

The Impact of Environmental Degradation on Women of Niger Delta, Nigeria

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Abstract

This work examines females as victims in the degraded Niger Delta of Nigeria using select texts of Kaine Agary and Million John. The Niger Delta region has suffered great devastation as a result of humanity's recklessness and inordinate exploitation of natural resources. Oil spills, gas flares and cutting of pristine forests are some of the activities that foster environmental degradation in the area. The Problem of the study investigates the multiplicity of environmental issues in the Niger Delta, especially as it affects females in the region. The Purpose of the study interrogates the Niger Delta environment and how the various shades of degradation affect the females physically, psychologically, emotionally and economically. In the literary work as explored by the writers, this study finds women and young girls at the centre of the pillaged lot and the most exploited group. This study concludes that women, irrespective of their environmental and cultural challenges remain resilient as they strive as indispensable partners in the struggle to redeem their ailing environment.

Introduction

The natural environment is a place of innocence, where species thrive naturally and harmoniously in an atmosphere devoid of rancour or acrimony. The environment indeed plays a significant role in the lives of humans. The environment, which involves man, the air space, land and water, is seen as a world or system with unified elements that are interdependent.

A.C. Emeribe in his article "Environmental Management and Protection in Budgeting" asserts that, "the environment is that, which gives physical sustenance and affords man the opportunity for intellectual, spiritual and social growth...the natural and manmade are essential for his wellbeing and enjoyment of basic human rights" (208).

However, with the advent of technologies; the world is reduced to what is commonly called a global village, thereby rendering the natural innocence of most environments vulnerable to alien, often harmful cultural forces. Environmental problems result from natural changes and also human activities. Naturally occurring environmental problems are basically ecological changes, which may also be aggravated by human activities. Examples of these changes are earthquakes, erosions, flood, wind storm, stream siltation, etc. However anthropogenic environmental problems principally include pollution and other vices resulting from industrial, agricultural, commercial, domestic and socio-economic activities such as waste dumping, gas flaring, oil spillage, drilling, bush burning, deforestation, over population. The well-being or otherwise of every specie in the ecosystem depend largely on the level of tolerance and of willingness of all humans to stretch their natural desires and capacities only to the limits of acceptability by all; failure of which leads to dissensions.

One of the most pressing issues the world continues to contend with is the unimaginable disappearance of the non-human world. Mankind's sustenance and existence depends on the non-human world which places it more important than humans since it provides the material support base for the latter. Man's attention has been drawn to his inordinate exploitation of natural resources that continues to make his existence precarious. The twenty first century person according to Ogaga Okuyade in *Ecocritical Literature: Regreening the African Landscape* "negotiates existence under chaotic environmental conditions; a situation created by mankind's uncanny translation of the functions of the environment to meet his ever insatiate greed for satisfying his unquenching taste for resources" (xii). Capitalist acts of consumerism such as oil exploration, uncontrolled cutting down of trees, burning of forests e t c endanger mankind's existence because as the natural resources continues to be depleted without conscious effort of their replenishment, life expectancy of man is being reduced. These careless and rough handling of the environment amount to degradation.

The environment is indeed a common heritage of humanity and needs to be protected, but unfortunately, deterioration of the environment through human actions continues unabated. Mankind has continued to consistently reduce the environment to a mere object or item that can be exploited for his sustenance and greed. Raj Kumar Mishra in *Ecocritical Literature* laments that:

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

Environmental degradation therefore refers to the filth, ruin and dilapidation that arise from unwholesome environmental practices, a situation where human beings, plants or animals, are exposed to contaminants and hazards at such level that adverse effects occur. The contaminants of an environment may include industrial operations, activities of construction, mining companies, smokes or fumes resulting from combustion or burning, the release of gaseous chemicals in the air as well as the use of pesticides in mechanized agriculture.

