

## An Eco-Critical Analysis of Wellington Nwogu's *Paradise of Thorns*

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### Abstract

The Niger Delta environmental problem has become a global issue. This is due to the ongoing environmental pollution caused by oil drilling and exploitation in that region for decades now, thereby leading to high cost of living, extreme poverty, health hazard, destruction of roads, loss of lives and other hardships. This paper aims to assess the Niger Delta environmental degradation through the use of ecocriticism, which sees literature as an integral part of the environment. Hence, an ecocritical reading of Wellington Nwogu's *Paradise of Thorns*. This study illustrates the quintessence of Nwogu in his attempt to employ his creative art as weapons against environmental pollution. His poems depict the beauty of the environment as well as their thematic concerns. The study, therefore, reveals that the government and its multi-nationals are responsible for the despicable conditions of the Niger Delta, which does not only affect man but the lands and seas. The paper equally takes a look at attempts made by the Niger Delta people to resolve the environmental degradation and to inculcate development that will culminate in a better living for the people of the region. The study recommends a collective responsibility and peace to resist the capitalist exploitations from multinational oil corporations.

Keywords: *Degradation, Environmental, Exploitations, Peace, Pollution*

### Introduction

The Literature of a given society shows the society in relation to their culture, environment and experiences. According to Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu in *21st Century Nigerian Literature*, "no meaningful or serious literary creation can ever achieve credibility and authenticity if it discountenances the environment" (55). In other words, literature is not different from the environment. In an essay entitled "An Eco-critical Reading of *Tanure Ojaide's Delta Blues and Home Songs*", Anthony Orlu and Funmi Adesanya observe that "the environment is a major source of inspiration in literary creation and language use" (67). Their observation above shows that the environment supports the writer a lot, in that it allows them access of drawing inspiration from the happenings within their immediate environment. He/she is careful enough to observe the experiences or activities that go on in his/her environment and thus reflects them in their arts. This background connects to Orlu's postulation in his paper entitled "Comparative Analysis of Niyi Osundare's and Tanure Ojaide's Art: "It follows then that the society is an important factor in the analysis of poetry since poets are influenced to a large extent by the things around them and the time in which they live" (223).

The above quotation makes it very clear that the society plays a very important role in the life of poets who are simply writers of their own personal experiences and those of their people. It is no doubt from Orlu's position that it is the things around the writers that influence or inspire their minds for writing. What this means is that the literature they produce must reflect the environment; hence, it is the environment that influences their arts. This is in line with Onyemaechi Udumukwu's assertion that "the sociology of literature recognizes the elemental interconnection between literature and society" (148). Udumukwu here holds that nothing separates literature and society; hence they have a very strong bond, not forgetting also that the society furnishes the writer with certain unavoidable information that they need to produce works of literature. Consequently, it is worthy of note that one of the functions of literature is to mirror society.

The environment captures the content of literature, as it plays a significant role in the life of man. This inspires what Cherryll Glotfelty calls “the relationship between human culture and the environment” (xv). Niyi Osundare captures this relation of man and his environment in his *Eye of the Earth* thus:

What we have now is a remembered landscape, echoes of an Eden long departed, when the rain forests were terrifyingly green...Left mostly now are echoes whispered in the stubborn ears of memory. Most of those trees so vivaciously native to this forest have met a rapid death... (x-xi)

However, there are environmental problems which result from human activities and natural occurrences. They include flooding, stream siltation, earthquakes, storm, and so on. Also, there are environmental pollutions from human activities such as gas flaring, oil spillage, waste dumping, deforestation, drilling, bush burning and so on. Raj Kumar Mishra in *Ecocritical Literature* laments:

Today, we live in a world of tropical warmth, chronic drought, desertification, deforestation, acidifying oceans, frequent coastal inundation, tsunamis, cyclones, increasing food and shelter shortages, accidents at nuclear power stations, oxytocin applied vegetables, industrial pollution and many more lethal activities. (1)

Ecological decay, therefore, refers to the dilapidation, ruin and filth that arise from environmental practices, a situation where plants, animals and humans are exposed to hazards when human activities or natural occurrences of adverse effects occur. The contaminants of an environment may include activities of oil companies, from combustion or burning resulting to the release of gaseous chemicals in the air, land and in the water.

