people’s bodies and mind. Living there meant not being able to see a doctor because there is no money. It means not having a good job or not having a job at all because of lack of education skill. It meant losing children to illness because of death of clean water, a filth environment and insufficient proper food. Kasanga Avenue was a maximum security prison for people who had committed the crime of allowing themselves to be born into poverty. (*Fourth World*, 95)

The above excerpt shows not just the environmental pollution of the Kasanga Avenue but also the living condition of the people living there. Kasanga Avenue presents only misfortunes like Akalaka's sickness and death; the death of Egodi and Donatus who are run down by a truck while hawking banana for their mother; the death of two youths killed by police during a protest march for the death of a girl and a woman in a dreadful flood that ravaged the Avenue and others. The residents also contend with police brutality just like the Black people did during the now defunct apartheid South Africa. Kasanga Avenue represents the slums and the ghettos of this world where countless residents like Akalaka and his wife die because they cannot afford medication.

Ifeoma Okoye presents vivid experiences of people in this world as they suffer gross social injustice in form of segregation, oppression, and exploitation as a result of the political system that empowers the

affluent few and dis-empowers the majority poor (Odinye, 2018). The inhabitants of this fourth world struggle for survival in penury and misery amidst overwhelming obstacles to their continued existence. In Kasanga Avenue, sickness, and preventable deaths are daily occurrences so people hardly experience joy or laughter, only misfortunes, sadness and sorrows. Kasanga Avenue destroys people so much that they are deprived of "dignity and honour" (*Fourth World*, 104).

Conclusion

The Fourth World is a novel that lays bare the difficulties of the masses living in abject poverty. The author made use of a fictitious shanty slum of Kasanga Avenue in Enugu to expose the negligence of environment by the government. Kasanga Avenue in the novel is a representative of this 'fourth world' found in Nigeria. The characters in several of their actions and experiences manifest the hazard of poor environment. The novel reveals to us how environmental concerns could change our lives from what we planned to what we may never have bargained for. The crux of the discourse is that poor environment does not only involve health issues, it also causes loss of loved ones, loss of dreams and aspirations, decline in morality among other myriad of losses. Environmental issues are rich sources of discomfort which not only thwart people's lives but affect their destinies and inhibit harmonious social cohesion.

To this end, one realizes that the members of this 'fourth world' belong to it not because they are lazy or unintelligent, but because of the type of politics that is practiced which produces bad leaders who places them in that condition. However, the writer condemns their complacency and insists that injustice should be challenged so the neglected residents should not see their

pitiable situation as their destinies but rather a call to revolt for the better. The characters should not grow content but instead they should, like Chira, rebel against oppression and injustice and strive to improve their lives which to Okoye, is the only viable way forward. It is to the writer, an inevitable and long overdue struggle, a struggle from the confinements of wretchedness and desolation to a meaningful, progressive and palatable life all geared towards a healthy and progressive society that is bold enough to break away from the limitations and encumbrances of environmental degradation and exploitation.

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