

Environmental Issues and the Human Society in the Niger Delta Landscape: An interrogation of Inno Ejike's *Oil At My Backyard* and Helon Habila's *Oil On Water*

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Abstract

Literature reflects and represents life and events in a given society. It is employed by the literary artists to explore and document the realities of man and his environment. This paper explores how literature explores and exposes the environmental degradations that face humanity in Africa, especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. These degradations range from pollution of water, destruction of trees, contamination of farmlands, loss of pastoral beauty, the pollution of air through the emission of carbon dioxide among others. The selected texts adopted the ecocriticism theory. This theory studies the relationship between literature and the environment. The aim of this work is to project that the selected authors through commitment to the realities of their immediate environment show how literature as a product of the environment can be used to rescue, preserve, and conserve the ecosystem from being destroyed and degenerated completely. This paper reveals that man through his actions and inactions is responsible to the degraded environment that poses severe danger to humanity. The findings show that man is the architect of his environmental status and realities whether good or bad. It further shows that the degraded environment is caused by man and it is only man that can also make frantic efforts to rescue and revamp it for the benefit of man and the entire creature.

Introduction

Environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources such as quality of air, water and soil; the destruction of ecosystem; habitat destruction; the extinction of wildlife; and pollution. It is defined as any change or disturbance to the environment perceived to be undesirable. It has to do with negative effects of any human activity on the environment where the biological as well as physical features of the environment are included (net).

Environmental degradation comes in the form of deforestation. The cutting down of trees has a great impact on environment and the natural habitat (Vambe, 2013:4). Drastic environmental changes like climate changes, global warming, soil erosion, depletion of ozone layer, water table depletion, species extinction and loss in biodiversity are all attributes of deforestation and desertification. Overpopulation as well as emission of harmful chemicals and carbon dioxide to the environment by heavy machines used in big companies who engage in the careless extraction of mineral resources from the seas contribute hugely to degradation of the environment. The Niger delta areas of Nigeria comes to mind when one talks about the health threatening activities of the oil extracting industries vis a vis the environmental degradation. These ugly practices endanger both human life and other natural existence in our environment.

Conversely, in the wake of scientific and technological advancement, the magnitude of man's intrusion on the supporting web of the environment generates alarm that cannot be overlooked because the very existence of man is threatened (Fubara, 1998:16). It is however established that population growth, depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, habitat destruction and species extinction, air and water pollution, ground water depletion and contamination, chemical risks, environmental racism and chemical pollution are all causes and realities of the human threat to the environment. The complexity of the environment is such that "even minute changes in any one factor in an ecosystem can influence whether or not a particular plant or animal species will be successful in its environment." (Zimmerman, 2006: net).

Niger Delta Environs and Environmental Pollution

The Niger Delta is located along the Atlantic Coast which forms the Southern boundary of Nigeria, and it is the entrance of River Niger and Benue into the ocean through a web of rivers, creeks, and estuaries.

It is the longest wetland in Africa and the third largest in the world, with about 2370 square kilometres of rivers, creeks and estuaries. Its vegetation is predominantly of the forest type with 8600 square kilometres of swamp forest and about 1900 square kilometres of mangrove forests (Alagoa, 2005). The region situated in the Southern part of Nigeria is bordered in the east by the Republic of Cameroun and in the south, by the Atlantic Ocean. Within the region is defined both geographically and politically. The later, being for revenue sharing purposes. The geographic Niger Delta includes the littoral States of Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Cross River and Akwa Ibom and has an area of about 67,284 square kilometres with a combined population of 16,331,000 persons. The political Niger Delta includes these and in addition, Abia, Edo, Imo and Ondo states, with a total area of 112,110 squares kilometres of land as at 2006. The region represents about 12% Nigeria's total surface area (NDDC, 2006). It has a lot of gas reserves which when sufficiently harnessed, could yield income far in excess of crude oil incomes. There are about 606 oil fields in the Niger Delta of which 360 are on-shore and 246 are off-shore (Nwilo and Badejo, 2005). Most of the new oil fields are deep water fields developed and being developed off-shore.