Regrettably, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is one of the most damaged ecosystems in Nigeria. Gabriel Godini Darah, in *Revolutionary Pressure*, observes:

In the Niger Delta, the extractive industry of the oil and gas has inflicted tragedies worse than has been experienced elsewhere in the world...because the Niger Delta is the most populated of all the Deltas on the earth, negative effects of oil mining and other ecological disasters have had more devastating consequences on human beings. (5)

Environmentally, the Niger Delta has been bruised and battered. As this essay pictures the dimensions of the tragedy of the region, the region suffers the devastating impact of environmental degradation. Wellington Nwogu, a poet, well known for his devotion to the Niger Delta, his homeland, evokes in his writings the sufferings of the Niger Delta land, culture, religion, tradition and people.

The process of oil drilling in the Niger Delta has brought about terrible and perhaps irreversible consequences for the environment. Some of the degradations include gas flaring, deforestation, contamination of farm land and water by crude oil. However, Chris Onyema describes the Niger Delta predicament thus:

The experiences the oil producing communities undergo in the hands of the oil exploring companies, the conniving Nigerian government and their local leaders are so awful that the blessings of oil turn into curses. Their rivers are polluted; their farms are destroyed, just as their lands are taken by force without (adequate) compensation (204).

The environment and the people of the Delta region have suffered great loss. According to Iniudu Ukpong, the Niger Delta area,

“is rich in natural and mineral deposit (Crude Oil and Gas) discovered in 1956, and has remained the economic backbone of the Nigerian nation, geographically, covered within the geological Niger Delta includes the six states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers. However, a more inclusive geopolitical definition extends to the Oil producing states of Abia, Imo and Ondo” (3).

This is to say that “since oil became a major determinant of the Nigerian political economy... the quest for oil wealth has intensified the battle in the country” (Esekumunor Clark, 78).

Against the backdrop, this study discusses the destruction and ecological decay in the poetry of Wellington Nwogu’s *Paradise of Thorns*. The study offers a shift from the glorification of nature to the destruction of the environment. The theoretical approach adopted in this paper to explicate the reason why Wellington Nwogu’s poetry is an instrument for challenging the rationale behind the practice of ecological imperialism is ecocriticism. Ecocritical literature is a method of literary criticism that gained popularity about two decades ago following the seminal work of Cheryll Glotfelty. As she puts it, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii).

According to Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in *Ecocriticism Reader...* Ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (19). Also, Lawrence Buell considers ecocriticism as a “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (430). As a theory, it goes beyond the settings of a text but also the human elements and its relations with man. Glotfelty and Harold Fromm further identifies that ecocriticism

Takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture specifically cultural artifact of language and of literature. As a critical discourse, it has one foot in literature and the other on land. But as a theoretical framework it negotiates between humans and non- humans (xix).

In other words, literature plays a major role with the physical environment. We discover from the above that nature needs to live and deserves to be respected by man. Therefore, ecocriticism ensures that the rights of these nonhuman lives are duly secured and protected. It is worthy of note that the theory is firm in its stand of nature glorification and preservation. This means that it is right to protect and adorn elements of the natural environment.

In *Paradise of Thorns*, Gabriel Okara points that “the effects of its exploration and exploitation make very strong presence in the poems. Expectations of a better life are being thwarted by the greed of the elites and those in positions of influence and power” (*Paradise of Thorns*, vii). Also, Daniel Ogums argues that “the mood is compelling, the tone is didactic, the sense is moralistic and the intention is redemptive. The text possesses the ability to teach and entertain: this bestows on its undeniable profundity” (*Paradise of Thorns*, front page). Also, James Knox Whittet reveals that:

Wellington’s *Paradise of Thorns* is a passionate protest against human injustice and an expression of a longing to return to some distant time and place where peace once walked with bare foot unhurt... Poetry is a means of reminding us what we are always in danger of forgetting, particularly in these troubled, that there is indestructible beauty and compassion at the heart of humanity... the heartfelt poems in the book can help the reader to awaken from the slumber of acceptance of life as it is daily and brutally lived and glimpse images of

beauty and hope beneath the pain... (*Paradise of Thorns*, 99-100)

According to Uzo Nwamara, “wellington is “a passionate emerging voice from the Niger Delta, navigates his pre-occupation with nagging contemporary socio-political issues with fresh imageries imminent in diverse thematic hues” (*Paradise of Thorns*, 100). As Inyang Eteng posits that “oil exploration and exploitation has over the last four decades impacted disastrously on the socio-physical environment of Niger-Delta oil bearing communities, massively threatening the subsistence peasant economy and the environment and hence the entire livelihood and basic survival of the people” (4-5).