Environmental degradation is one of the biggest problems of our world today. Mankind is in a perpetual state of crisis; a situation created by the destructive translation of the functions of environment to meet human's ever insatiable greed for satisfying his taste for resources. As human beings advance in intellectual knowledge and technological abilities, their desires expand and grow, far beyond the provisions of basic necessities of life, to that of construction of larger than life structures, far away from basic comforts but mostly for mere fantasy and aesthetic satisfaction. From one generation to the other, there exists in humans the urge to overthrow systems, destroy and waste existing structures in order to rebuild. The reckless need and bizarre satisfaction to deconstruct in order to reconstruct occupies an alarming space in the activities of humanity. The results of these activities and desires are dirt, pollution and degradation. Indeed, a denuding of the local environment through exploitation of earth and water resources becomes a constant reality that humans and non-human natural organism have to grapple with. The insensitive desire to conquer, subdue and subjugate inform much of the degradations in the ecosystem. The result of degradation amount to a denigration of the socio cultural, moral and economic structures of the physical environment.

Regrettably, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is an apt example of one of the most battered ecosystems of the world. The processes of exploration, drilling, production, marketing and distribution of crude oil, gas and their products are the prime sources of human induced degradation of the Delta environment. The activities of oil industries in the area have induced remarkable degrees of negative impact, which amounts to deterioration, degradation, rape and despoliation. The intensive exploitation of the area's rich oil resources brought with it severe environmental degradation. Ken Saro-Wiwa in *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* describes in a detailed manner, the despoliation that has beset his homeland thus:

Oil exploration has turned Ogoni into a waste land; lands, streams, creeks are totally and continually polluted, the atmosphere has been poisoned, charged as it is with hydrocarbon vapour, methane, carbon monoxide and soot emitted by gas which has been flared twenty- f o u r hours a day, for thirty- three years in very close proximity to human habitation. Acid rain, oil spillages and blow outs have devastated Ogoni territory. High pressure oil, pipelines crisscross the surface of Ogoni farmlands and villages dangerously. (96)

Niger Delta today, in the hands of oil explorers and exploiters is a wasteland. Iniodu Ukpung agrees with Ken Saro-Wiwa as he describes the region in his poem *Niger Delta Blues* as a chimney, where smoke of death oozes, a city of David, where terrorists conduct experiments. In despair, he describes the region as devastated, dejected, endangered, exploited, marginalized and militarized. G. G. Darah, in *Revolutionary Pressures* observes of the Niger Delta:

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)

Onyema Chris quoting J.Ushie bemoans the degradation in the Niger Delta environment and the mindless crude exploitation that goes on in the area, thus:

The Niger Delta is completely vandalized, its once fertile land soaked in and sterilized by crude oil, its people living in thatch and mud shacks, its rivers, streams and creeks poisoned, its fishes murdered, its people left uneducated, left without drinkable water, left without electricity supply, left without jobs, left without health facilities, and without food...live in the midst of oil spillages and round the clock gas flaring. (442)

The people of the area as a result of their degraded environment are unfortunately bedeviled by poverty. The loss of farmlands and aquatic life have left the inhabitants devastated and pauperized.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is traditionally defined as the area drained by the tributaries of the River Niger before it empties into the Atlantic Ocean. The Niger Delta can be referred to as the "oil zone" of Nigeria. According to Ken Saro-Wiwa Jnr:

The oil zone of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, comprises of about 37 million people, spread in about 1,600 communities that harbour the various tributaries through which the Niger -the largest river in West Africa and the longest in Africa – empties its waters into the Atlantic Ocean. It has been described as one of the most densely populated parts of the world and one of the world's greatest ecosystems; Africa's largest and the world's third largest mangrove forest, the most expansive fresh water swamp in Western and Central Africa and Nigeria's major forest concentration of high biodiversity and the centre for endemism. (45)

The area as Iniodu Ukpong argues, "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).