Niger Delta region however is dominated by the Ijaw ethnic group, other groups in the western Delta includes: Isoko, Itsekiri, Kwale and Urhobo. In the eastern delta are groups like Ekpeye, Andoni, Ikwerre, Ndoni and the Ogoni. However, the Niger Delta region with its natural endowments of oil and gas which drives the international economy is poverty ridden as a result of political marginalization, economic pauperization and environmental degradation occasioned by its small soil and oil company activities in the region and long years of reflect by the Federal Government of Nigeria (Akpan, 2007). Being a deltaic region, Niger Delta is the "gold mine" of the Nigerian oil industry. It accounts for over 70% of Nigeria's on-shore oil and upstream operations. According to Khan (1994:40) "Since oil was discovered at Oloibiri, the Niger Delta basin has proved to be the most prolific producing area in Nigeria, containing seventy-eight oil fields, including the largest, Forcados and Yorke (40)". In a region where land scarcity is rampant, the exploration, production and transportation of oil means that oil installations and operations occupy a lot of physical space at the expense of the indigenous land owners, and has had a pronounced impact on the environment. Again, because the Niger Delta has been subjected to both on-shore and off-shore operations for over four decades, the social relations of oil production have penetrated the social structure of the local communities and defined their place, largely as the "excluded, the alienated, and the exploited" in the larger Nigerian society. The critical issues therefore are: what is the social impact of oil production in the Niger Delta, and how does this "produce" resource scarcities, and conflict; who controls, and has access to, the resources being produced from this area; and who bears the environmental costs of oil production? The question of "scarcity" of resources, resulting from the interaction of economic modes/forces and the ecosystem, or as a result of the pressures of overpopulation on shrinking resources and the implications for global (western) security, has dominated the discourse on environmental conflict in recent times.

An assessment of the Nigeria's Niger delta environment within the framework of sustainable environment necessitates that the area has been grossly degraded. The environment has over the years been inadequately taken care of and this neglect has obviously resulted to the underdevelopment that is been witness in the area. It has also led to massive hardship and poverty amongst its inhabitants. Food insecurity, lack of clean water, contaminated farm lands are some of the effects of environmental degradation in the region. The Nigerian environment generally, nevertheless, presents a gloomy picture across the length and breadth of the country. A commentary by the World Wild Fund, the World Conservation Union, with representatives from Nigeria and the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, conclude that the Niger Delta is one of the five most polluted spots in the world and that the major negative effect of pollution is environmental degradation (Azaiki, 2003).

It is established that major pollutions that have brought environmental degradation in the Niger Delta area have been mostly oil spillage and gas flaring by the oil companies, leading to soil fertility loss, delta forest loss, biodiversity depletion and fisheries decline amongst others. Oil spills occur as a result of such factors, occasions or developments as equipment failure, accidents, natural hazards and deliberate human actions. As a result of these externalities, huge volumes of oil have been spilled

into the environment - land and water (rivers, ponds, lakes and sea), causing serious damages to the ecosystem. More than five decades the Niger Delta has suffered from the twin evil of oil spill and gas flaring. The oil spills and gas flares experienced by the communities of the region over the years had no doubt brought about adverse effects on their environment, health and livelihood.

Theoretical Framework

In the light of our appreciation of the relationship between literature, the environment and the human society and degradation, this paper anchors on the theory of eco criticism. Ecocriticism makes environmental issues its primary focus. It is a branch of literary studies specifically concerned with the relationship between man and nature, the ecosystem and the ecosphere.

The term “ecocriticism” was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism” (Wikipedia). Interest in the study of nature writing and with reading of literature with a focus on “green” issues grew through the 1980s, and by the early 1990s ecocriticism had emerged as a recognizable discipline within literature departments. Because it is a new area of study, scholars are still engaged in defining the scope and aims of the subject. Cheryl Glotfelty, one of the pioneers in the field, has defined ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” and Lawrence Buell says that this study must be “conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis.” David Mazel declares it is the analysis of literature “as though nature mattered.” This study, it is argued, cannot be performed without a keen understanding of the environmental crises of modern times and thus must inform personal and political actions; it is in a sense, a form of activism.

Ecocriticism examines how literary works approaches and reflects nature and most importantly how nature influences man and how the activities of man invariably affect nature. A critic using this approach is interested in how nature is reflected in a work of art (Asika, 381). Godimedes defines ecocriticism as “The field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations” (16). It is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature (Wikipedia).

In her essay “Revaluing Nature” Julia Evergreen Keefer mentions what an ecocritic looks out for. She asserts that:

Ecocritics investigate such things as the underlying ecological values, what is meant by the word nature, and whether the examination of “place” should be a distinctive category, much like class, gender or race. Ecocritics examine human perception of wilderness, and how it has changed throughout history and whether or not current environmental issues are accurately represented or even mentioned in popular culture and modern literature. Other disciplines, such as history, philosophy, ethics, and psychology, are also considered by ecocritics to be possible contributors to ecocriticism (net).

