

Niger Delta Areas versus Environmental Degradation and Corruption in Okpewho's *Tide*

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between literature and the environment. It investigates how nature influences man and how the activities of man invariably affect nature. Its main focus is on the works of Isidore Okpewho. The author used his novel to create the awareness of the magnitude of environmental abuse of the Niger Delta by oil companies. They are overwhelmed by the depth of the desecration or defilement of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta through the activities of multinational oil companies. Furthermore, the study points to the environmental degradation, oil spillage, sorrows of deprivation, joys of abundance, hopes of harmonious existence, rise of unemployment and fears of loss and disaster in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In carrying out this research, the researcher made use of both primary and secondary sources. The primary source is the novel under study while secondary sources include other critical and related literatures. The researcher also explored the theoretical framework through ecocriticism.

Keywords: Degradation, Pollution, Environment, Unemployment, Corruption.

Introduction

There is the optimistic belief that no individual can survive the perils of life without constant help of either the group, class, society or the environment, which he belongs to. Ethics of the profession or occupation has a lot of roles to play in an individual's life. So it is with any writer, whether in science, arts or any field of human endeavour.

Notably Isidore Okpewho, have shown considerably in his novel '*Tides*' that the environment in which one finds oneself has a lot to do with one's writing. The main purpose of literature is to help make us understand ourselves and the world around us.

Literature begins when a writer imagines things and writes or says them. It provides us with hypothetical answers to the most important questions we have to ask: Why are we here? What is our relationship, our

expectations or our obligations to the world around us? In that sense, Okpewho through his novel

Tides, have exposed some of the different modes through which literature is related to his environment in the Niger-Delta region.

The discovery of oil in commercial quantity in Olobiri on January 15, 1956 in the Niger Delta of Nigeria placed Nigeria among the rank of oil producing countries from 1958. The above vibrant economic discovery in Niger Delta necessitated a momentous means of revenue generation for the Nigerian Government. The activities of the multi-nationals as well as the exploitative trends of economic consideration and environmental degradation have fuelled crisis, tensions and varied flow of responses as a result of exploitation and corruption that now dominated the literature of the Niger Deltas.

To the Niger Deltans, this war is also carried through and experienced in the literary lines as major writers interrogate and explicate these excruciating pains they feel in their mind. Niger Delta region has advocated social equality and environmental justice which had long eluded the region since the menace of oil extraction began to rampage the whole of Niger Delta environment. Writers from Niger Delta have joined in the collaborative effort of bringing about environmental

justice against the collaborative despoliation of the environment perpetrated by the government and the Oil companies. Chimeka Garrick, Kaine Agary have joined the new crop of Niger Delta writers like SaroWiwa, Tanure Ojaide, Helon Habila, Ben Binebai, IbiwariIkiroko, Christine Watson among other writers.

The virtual destruction of Niger Delta and its attendant effects on the people have created an increasing feeling of insecurity, estrangement from their means of substance, hardship, unemployment, corruption and environmental degradation. Successive government of Nigeria has exploited the resources of the region with reckless abandon. This exploitation and reckless abandon have stirred the creative impulses of creative ingenuity of writers within and outside the region. There is this tone of severity and submission occasioned by circumstances which now reflects in their literature. Nwahuanya posits that: "As the land bleed oil, so the people's tears in their abject poverty and real blood as they fair under the constant assault of government agents to silence their protests"(16).

The writers have through creative literature, increased their pressure on sensitive minds in their calls for a dispassionate reconsideration of the environmental and human rights issues

which have repeatedly constituted their thematic focus. However, Niger Delta is a region bedevilled with ecological problems. The discovery of oil in the region has affected agriculture, fishing as well as the living conditions of the people, resulting to hardship for the people. Land, streams, creek etc have been polluted. Apart from these ecological problems, the Niger Delta region lacks basic social amenities like portable drinking water, electricity, roads, hospitals, schools, job opportunities to enable the people earn their living and become self-reliant yet the region is the proverbial goose that lays the golden egg that feeds the entire nation." It was against this backdrop of economic, social and political deprivation that Ken Saro Wiwa died for. Saro Wiwa views the exploitation of oil by multi-nationals as anti-people exploitation. In an insightful interview, Saro Wiwa affirms that his people live in the middle of death. What Saro Wiwa advocates for is the right of the people to use the resources for their own development.

