

**ENVIRONMENT IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE: ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF
NGOZI CHUMA-UDEH'S *FORLORN FATE***

Ijeoma L. Obiorah

Department of English Language & Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: il.obiorah@unizik.edu.ng

&

Augustina Oye Ndu

Department of Modern European Languages
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: ao.ndu@unizik.edu.ng

&

Dr. Buchi O. Chinedu

Department of English Language & Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: bo.chinedu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

The discovery of oil in Nigeria has paradoxically brought both fortune and destruction to its people. Several communities where oil has been discovered in the country have continued to suffer the negative impacts of oil exploration and exploitation in their areas. This study examined the relationship between literature and the environment and exposed the negative impacts of man on his environment. The data for this work was collected by critically analyzing Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Forlorn Fate* using the Niger Delta experience to reflect the tragedies equally experienced in most oil producing communities in Nigeria. The theoretical framework adopted for this study is eco-criticism, which is the study of the representation of nature in literary works and also of the relationship between literature and the environment. The findings exposed environmental degradation, oil spillage, deforestation, pollution, exploitation and unemployment as some of the direct consequences of abusing nature. Finally, it was recommended that Nigeria as a country should review and reconsider how its Government has steadily and painfully devalued and devastated its oil producing communities through the activities of not only the expatriate oil companies and their Nigerian connivers but equally by the Government itself in their failure to adequately compensate the host communities.

Keywords: Degradation, Oil, Eco-criticism, Environment, Pollution

Introduction

Recently in the news, only three percent out of the ten percent profit share demanded by host communities in the petroleum industry bill was approved by the Federal Government. Needless to say, Nigerians reacted with outrage. According to the Vanguard Newspaper of July 7th, 2021, Delta based social commentator and community development crusader, Prince David Odeli openly expressed anger over this meager allocation to the host communities. The Newspaper quoted him to have stated that;

... If the Federal Government as well as the International Oil and Gas Companies genuinely desired the development of communities producing crude oil in this country, the ten percent demanded by these people should have been approved. Also, the petroleum industry bill should have been fine-tuned in such a way that the host communities' trust fund should be efficiently managed in order to engage reputable construction companies to execute

critical infrastructural projects in swampy oil and gas bearing communities.
(11)

Our world as nature made it is a beautiful and perfect place. However, destructive factor(s) rise against the beauty and harmony existing in the environment and this tends to discomfit the activities of man and other living things in that environment. According to Gikandi,

...the writers of the Romantic period were known for adoring, worshipping, respecting and acknowledging nature and landscapes such as mountains, lakes, valleys, rivers, oceans, forests, trees and other living creatures. They believed that nature must not be tampered with and that anyone who does so must be punished severely. (44)

The generations preceding ours understood and appreciated nature more than ours which mainly disrupt and abuse it. These abuses or neglect of the environment come in different forms which include in this contest; gas flaring from oil companies, oil spillage and the destruction of aquatic lives, bush burning, soil excavation, dumping of refuse into drainages and deforestation through cutting down of trees among others. With the rising needs of growing economies, industrialization in Nigeria and discovery of more crude deposits across the country, there has been increased need to reduce gas emissions and pollutions. Byron captured this aptly:

Oil exploration contributes directly or indirectly to climate change in various ways. Firstly, one of the products of oil exploration activities is gas, some escape into the atmosphere, thus changing the composition of the natural gasses of the atmosphere. Secondly, other end products of these activities such as petroleum and kerosene used to power vehicles, electricity, generating sets and heating devices such as stoves used in cooking, contribute to environmental degradation. This is done through releasing of gas into the atmosphere. (64)

Biography of the Author

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh is a prolific Nigerian writer who has published many works. As a literary artist and social critic, she dreams of pursuing a distinguished and remarkable career in the study and teaching of world literature. Author of over fifteen literary works, she is also a keen literary editor with interests in publishing and the empowerment of minds through books. Ngozi holds a PhD in both English and Education Administration. She is currently a professor in the Department of English, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Anambra State Nigeria. A member of Modern Language Association, African Literature Association and the Association of Nigerian Authors, some of her books include *Teachers on Strike*, *Echoes of a New Dawn* and *Chants of Despair*.