Ashton Jones points out that "the Niger Delta Region lies within the West African tropical rain forest biome and its natural ecosystems can be described by six distinct ecological zones namely, Fresh water swamp forest, Tropical Rain Forest, Derived Savannah, Mangrove Swamp forest, Sand Barrier Islands and Estuaries"(21)

Female Characters and Environmental Challenges

In the socio-economic and cultural structure of the Niger Delta communities, women are subordinate to men. Though traditionally, women of this region neither own nor inherit land, they bear the burden of raising and nurturing their families, thus, they provide the basic needs of their household; food, water and fuel through engaging mainly in fishing, farming and gathering of forest products. However, the poor management of oil and gas in this region coupled with pressures arising from natural environmental changes has undermined the livelihoods of women and the income they generate to sustain their families.

In the past fifty years, oil and gas exploration together with other related activities have undoubtedly unleashed unimaginable impacts on women inhabiting the Niger Delta states of Nigeria. Some of these impacts include ravaging of farmlands, destruction of aquatic life, loss of family houses through laying of oil pipelines and contamination of portable water. Other ramifying effects on women include increasing wave of prostitution, high incidence of teenage pregnancy, drug addiction and proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases. The women cook, drink and wash in polluted waters. If and when they are lucky enough to find fishes in their polluted waters, the fishes are contaminated, their farmlands are also destroyed.

A degraded environment is seen as a challenge to the resourcefulness of these women who depend totally on the viability of their environment.

Agary, in the first lines of *Yellow Yellow* subjectively captures the images of a despoiled environment as she brings the forlorn situations of the receptors of environmental harm to the fore:

“During my second to last year in secondary school, one of the crude oil pipes that ran through my village broke and spilled oil over several hectares of land, my mother's farm included ... what could have happened that left her void of words Oil, she said.... I ran to my mother's farm.... I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path. It just kept spreading and I wondered if it would stop.... Then, there was a smell... it was so strong – so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach”. (3- 4)

The narrator explains that "this incident left her mother void of words" (1). Her mother's inability to talk as a result of their mishap is strikingly projected as Zilayefa projects herself at the centre, directly expressing their travail in such manner that the reader imagines and experiences the pain. She exclaims in despair; "and so it was, that in a single day, my mother lost her main source of sustenance" (4). The protagonist's tone is lachrymal as it is encased in lament. Agary effectively deploys the emotion of tears to elicit sympathy and draw the attention of men and women of conscience to their plight of oppression and exploitation.

The destruction of Bibi's land is a symbol of the distraught situation of the people. It becomes for the woman a dislocation of hope, a killer of dreams, a dismembering of fantasies and a death of her family's future. Zilayefa explains: "The day my mother's farmland was overrun by crude oil was the day her dream for me started to wither.... the black oil that spilled that day swallowed my mother's crops and unraveled the thread that held together her fantasies for me. She was able to find a new farm land in another village but it was not the same" (10).

Women are directly affected by environmental activities. Cultivable land is the basic resource for meeting food needs and often for servicing livelihoods. Women are at the centre of subsistence food production. Made landless

or pushed into marginal environments as a result of land degradation, women have to feed families from smaller and more impoverished plots, the work burdens of women are exacerbated by the need for them to travel greater distance to collect food, water and wood owing to the degradation of their immediate environment. Zilayefa laments:

"Farming and fishing, the occupations that had sustained my mother, her mother and her mother's mother no longer provided again, had witnessed lands claimed by massive floods during the rainy season, the earth slowly melting into rivers. Women rowed their canoe farther and farther away to tend land for farming ... every year it was harder to catch fish, as though the water spirit had tied the fishes' womb" (*Yellow...* 39).

Such, as explained by Zilayefa is the adversity the females in the area grapple with. Life is virtually made unlivable for her and her mother, as their only source of livelihood is decimated before their very eyes. The despoliation of the place is portrayed as synonymous with ruination of dreams. The narrator explains further that "the day my mother's farm land was overrun by crude oil was the day her dream for me started to wither, but she carried on watering it with hope. The black oil that spilled that day swallowed my mother's crops and unraveled the thread that held together her fantasies for me" (10).