Saro Wiwa's fight for social justice and minority rights made him a man of the people. That he was able to mobilize and draw attention, locally and internationally to the plight of his people marked him out as one of the greatest activist of our time. Ken Saro Wiwa's works tackled the issues of environmental degradation, exploitation,

hardship and unemployment as a result of oil spillage and the complacent of the Nigerian government that benefits solely from the proceeds of the petroleum. Thus he asserts:

Today, the Ogoni people are involved in two grim wars. The first is the 35 years old ecological war waged by the Multi-national, Oil companies, Shell and Chevron. In this most sophisticated and unconventional war, no bones are broken, no blood is spilled and no one is maimed. Yet man, woman and children die flora and fauna perish. The air and water are poisoned and finally the land dies. The second war is tyranny, oppression and greed designed to dispose the Ogoni people of their wealth and subject them to abject poverty, slavery dehumanization and extinction (12).

It is necessary to add that though Niger Delta houses massive oil and gas deposit, the majority of the people that live in the region wallow in abject poverty due to administrative neglect, crumbling and infrastructure, and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, filth and squalor and economic conflict. With the ascending of oil in the Niger Delta, the region has been steeped in a whole of the

environmental challenges and crisis engendered by oil exploration and resource extraction. The research seeks to solve the problems of Niger Delta and its environment treated in the selected literary work; *Tides*.

Literature and Environment Defined

The study of literature and Environment raises significant questions about how ecocritics will continue to define ecocritical theory and practice. One of the central issues involves the concept of speaking for nature or determining how to let nature's voice speak for itself.

Inevitably, this voice of nature can only be expressed in literature at least through human representations of non-human creative and landscape. In order to conceptualize a voice of nature, some ecocritics, such as Michael Lundblad and Michael P. Cohen maintain that we can identify the environment or nature as the reality behind or before any social construction.

Onuekwusi further states that:

Literature is about life. Some have described it as a mirror of life. The thoughts, ideas and experiences which a literary artist communicates are those that he obtains From the world of men and women. These provide him an interpretation of life

and a theme which he tries to communicate to humanity. What the literary artist obtains from life, indeed from the

socio-cultural environment of his acquaintance, he clothes in interesting stones... (5).

From this, Onuekwusi suggests that literature evolves from the environment. Nkem Okoh defines literature thus: literary productions as a whole- the body of writing produced in a particular country or period or in the world in general. Writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty or form of emotional effect'' (5).

Environmental Situations in *Tides* as it affects Niger Delta Areas

Okpewho's *Tides* is adjudged by critics as a success. *Tides* like most novels from novelists from the Niger-Delta centres on environmental degradation, marginalization, unemployment, incessant retirement of government officials, lack of social amenities and moral decadence allowed and enhanced by political leaders, of which Nwachukwu-Agbada asserts in Obika (2009) that in this novel of the Niger Delta:

.....the artist leaves the comfort of his home in search of the solution to the problem of the wider setting. In

the case of the novel in question, the problem is the devastation of an environment which although it bakes the 'national cake' is left unrehabilitated, which although it accounts for much of the national budget is deforested, pillaged and rendered hollow (2-3).

Tides by Isidore Okpewho seem to be more of fraction than fiction. It is more action oriented and tells the real situation, the truth and nothing but the truth as it affects the people. It is a sense of correspondence between two friends of former professional colleagues, in which nothing is hidden as they open up without fear or favour to each other. This epistolary novel reveals the actual situation in a developing country with its attendant problems in its domestic, social, economic and political situation.

The novel is divided into 3 parts- "Ripple" "Billon" and "Flood", though it is in a letter form like Mariama Ba's *So Long a letter*. While the former is between two male friends and colleagues who faced forceful retirement from their work, the later is between two female friends who faced inhuman treatment meted out to them by their husbands. It opens with two protagonists who suffer some of the indignities of people.

They are from minority section of the country. Tonwe and Piriye are prematurely

retired. While Tonwe Brisibe comes home to the village to settle, his friend and former colleague, Mr Piriye Dukumo remains in Lagos to practice freelance journalism.