Ecocriticism therefore, aims to show how the work of writers concerned about the environment can play some parts in solving real and pressing ecological concern.

Environmental Exploitation and the Human Society in *Oil at My Backyard* and *Oil on Water*

Inno Ejike’s first novel, *Oil at My Backyard* (2001) is a veritable expression of acceptability and exploitation of the contending oil companies – Eluala, Ricco, and Oyega and their success in the communities where they do business. The novel opens with the search for oil, the disruption of people’s eco-fecundity and peaceful coexistence, and the ironical enthusiasm shown by the indigenes of these communities. The oil company arrives in Oduala during the celebration of the “Oghu festival”. This festival is synonymous with eco-peace but the communities also thought otherwise, Ejike narrates:

As the Oghu masquerade was patrolling the village in company of some youths, they spotted the brand new Toyota Four –wheel drive jeepThey suspected that these strangers could be agents of an oil company, who in no distant future will take over

their fertile farmland for oil exploration ...No sooner had the oil companies started exploration, than the devastation of the farmlands commenced ... (10). They are like cockroaches that check in easily but do not check out. (11)

The experiences that the oil producing communities undergo in the hands of the oil companies, the conniving Nigerian government and their local leaders are so awful that the blessings of oil turn into curses (25). Their rivers are polluted; their farms are destroyed as Ada witnesses:

As I was going to my cassava farm this morning, I saw a group of men ...At first, I thought I had fallen into the hands of head hunters. But when they greeted me and ... I felt a little relieved. On my way back from the farm, I noticed that they have cleared a very large area. They are heading towards the area where we farmed cassava last year... we may not have any place to farm next farming season. (27)

Environmental degradation such as gully erosion, land, water and sea pollution by oil spillage, immigration of territorial and aquatic lives, diseases, death and destruction of human and non – human lives affect everyone; and all these compel the people to live under as much pressure as the oil pipelines that criss – cross the land and the women are mostly affected. The devastation of the farmland is so much that the women question the economic value of fifty-thousand-naira compensation to their cassava crops:

At the project site, they felt like shedding tears. The destruction Ada saw the first time was a tip of the iceberg. Their entire cassava plantation was ravaged. They saw their young cassava shoots leveled to the ground and their leaves withered by the scorching afternoon sun. What they asked for as compensation was by far below the cost of damage to their cassava farms. The oil company had also felled many palm trees and raffia trees. The raffia grows freely along the swamps. It is the major source of wine for their refreshment. They use raffia leaves to make thatched roof for their houses. (47)

Most environmentalists believe that the discovery and exploration of oil in the region has been more of a curse than a blessing. The argument is that oil exploration, which has led to oil spillage has caused the region and its people environmental degradation, extinction and death of their sea animals and loss of their economic source of income – fishing and farming. Oyenga Oil Company has completed the pipeline project to the seaport which allows for easy shipment of their crude oil. It was successful the first month, but in the second month, it wasn't as expected and the writer analyzes that:

One of their ships, after loading capsized twenty miles from the shorelines and emptied a shipload of crude oil into the high seas ... This was the highest oil spillage disaster in recent years. The tide washed the crude oil to the shoreline covering over a hundred kilometers range. The spillage found its way to Oduala creeks, destroyed their aquatic farms and soiled their vegetation. (157)

The above suggests that the aquatic life in the fish ponds dies as a result of oil pollution. The ponds themselves are taken over by the thick deposits of crude oil. The creek has been turned into a black pool making it impossible for the community owners of land to swim or paddle their canoes without it being covered by oil. The grass, palm trees and other forms of vegetation within the village also suffer the same fate. All forms of drinking water, normally drawn from the wells are severely poisoned by the high levels of pollution. The Umuibe community expected portable water from the company (83). It was not only the farmland that was affected in the spillage. The white garment church members who went to the beach area to offer prayers came back with garments soiled with crude oil (158). Sea birds, turtles and fishes were washed ashore floating on their backs because they had died of pollution to their environment (159).