In the same manner, Nengi Ilagha expresses with dismay the predicaments of women in the face of environmental degradation, through one of her female characters in her novel, *Condolences*:

"The ground no longer yields her strength because it has become too weak from drinking plenty of poison ... I lost a grandchild to the evil oil about six years ago... I lost my mother's farmland to the ceaseless fire... The great heat has dried up everything on the land. The rain is poisonous because of the bad air. Rain water now gives disease. Our lands are cracked; our women are not fertile as they used to be. Our land is dying" (154).

The identification of a healthy environment, for Zilayefa and the entire town is portrayed as that which is remembered with nostalgia. The days in which she enjoyed a habitable environment came as faded memories. She refers to those days as:

The days when the Ijaw woman could ignore the nature of the Ijaw man because she had a means of earning a living and providing the needs of her children. Those were the days when Ijaw women cooked a fresh pot of soup every day because the rivers were teeming with fish. Their farms held more plantain trees so fertile that there was more plantain than anyone knew what to do with; roasted, boiled, mashed, green and yellow, the possibilities were endless. Those were the days. (*Yellow Yellow* 40)

John Million in *Amongst the Survivors*, through his omniscient narrator presents a graphic picture of the reality of the lives of most women in the Niger Delta. He presents images of hopelessness and pain. The consequences of environmental pollution are many and varied, seated destructively on the shoulders of women. Million demonstrates how deplorable the situation is, thus, Oruama, an old widow's harrowing experience is highlighted;

One day, Oruama an old widow, went into her farmland in the morning. Opposite an existing seismic line... there was a long plank constructed boat, with a yamaha twenty five horse power engine anchored at the water front of the farm ... ravaging the farm, they cut sugar canes, plantain trees, banana trees and other crops. (80)

Oruama, "cried, weeping, everything is gone.... They have ravaged my farm like invading locusts" (80). In like manner, Mosambika's great grandma whose skills and dexterity in the act of fishing is unrivaled "complained about the severe waves in the River Nun, when she was paddling back home from the fishing port, her canoe nearly capsized... she also complained about the fuels and diesel spills caused by the company tug boats and speed boats" (110). She cries out, "the Whiteman has inflicted a deep wound on us, it would take a long time to heal and the scars will be left for our children's children to witness. The fuel and diesel spills have driven the aquatic animals; fishes, crabs, prawns, lobsters and crayfish, all have disappeared into high seas, never to return" (110).

The activities of the oil explorers ceaselessly foist untold hardship on the lives of the poor women of Isonibri town. The drillers having caused a lot of damage, with consequent discharge of thick, turbid liquid into the surrounding swamp forest adversely affecting the life of their sea supplies. Orukoroere had returned from the bush from checking her traps. Unfortunately, all the fishes entrapped were found dead, due to the turbidity of the water.

Orukoroere forlornly peers into a bleak future as she laments: "Shell Company you have come and made the young boys and girls rich, they have money to spend anyhow, but what about the old men and women that feed on the forest, should we die in hunger because of your oil?" (93). Mosambaka's grandma also grieves as she:

Wonders what the future of the Niger Delta will look like...The heavy noise of their dynamites, their to and fro movement, the constant drilling of deep holes in the soil, including the oil spills resulting from their drilling machines have killed the Bush fishes, crabs and all other mollusks, constaceans and other micro-organisms are all dead. Our bush traps lie empty, alluvial deposits and filamentous algae settle down on them, soon they get spoilt and wasted, and the bush smells like dead body. (111)

Women are known as basal providers of family food, water and fuel. Unfortunately, however, John Million points out that the terrible situation of their waters and land have plunged their families into hunger, thus bringing back memories of the horrendous experiences of the Nigerian Civil War. Million John alludes to the suffering and pain of the war, in order to drive home the point that the Niger Delta people are oppressively subjected to a war situation. One of the women exclaims, "this is strange! It is strange indeed! Hunger had stricken the people of the Niger Delta, even during the war fought by the Igbos and Nigeria, salt, pepper and fish were extremely scarce, but not as scarce as what is happening in Isonibiri today" (112). Ogbolomie-ebi, wife of Chief Amaferi whose "entire farmland consisting of sugar canes had been devastated" (139) feels the pangs of violence meted all over her body as she is directed by the Assessment team of the seismographic party operations to wait in order that the level of devastation on her farm may be assessed. She sorrowfully asks, "How can a stranger know the number of sugar cane plants on my farm... are you a soothsayer?" (140).