Piriye writes to his colleague and friend, Tonwe through Priboye, a friend to Piriye. In his letter, he discusses how their untimely retirement affects their vision of life. In so doing, he exposes the economy of the Niger Delta communities, He writes this to his friend:

I've no way of knowing if you'll be interested in the project. The point

simply is this-you know very well how badly the traditional economy of the Delta communities has been faring as a result of two modern industrial projects which purport to enhance the economy of this country. First, there is the Kwarafa Dam, which has severely reduced the volume of water flowing down the Niger and so curtailed the fishing activities in the Delta-and our people are nothing if not fishermen. Secondly, the spillage of crude petroleum from the oil rigs down here-one of which is in fact located near your own village-has proved an absolute menace to agricultural lives for many farms are practically buried in thick layers of

crude, which kills off many fishes and other forms of life (2).

From the word "go" Dukumo sees the nature of our country and her people:

he asserts that the issue of a national goal is a mirage. After all, their retirement from the profession they cherished so much was on ethnic differences. Personal reasons aside, the situation of things in the Niger Delta is better imagined than seen. According to Obika (2009), Nwachukwu-Agbada states that:

The case of the people of the Delta region as presented in Tides is not resource control nor is it clamour for their sons and daughters to be employed in the oil companies. Far more that these, they are bothered here by their survival, by the ecological disaster they face, and which the government and the oil companies are not prepared to do anything about (6).

Piriye describes the agony suffered by the farms and fishermen. Although the

Committee of Concerned Citizens (C.C.C) is at present taking care of these problems, the publicity secretary, Noble Ebika Harrison nicknamed "Bickerbug" is monitored by the Supreme Military Council. Piriye invites Tonwe to join in the project to free his people from this trauma.

Though he is disturbed by the noise and pollution posed by the exploration machine he does not want to respond to the call at first which made Piriye to be dissatisfied with Tonwe's reply. He abhors the quest for "national unity", "Beloved country" when still the government retires them untimely from active service.

However, Piriye's commitment to the project stands firm and he appeals to his friend to reconsider his stand. Something happened that shook him off his complacency.

An Aboh man, Opene was humiliated as he tried to fight for his right by armed soldiers who had collaborated with the oil companies. The elders and some influential men like councillor Zuokumor had sold their conscience to collect money and shatter the peace and harmony of Beniotu Community- Tonwe emphatically states that ethnicity does not matter to these fishermen like Opene who is not from the vicinity of the fishing community. In Piriye's reply to Tonwe, he highlights the insensitivity and corruption on the part of government official. Bickerbug shows the pictures of the devastation done to the Niger Delta environment and as he was making a speech, he was arrested. He later mentions how his family life is deteriorating.

It is appalling to hear that the Delta Area from which money is realized is being

overlooked; rather this money is shared among the other States. Commander Adetunji is not left out of the struggle for national cake. He is in support of the oil company because of the money he gets from them. The C.C.C. meets with the minister for petroleum and power, Dr. John P. Adiele and reaches a consensus which is neither favourable to the government nor the communities involved. Piriye is still uncomfortable with his wife's childlessness. He narrates how Bickerbug was muddled by two men. The couple that tells him the story is shocked to hear that Bickerbug is yet unmarried.

Piriye is mesmerized at the police headquarters as he goes in search of Bickerbug, The dilapidated state of the police cell is shown and how police officers who are supposed to keep law and order, humiliate innocent citizens while questioning them and asking them to make statements. Piriye comes back home to see that his wife has packed her luggages and has left him for good. After that incident, his room was burgled but his big envelope containing Tonwe's letter was intact.

Tonwe in turn tells of his trip to Benin and how Mr. Johnson Aniemeka welcomed him. He narrates how Mr. Aniemeka has accepted the doctrine of exploitation and because of this, does not want anything to disrupt his pleasures. He

believes that there is nothing to do about the situation since the government is not that static enough to resolve any matter and look into it. The government

you meet today might not be the same government you will meet in the next two months. There is power reshuffle at any given moment it pleases the government in power. Tonwe sees the oil business as trouble. He later meets with Batowei through Aniemeka's description. Batowei still repeats the same thing Aniemeka tells Tonwe.

Braide (2000) is of the opinion that:

It would be a gross omission if one failed to call attention to the role of the petroleum industry participating in the deplorable state of the environment in the Niger Delta...oil pollution of the marine environment is an inherent consequence of the exploration and exploitation of petroleum resources... These areas are constantly in danger of exposure to marine environmental pollution and the resultant deleterious effects that harm our living resources (flora and fauna);

Cause hazards to human health and hinder marine economic activities including fishing and impairing the

quality for use of sea water (379.–380).