Poverty looms when natural resources are endangered. The oil producing areas were getting more impoverished and their environment degraded (124). Gully erosion was on the increase. Their roads were impassable. In the face of insurmountable neglect and deprivation, the Government wanted the oil

to flow without interruption. The oil companies operating nation-wide were smiling to the banks, while the oil producing areas were wallowing in abject poverty (125). This is hellish for Umuibe community as Chief Ibe reminds the company Chairman:

You can see how impoverished our people are. They do not have working capital and inflation has devastated their business. We, the owners of the oil do not benefit from the oil deals. We have asked the government to give us fifty percent of the proceeds from oil ... but all their eyes are on oil! Their drilling activities have polluted our streams and the creeks. Our fishermen are coming back with empty basket as fishes are being destroyed by pollution ...we want participation in this oil business. (143)

Similar to the above is the concern with the gas flaring by these oil companies. While oil pollution devastates the land and water spaces, gas flaring emits noxious flames of inferno that brings toxins in the air. These gory ecocidal acts connect to the horrific environmental experiences that the Umuibe know, and the way Eluala Company, the foremost and largest multinational oil company in Nigeria, lives up to its expectation: raining shellfire and flames of hell that shock the Umuibe land and reduce their lives to mere mimicry. The point here is that Umuibe community is no longer habitable. It is hellish, and this hell is perpetrated by injustice fanned by the embers of greed and avarice of government and the multinational oil companies. The attending consequences are:

The rainwater was no longer drinkable. It was mixed with heavy carbon deposits. There were traces of carbon monoxide in the atmosphere ...the gas will produce 'acid rain' ... the health implications will be: series of respiratory disease, and miscarriage among their women folk! The men will get impotent! Terrible consequences really. (84 – 85)

In another submission, the educated people of Rumuma become angry with the Eluala oil company over gas flaring. They thought they could convert the gas into cooking gas or re-inject it into the soil for future use (123). Also the Oduala community felt displaced on both land and sea. Compensation was not paid on their land, the oil companies are flaring gas in their villages polluting their creeks (157).

There is no provision of electricity and pipe-borne water as well as educational infrastructure that are neglected and dilapidated. Instead of the petroleum sectary to respond positively to these areas, he concludes that security apparatus be in the affected areas to safeguard their staff and equipment, "I will arrange for the government to build a military barrack for the soldiers to be stationed there" (129). If a barrack can be arranged for the community host, why not a general hospital or electricity project as well? Of course the community would be more peaceful with basic amenities than with the law enforcement agencies that will be harassing them from time to time. It is interesting to note that a gas explosion in the drilling area left the Rumuma community in a great turmoil. There was a huge fire covering a wide area. Many lives were lost. There was hardly any family that did not sustain a loss and what they thought was a blessing had turned out to be a curse. Thus, the death toll rose to twenty-two, with about thirty people seriously wounded. There were no hospitals around. The medical facility at Eluala Oil Company premises was grossly inadequate ... The nearest health care centre was at the local government headquarters ... There were no doctors on duty when the first batch of the victims were brought in. (125-6)

The issue of oil pipeline vandalism coupled with the government insurmountable neglect and deprivation of necessary amenities to the oil producing communities give rise to unemployment of the youths.

Ejike portrays the communities that are sensitized who are already imbued by forebodings from the experiences of other oil producing communities clamouring for resource control. They point out that if the oil at their backyard should be the source for their grief and anguish, they should be allowed to control the resources given to them by God (204).

Similarly, Helon Habila in his *Oil on Water* explicitly exposes the inherent social vices accompanying the exploited environment as it impacts the human society. While the writer uses two of his major characters who are reporters-Zaq and Rufus to search for the kidnapped white woman, Mrs. Floode, he tries to bring into limelight how the terrain looked like as the two ventured into this journey:

It was early morning, but already we had been in the boat for over two hours, leaving the sea and heading a tributary, going west. Irikefe Island, also known as Half-moon Island...had long since disappeared, swallowed by the distance and the darkness cast by the mist that rose like smoke from the riverbanks. Midriver the water was clear and mobile, but toward the banks it turned brackish and still, trapped by mangroves... Ahead of us the mist arched clear over the water like a bridge. Sometimes, entering an especially narrow channel in the river, our light wooden canoe would be so enveloped in the dense gray stuff...as we glided silently over the water. (3)

The writer practically depicts an environment whose people suffer from hunger, disease and poverty. A society that is characterized by weeping and shedding of tears to express sadness, a sense of loss, rape and ravaging, loss of innocence, dashing of hopes, and unrealized potentials. These are parts of the conditions of life of people whose lands are exploited and degraded. Habila uses Tamuno (The old man) as a character in his work to showcase a hopeless situation in finding future for his son-Michael in the interior riverine area of Irikefe. He pleads to the two reporters to take his son when they want to go back to Port Harcourt. In a pidgin language of the old man, the writer puts it this way:

He no get good future here. Na good boy, very sharp. He go help you and your wife with any work, any work at all, and you too you go send am go school. But see, wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon he go join the militants, and I no wan that. Na good boy. I swear, you go like am... Im fit learn trade, or driver. ...im fit read and write already even though him school don close down, but im still remember how to read and write. (36)

The coming of militants in Niger Delta added a new dimension of kidnappings to the struggle against the exploiters of their lands. It started with expatriate oil workers to their chief executives and a huge ransom had to be paid by the concerned people to release their loved ones. This is a situation that Mr. Floode (the Whiteman) sees himself when he calls the attention of the journalists to intervene in the kidnap case of his wife.

From the BBC channel report in the white man's office, the writer notes:

Isabel Floode, a British woman, had been kidnapped by rebels in the Niger Delta, an attempt to make contact was spoiled by an unplanned military intervention, and now it was doubtful if Isabel was still alive. Some oil companies had already stopped sending expatriate workers to the region, and were even thinking of shutting down their operations because the cost was becoming higher than they could bear, and this possibility was already causing a tension in the oil market, with prices expected to rise in response. (95)

The revolutionary strategy of kidnapping by the Niger Delta militants has attracted both global and national attention but this has not proffered solution to the crisis. As a social vice, kidnapping is a device for the militants to enrich themselves as Habila points that "it is like plucking money off a money tree..." and the money as Basse narrates in the text is from "our oil, and so we would be getting back what was ours in the first place" (210). Habila through the voice of his narrator Rufus did not fail to mention that the white man is in his country, polluting his environment and making millions in the process. Therefore, he can pick the two hundred thousand Mr. Floode offered in support of the search for his wife and not get back to him again (101).

The Niger Delta region from all indications faces many challenges like limited rural infrastructure especially water resources, poverty, illiteracy and inequitable distribution of wealth. The host communities need to make up for their upkeep and thus resort to oil pipeline vandalism. When Mr. Floode reported to Rufus on the issue that the host communities are doing themselves harm by vandalising their pipelines. Rufus declares that they – the community host are hungry and could not be blamed (97).

It is pertinent to note that exploitation in whichever form or shade it comes goes with intimidation. It is out of intimidation that people are being violated. Salomon, the Whiteman's driver notices that it is not only their land that is violated, polluted and stripped but that he has lost his wife Koko entirely to his master. Koko becomes pregnant for the Whiteman behind her husband (208). In his discussion with Rufus – the reporter, Salomon laments that Mr Floode insulted him badly, taking away his pride, his dignity, his manhood while serving him honestly and diligently all the time (210). This is synonymous with the degradation of the Niger Delta land by oil merchants since the host communities are deprived of their rights, pride, dignity and respect.

There was a total neglect to the well-being of the indigenous community whose blood samples have recorded toxins in them (145). It is important to note that part of the reason for the protracted Niger Delta crisis is recorded by Leburah Ganago: "It is universally acknowledged that the Niger Delta region accounts for over ninety – five percent of the Nigerian economy. It is equally an open secret that the Niger Delta region is the least developed area of Nigeria as the oil wealth from the area is carted away by the ruling cabal... to develop their own regions" (qtd in Senayon, 7(net). This however, has been the most potent propellant of the anger of the people of the Nigerian Niger Delta. Their issue as Ray Ekpu explains paradoxically is that Niger Delta is "grinding poverty in the midst of vulgar opulence. It is the case of a man who lives on the bank of a river and washed his hands with spittle. It is the case of people who live in the farm and die of hunger (10).

Conclusion

Environmental degradation is in no doubt a global phenomenon and opinions from various authorities in the fields of sciences, the Arts and Humanities have shown that it is one problem that cuts across intellectual and geographical boundaries. The paper as evidenced in the literary texts focuses on the explicit expressions that it is only through revolution and constant empowerment through education that sanity will be restored in the region. There is the need for the people in every sector of human endeavour to gather and fight a common enemy and redirect their thinking towards an understanding of the natural principles of cause and consequence as they relate to human exploitation of natural resources, including the environment in which we live. There is need for environmental clean-up exercise by the Federal Government and international oil companies to restore the land from total extinction. This with a concerted effort will go a long way to harness the natural resources of the Niger Delta land. It will be a step to salvage the people from the psychological trauma of losing their soil, water, air and constant fires from gas flares and oil blowouts that destroy their farmlands rendering them impoverished.

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