One of the major obstacles to traditional fishing methods in the creeks and waterways is a result of the constant movement of the sea trucks travelling to and from the flow stations. Fishing lines, nets and traps are often torn, sea trucks continually destroy properties despite protests from communities. The operators of the sea trucks appear to have very little concern or compassion for the fishermen and women. Although, there are speed instructions, it appears they are often not enforced. The noise, waves and vibrations generated by the sea trucks is attributed by the local community as a prime reason for scaring away fishes which is evidenced by low fish yield.

Consequently, the women suffer even much more on account of migration of their men to urban areas. As a result of the futility of life in their degraded environment, migration becomes the sought after choice by many. The men often migrate to mainland towns in search of wage labour. These men complain that they can no longer rely solely on fishing as an economically viable occupation as they had done in the past. A greater burden therefore, is placed upon the women because of the massive outward migration of men. Each day, women spend hours in the mangrove swamps gathering shell fish such as periwinkles and mangrove oysters. Grandma expresses: "my life is my paddle; without my paddle, we do not eat" (*Amongst the...*114).

Women give in their all for the sake of love for their families and as such, they suffer even more in the face of their degraded environment. The discomfiting situations of their husbands and children are theirs to bear. Zilayefa and her friend Ebiere analyzes the situation of their mutual friend Priye who had been delivered of a baby; "Priye life sweet o, her mama throw party for her as she born". "Dat na life? She no get work, de pickin papa no get work. But her mama go help her with the pickin" (42). The arrival of a new baby presents more difficulties than joy in the life of Priye's poor mother.

Ebiere's case is no less different as she mourns a husband who was killed in a communal feud, saddled with pregnancy and an absentee father, with a toiling mother as her only hope. "Her mother had young children who she was bringing up single handedly. Her father earned money that he spent every which way except to take care of his family. Ebiere had no work. The father of her unborn child had worked odd jobs ... unfortunately he was with the wrong crowd when he was caught up in a feud that took his life" (42). The gloomy situation depicted above is such that Ebiere's life is held still with only her mother's toiling hands as sustenance. When asked how she would cope with life as a single mother, she dejectedly answers "I go care for de pickin now. How I go do again, dem dey troway pickin" (*Yellow ...*42).

Mothers are considered as hawks, guarding the lives of their family members with every breadth they can muster, despite the stagnation of their environment. Zilayefa in all her eagerness to leave the village for a better life in the city feared that she may not cope without her mother's protection. She wondered what would become of her when she eventually leaves the comfort of all that she had known for seventeen years, "to start life in a new place without my mother who had been my protector, my shield and who would have been, if she could breathe for me, my life support" (*Yellow...*17).

The volatile atmosphere in the Niger Delta is as a result of the long years of deprivation. It is characterized by

protest, agitation and communal conflict. The area has regrettably become a lawless zone where militant youths disrupt oil production activities at will, where also, communities frequently engaged, with little provocation, in destructive inter and intra community clashes. The boys reasoned: "If they had to suffer amidst such plenty, then, they would cause as much havoc as possible until someone took interest in their plight and until justice as they saw it prevailed ...Some of them joined the boys from other villagers to kidnap oil company executives or bar oil company workers from doing their work. Mostly, they were successful, but sometimes one or two of our boys failed to return from a mission. The word around the village was the police had caught and killed them" (*Yellow* ...9-10). The young men in these communities are seen at the centre of these conflicts. Their lives are on many occasions cut short in their prime and they leave behind mothers, wives and even children who are thrown into mourning.