Piriye narrates how two men in French safari visited him, and later after much interrogation disclosed that they are security officers. Fortunately, for him, he is brought to the same cell where Bickerbug was. The indecent and unkempt appearance of Bickerbug and his inmates was something to think of. The garbage served to these prisoners on dirty plates and the wooden boards they use as bed are typical example of Nigerian cells, all these notwithstanding, one has to struggle to live on as Bickerbug puts it: From now on, you really have to eat what everyone else eats. I eat it myself. You've got to survive, you've got to live and carry on the struggle (97).

Bickerbug took over from Okpaleke when he could not act against the inhuman treatment meted to the prisoners (or rather detainees as they were not prisoners in the regular sense). The next morning, Piriye's money was stolen in the cell by one of the inmates. Life in the- detention camp was hell except for the games introduced by Dickerbasg and the "Open forum". Tonwe feels to his friend and the latter's letter to him shown how happy he is with the news of Lati's pregnancy. This Christmas letter deals more with Lati, his life, work and the happiness of a would -be - father.

Tonwe on the other hand narrates how he attended an inaugural meeting of the Task force on Pollution in the oil producing areas which was held in Warn. He spent a night before the meeting with his daughter, Enikeye and Son-in-law. During the meeting, Dr. Achele reminds the populace and high placed officers in the meeting that oil is the chief source of wealth and that it was impossible for them to shut the oil producing company for a period of three months, just to sanitize the communities affected. Rather chemicals would be used to neutralize the oil spillage. Chief Zuokumor was irritated by Tonwe's questions on the harm these chemicals would have on their farms and seas thereby destroying what they were fighting against. Tonwe's questions remained unanswered till the end of the meeting.

Akpuru-Aja (2007) also has this to mention about the chemical that is used: "The overall oil-led development in the Niger Delta has certainly damaged the wetland and the environment of the livelihood in oil producing communities" (103).

Bickerbug after being released from cell narrates the trauma he passed through to Piriye. He told him that both the populace and the engineers were not happy about the situation of things in the oil producing areas. Bickerbug, whom Piriye and Tonwe

thought was in the fight with them, betrayed them and was rearrested by the police as he tried to escape out of the country in disguise as a Catholic Priest on theological conference to Coutonou. Piriye was on the run as Priboye concludes on how the police had been after him for four days. He said that he was just a messenger or mail master and there was nothing he had to say about what was really going on in the oil producing areas. He advised Piriye to hide until there was peace once more.

There are many substances of environmental degradation in Okpewho's *Tides*. There is oil spillage and other destructive effects of the oil operations in the Niger Delta areas. This oil spillage hampers growth of fishes in the river. These and other pollutions from the oil company make the lives of the fishermen unbearable for them. Ibaba (2005) in of the view that:

..Oil spillages are a major cause of the conflicting relationship between the oil companies and the oil producing communities. Due to the attendant devastation of oil spillages on the environment, economy and society, the communities have charged the companies of insensitivity centred on the payment of inadequate compensation, show response to oil spiffs in terms of clean up, delay in

the assessment of the impacted areas, delay in the payment of compensation...(29)

This fishing community is worst hit because the portion of land left by water can no longer produce food as a result of chemicals and toxic waste dumped by the oil companies operating in these areas. The fisherman can no longer catch fishes because the activities of the drilling companies drive the fishes far into the high seas.

The Kwarafa Dam helps to worsen the problem of the fishermen in these communities. These and other problems are why Dukumo solicits the help of his learned friend to do a book on the problems facing the Niger Delta. From the other angles a group in Lagos known as Committee of Concerned Citizens –CCC with its leader in the person of Noble Ebika Harrison-nicknamed "Bickerbug" wants to improve the condition of living of their people, since their youths are not employed to work in oil companies. For a long time, the inhabitants have been complaining without being heard and the rural inhabitants are faced with hunger, abject poverty and all sorts of diseases.

Tonwe is no longer happy in the village because his people suffer all sorts of humiliation in the hands of the so-called oil

men and their security agents even in their own land. Imagine the type of treatment Opene receives for leading a peaceful delegation to one of the oil rigs. According to Tonwe; “He had scarcely finished when the officer slapped him hard across his mouth and sent him crashing across the bows of the canoe, dragging a couple of his men down with him (13).

This treatment to Opene and his people is enough to provoke a civil war.