### **Environmental Pollution in Nwogu’s *Paradise of Thorns***

Wellington Nwogu in his poetry recounts the unhealthy conditions of the people of Niger Delta. In *Sounds of Doom*, the poet laments:

Those smokes of angst, swirls;  
Wind of death, puffs –  
Fire of debacle: flames- but  
Who will end these sounds of doom? Who? (3)

In the above lines, the people do not only cry of hunger but of soot and smokes that come from blowouts and gas flares. This too is exemplified in the lines, “those smokes of angst, swirls/wind of death, puffs” (3). This reveals the agonizing effects of gas flares on the people of the Delta. The speaker, here, accounts that the fire produces heat that hurts the people. It is, therefore, comprehensible here that the pollution makes the environment very rough and painful on the people. This is why they no longer sleep freely living under a hot weather that makes the breeze generates flames rather than promote a good atmosphere. In “Clouds of Blood,” the poet says:

See now a cloud of blood  
Making Bizzard rivers on  
The front-yards of  
Clowning clouds-  
Rains, rains blood  
Rains, rains blood  
And thunders acrid  
Of destroying acids- (4)

As a result of the contamination of the land, it leads to rains of blood. With the repetition of “Rains, rains of blood,” it emphasizes the terrible conditions of the region and how urgent the need to solve the problem is. In “Niger Delta Rain” the persona points out that:

Delta cloud,  
Rains insurgence as water,  
Gunmen as blood  
With tumbling blasts –  
It rains death and woes  
With brawling whistles of doom;  
It rains rivers of angst and diseases  
Of noxious snaring erosions:  
This rain of pain  
Has drenched horizons  
Of the whole hemisphere  
This pure pain pours drops  
Of liquid flames-  
It down-poured last time  
And falls this day  
At dose of excesses  
With dusts and nerve-wracking vapours (6).

The persona notes with great dismay, the sudden disappearance of rivers, the drying down of the land's swampy areas as occasioned by the activities of the multinational oil corporations. He is not happy that the hopes of his people are destroyed, since the fishermen can no longer fish and the farmers no longer see good soil to germinate their plants. Hence, "it rains anguish diseases and pain" as used in the stanza above is a metaphor that connotes the suffering masses that die out of hunger while living in the midst of plenty. The hot state of his homeland is such that it is beyond what words can say. For instance, according to the persona,

Trees fall headlong from  
The feet of their roots-  
Mansions dilapidate  
Inhabitants' zincs  
Rust and being beheaded  
By the wind's double-edged-sword  
These poisonous torrents;  
Soaks foams of diverse shapes-  
Earth's residents whose  
Birth rights are awfully deprived  
Run into red roads  
Of myriad thorns (6-7)

Here, the forests play a special role; not only are the trees important in protecting watersheds, maintaining soil fertility, regulating water flows and air quality, they provide the benefits of food, herbs and fuel. Therefore, the deforestation of lands leads to making life difficult for the people of the region. The erosion of land used for livelihood also deprived the people of their legitimate means of livelihood. These unfortunate developments also brought about the displacement of farmers and poverty. These are effects of the oil exploration from the multinationals, as they disfigure the land, leading to poisonous torrents and death.

Also, the poet continues to lament the degradation and exploitation of the people and the land of the Delta. As he points out in *Igboh-Echie Road Lamentation*, the destruction of the land is depicted thus:

A sloppy swampy path like blood  
And like Noah's era's flood:  
Where four wheel houses float like a sea fishing boat  
The road is dead  
A pathway of cream-coloured sea  
Like the atlantic ocean, we see;  
And a stagnant river without fish..  
The road is dead (22)

The constant repetition of "The road is dead" depicts the extent of destruction the Delta land is, Igboh Echie is a place in Rivers state Nigeria, where oil also dwells. Hence, Igboh Echie road is dead. He further questions "who will clothe the naked road and heal the sobbing land?" (23).