Women more often than imagined spend their lives looking after others – their children and the men in their lives. A woman's work is not just limited to the home alone. She bolts off to the market, buys food stuffs, most times, ekes out the food, runs errands for her husband, attends to the children, washes and cleans up. She is subsumed in the family front that she sometimes forgets her own wellbeing. The consequences of her family actions and inactions are borne by her. This is depicted by Million John through one of his characters Orisa, who distorted the peace of his family through his expensive adventure. Orisa and his son had embarked on an unlawful and nefarious act of dynamite shooting in order that their fishing expedition would ruffle the creeks and earn them much more fishes. This expedition, unfortunately turned out badly as the dynamite exploded and left Orisa mutilated. "In less than seven weeks, Orisa was healed but one thing remained; he was permanently disfigured. His right eye was stone blind and his left leg amputated from the knee" (*Amongst* ...165). In the event of all these, Orisa takes to drinking as his source of escape while his wife, Ebiye becomes the main victim. Hence;

...the family burden is shifted and heaped upon her head... Her life eventually takes a nose dive on account of her husband's misfortune... She feeds and caters for the entire family. She cannot change her bush clothes, she wears them from dusk to dawn.... She daily shifts from one labour commitment to another, trying hard to meet the demands of her husband and children. In the morning, she would be in her farmland weeding and in the evening, she would be floating her net by the water front of the town to catch some fishes to make ends meet.... Ebiye cannot wait for the harvest season, her farms are harvested prematurely or else she and her children would die of starvation. (166)

Women's health, just like everyone in the area is endangered by environmental degradation resulting from scarcity of clean water, desertification exposable to toxic chemicals and hazardous waste. Females in the region stand a higher risk than their male counterparts due to their physiologies. Most women in the area are faced with the travail of deformity and death as a result of illnesses and diseases such as cancer of the lungs, skin, womb and various respiratory tract diseases. Cases of miscarriages, infertility and malformed babies are also rampant in the degraded region. The women in Ojaide's *The Activist* raise an alarm: "there is much more happening to us women in recent years. Our pregnant women are delivering so many malformed babies. What used to be a rarity is now common place... newly married young women complain openly about the weakness of their men" (219).

Conclusion

Unarguably, women and their children are worse hit by the tortured Niger Delta environment. The loss of farmland and aquatic life as a result of battered environment affects the women much more than anyone as they hold the responsibility of running the familial base.

The women are also affected psychologically. Their lives are benumbed with intense fear, deprivation and abuse which often manifests in disorganized and agitative behaviours. In recent times therefore, women have been involved in the struggle to rescue, preserve and conserve the environment from being destroyed completely. They (Women) strongly believe that in finding justice for the environment, they would have found justice for the womenfolk and by extension for humanity. Women have since begun to question the repressions that are rife in the society, rejecting all forms of social misrule and obnoxious practices that continue to put her down. Women have indeed arisen to demand for their rights and the need for society to understand their roles as indispensable partners.

They no longer sit to stare while the environment is abused and debased. Such women include Maathai Wangari of Kenya, whose initiative, the Green Belt Movement has become for many a symbol of Women's quest for environmental citizenship. The goals of the GBM are mainly to reclaim Land and replenish soil by planting trees to promote environmental conservation and rational Land use and to give employment opportunities to rural women of Africa.

Women's special connectedness to the earth have propelled them to demand for justice. Women infer that since humans are dependent upon the earth for survival, the earth and all life forms should be treated as sacred and must be preserved. Adichie, on this stand advocates for "a different world, a fairer world, a world of happier men and happier women who are truer to themselves".

Ecological justice therefore, serves as the only panacea to minimizing the excruciating pain women in the Niger Delta suffer, given that when justice is done to the environment, it invariably trickles down to women, the highest victims of environmental degradation. As such, Tanure Ojaide in *Ecocritical Literature*, agitates for an ecology of justice; human rights that will bring harmony to the relationship between humans and their environment for the respective wellbeing in the interconnected cycles of life" (66).

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