Piriye's mission is to salvage the people from the inhuman policies which corrupt officials like Chief Zuokomor formulate. The community therefore loses confidence in them. The government from the other side aggravates the problem by not allowing any publication that will portray Nigeria on the negatives side. Security operatives are therefore set against people like Dukumo, Tonwe, Bickerbug and even Priboye. While the youths engage in hit and run attacks on the oil companies, the government uses her security agents to hunt them leaving the natural and more serious approach to addressing such issues. This is perhaps the reason why the confusion is still lingering on after all.

The police cell, offices and detention camps are also terrible. The way the places are neglected makes them very uncomfortable to stay in. People face death in the cell because of lack of quality food.

The fear of going to the police to make report / statement about a missing person is what gives the reporter a great concern. Since one will not know one's fate immediately one steps into that station. Ways of Waste disposal in these detention camps is another thing to record.

Onwueme explores the immoral act of the chiefs and leaders of the Niger

Delta who in the bid to enrich themselves, pawn their young relations to the white men working with the multinational oil companies. Government officials who are meant to plan ahead with the money realized from the oil are busy planning their own homes. This is seen from commander Adetunji's words which reflect his selfish attitude rather than the attitude of the communities he is referring to:

We know these fishermen and their tricks on the oil companies. It's either that the explorers have destroyed the shrine of their god or that their fish traps have been damaged or that the tides have been disturbed and they no longer catch fish when they normally do, Or some other silly complaint. They tell us anything just to get compensation. Compensation, everybody wants to be paid something. That's the

trouble with this country today.
Money, money, money (3).

These government officials are not concerned about the lives of people and their complaints. The fishing life in Burutu goes so low because of the death of fishes in large numbers. The activities of the oil companies pose a threat to the people's livelihood since the searchlight on the water disturbs the movement of fishes and makes the fishes to move far into the seas. The chemical used in the treatment of oil waste in the environment, is reducing the volume of water which causes the fishing economy to be bad. Piriye talks about this thus: "I'm talking instead about upsetting the ecological balance between the flow of water from the river down the creeks to the sea and the periodic surge of the tides of the sea up the creeks... (149)

Ebika is of the opinion that the chemicals which Frank Segal talks about are mere bullshit. Bickerbug mentions the angry masses, the engineers, the technicians, the white men, the Israelis and even the Germans are annoyed due to the situation in the country.

Meanwhile the Issue of childlessness in African society is not left out as this brings in confusion between Piriye and his wife Tonye, of which when Lati announces her pregnancy, Piriye is overjoyed. The family trauma faced by childless women in Africa

is not that easy to handle especially when the husband cannot take it any longer without asking if the fault is from him or his wife. Nwapa in focusing her searchlight on the issues of childlessness in marriage with its attendant implications says this in Efuru and Idu, we see the premium the society place on children: "what is important is not marriage as such, but children. A marriage is no marriage without children" (10).

In conclusion, Piriye, Tonwe and Bickerburg fought so much to salvage the land, but they couldn't. Bickerburg resorted to violence which caused more harm to the society.

Ecological degradation as portrayed by Okpewho in the Niger Delta is an endemic that is unnerving. Persistent and intractable actions of wealthy and power drunk individuals render ineffective efforts by eco activists and warriors to rid the place of so much ecological mess.

Then there is also the issue of neglect of the problems in the area by the country's government and of the surreptitious activities of oil companies and their local collaborators. Effects and incidents in the novel are effectively literary elements used by the novelist to portray ecological degradation; that the novelists to a large extent have fulfilled basic ecocriticism principles with their works.

Thematically, the novel deal on environmental degradation, oil exploitation, pollution and ecological problems in Nigeria especially in the Niger Delta region.

Conclusion

In the *Tides* places and characters are portrayed from the point of view of a patriarchal system where men determine all and everything that becomes of the other. This portraiture lends credence to Judith Plant's position that ecological degradation may be attributed to patriarchy- the dominant world social system. This perspective to ecocriticism supports Plant's view; thus if the environment ails, human as well as non human nature is bound to be adversely affected.

This is precisely the case with the *Tides*, where characters and places are portrayed from the patriarchal perspectives, a man's world devoid of feeling for the life and sufferings of the other; where there are various forms of pollution. all leading to one form of environmental degradation or another. Human efforts to combat evil only brings about worse evils and nothing really changes, even as the three novels end with no resolution of the crisis. Conspiracy of the few beneficiaries of the ecological loot and degradation perpetually sustains the evils, and as long as the rest of the humanity is led and controlled by this group of

persons, the hope of ecological sustainability remains indeed blank.

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