In "Our Crude is Rude" the persona reveals that:

If crude  
Is the waste of oil  
In the water-land  
Of silence where the  
Heathly become  
Deaf and dumb;  
It equal dozens  
Of solecisms  
If crude  
Is what make heirs  
Pitiable and haggard

Complainants and beggers  
That crude is rude...  
If crude  
Is an endowment  
Of oil wells  
But does not make  
Landlords well;  
That crude is rude (28)

Here, the poet is saying that since oil is the beauty of the region, yet it does not make the people of the Niger Delta enjoy their natural endowment. Hence, they had to beg the government and the multinationals to get what is due them, thus leading to poverty and hunger. In “Paradise of Thorns”, the poet says that:

The assailing beam of  
the domineering torment  
has dissipated the flower of  
the growling garden – disenchanting the  
apparition of many heavens, for the  
earth’s debacle is due for condolences-  
the earth is due for condolences  
for paradise has grown spikes-of-thorns...  
which makes nothing that fly, flies;  
Nothing that walk, walks;  
Nothing that work, works;  
Nothing that creep, creeps...  
the earth is due for condolences  
for paradise has grown spikes- of- thorns (33-34)

In the above quoted lines, the poet asserts that nothing works, the symbiotic relationship between the hemisphere and the hydrosphere is being destroyed hence, the need for condolences. There is so much pain in the mind of the persona as he recounts the quality of people or things once recorded in his land, for “nothing that work, works”. In other words, every living thing in the environment is dead as a result of the destruction of the land.

In “Delta Structure” the persona refers to the multinationals and the government as thus:

woes at thrones who  
war against sanity  
who make kings sit on naked  
grounds and princesses crawl  
in dungeon places;  
and those who make owners  
stretch to strangers  
begging bread of her own wheat..  
those who disfigure the  
structure’s shape and make...  
plates of sourced soups-  
who approve schemes  
of stark sorrows – will not die  
but have hand shake with grave (36-37)

The lines above reveal what will happen to the perpetrators of the injustice meted out in the region, such as the multinationals and the government. They will suffer more, in that they will not die but shake hands with grave, that “those who make owners stretch to strangers begging bread of her own wheat” will suffer and die a miserable death. For their punishment, according to the poet is worse than death itself. In “Umuechem Massacre” the destruction is depicted as thus:

if you know Umuechem  
a paradise of milk and myrr  
you will wail for a million years  
or- stream blood of tears  
the land shrinks in shrieks of  
her showy beauty – of  
imposed shoddy countenance  
you will sob and sigh how  
milk and myrrh morphs into  
milk of mockery and  
paradise of pains  
if you know Umuechem's  
flesh, whose blood bled to death  
you will whip earth a trillion times  
and pound parasites as pepper (45).

The poet here recalls the good old days of the region with images of “paradise”, “milk”, “myrr” and “beauty” as opposed to the present conditions of the people in the image of “mockery”, “pains”, “blood of tears” and “pound parasites as pepper”. Hence, a shift from “a paradise of milk and myrr” to a “paradise of pains” and “mockery”. Thus, in a situation where rivers are metaphorically dead, soil is disfigured and there is gas flare, it leads to the destruction of the air, water and land; when all of these elements that should sustain life are destroyed, life certainly will come to a halt.

### Summary and conclusion

Literature is an integral part of the environment; hence, environmental writing therefore goes beyond aesthetics, as it concerns the preservation of nature, humans and non-human element. It is worthy of note that the non-preservation of forest trees as well as sea animals is as a result of the mining activities of oil companies in the region. These exploration activities are the major factors responsible for the ongoing environmental degradation in the Niger Delta today.

In conclusion, the poet writes, “let peace return” to the region. The multinationals and the government must compensate the people of the region. However, there is a ray of hope for the people of the region thus: “Let us/let light live/let us/make/here/there/everywhere/the/paradise of our earth/ and the Dubai of the Delta” (74-75). Therefore, fuelled with environmentalist consciousness, Nwogu's poetry highlights instances of environmental contamination and destructions carried out by the multinationals and government. And with the Niger Delta mired in environmental crisis, Nwogu has re-engineered the possibilities of his poetics so as to ensure that the environmental problem of the Niger Delta region does not subsist. He hereby gives hope to the people of the region through poetry as a functional tool for environmental agitation. In other words, Ecocriticism has come to build hope and seek ways of improving the earth and enhancing the relationship between humans and the environment, by ensuring the earth does not end in explosion. For the environment and humanity are supposed to live a collaborative life.

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