Synopsis of *Forlorn Fate*

The Whiteman arrive Odua kingdom and makes frantic efforts to covet their crude oil yielding lands but meet with stiff resistance. They however succeed by going through some corrupt members of the Amanyanabo's Cabinet. They unleash massive destructions on the land and its people in their bid to mount their oil drilling equipments. Mr. McMurray the face of the oil company in Nigeria later masterminded the kidnap of his supervisor detailed to visit him from overseas using Odua youths, sets the youths up and gets them into police net. Meanwhile, Nina a Colonel in the USA Army was commissioned to come to Nigeria to look for the kidnapped oil mogul. She arrives Nigeria and discovers to her amazement that her African roots she and her whole family have been searching for in so long was actually in

Niger Delta. Mysteries were unraveled and battles fought till Mr. McMurray was finally exposed and arrested and Sir Bois Senior was released. In the end, Nina identified with her Niger Delta root, got the whole family together and married Sir Bois Junior.

Review of Related Literature

Since environment is said to be everything that is around us, they can be living or nonliving things. It includes physical, chemical and other natural forces. Living things live in their environment; they constantly interact with it and adapt to conditions in their environment. This suggests that environment also comes under the ambit of our society since it encompasses and inhabits man and other living and nonliving things.

The study of literature and environment raises significant questions about how eco-critics will continue to define eco-critical theories and practices. 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 fully be expressed in literature through human representations of the non-human through creative imaginations. In order to conceptualize a voice of nature, some eco-critics, such as Michael Lundbad and Cohen maintain that we can identify environment or nature as the reality behind or before any social construction. Thus environment is "whatever surrounds us and influences our lives, be it forest or suburbs or skyscrapers" (11).

Nigeria's Niger-Delta region is one of the most sensitive regions in the country, with the largest land in Africa consisting of creeks, mangroves and forests. Uncontrolled human activities such as logging, oil exploration and exploitation, oil spillage, urbanization and mining activities have continued to jeopardize the delicate ecological balance of this region. Nigerian government rarely enforces petroleum exploring regulations and this has allowed multi-national oil companies to self-regulate and neglect environmental safety measures and standards. These neglects have translated into degradation of the environment and harsher conditions of living for the people. Despite the laws made by the Federal Government against gas flaring, these oil companies continue to flare gasses with reckless abandon. This degradation of the Nigerian environment and its consequences are exactly what Ngozi Chuma-Udeh devoted her creative efforts to highlight in the novel *Forlorn fate*. Braide Victor in his write up *Civil Society and the Environment* opines that;

Environment can be said to be everything that is around us. It can be living or nonliving things. It includes physical, chemical and other natural forces. Living things live in their environment; they constantly interact with it and adapt to conditions in their environment. (4)

Research has revealed that among other things which bring about the Niger Delta upheaval, poverty, exploitation, unfulfilled promises, depreciation are among the chief factors behind the agitation of the Niger Deltans. As Oviasuyi and Uwadea observed, "prior to the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta area, agriculture was the mainstay of the people and the major source of revenue for both State and Federal government" (115). The case of the Southern region however, is understandable, poles apart from other regions of the country, as is seen in that of the Western Region where the Government used the revenue from cocoa to develop the region, providing the people with basic social amenities from cocoa house in Ibadan. The government constructed good road networks, schools for providing free education at all levels. The Northern region as well is not left out, as they have a good road network and infrastructural facilities in places like Kano, Abuja, Kaduna and Sokoto. This evidently, is the reason the government is flawed at their inability to, or rather, failure to re-invent the huge

proceeds accrued to accrue to the petroleum and other mineral resources tapped out of the Niger Delta region, which oil the wheels of the country-the Niger Delta.

Quite a good number of Nigerians have continuously decried the frightening rate at which the Niger Delta region is being degraded. There have been public calls to compensate the people of the Niger Delta for the negative impacts of oil production on the environment which include oil spillages, reduction and destruction of wild life and fish reserves. Instead of the government to put in concerted efforts to see that the situation of the Niger Delta region is ameliorated, it has continued to make series of unfulfilled promises to the people of the region, deceiving them into believing in sugar-coated lies of the government. Ken Saro Wiwa asserts that:

Oil exploration has turned Ogoni into waste land: lands, stream and creeks are totally and continually polluted; the atmosphere has been poisoned, charged as it is with hydrocarbon vapour, methane, carbon monoxide, Carbon dioxide and soot emitted by gas which has been flared twenty four hours a day for thirty-three Years in very close proximity to oil blowouts have devastated Ogoni territory. High pressure pipelines crisscross the surface of Ogoni farmlands and villages dangerously. (96)

From the above excerpt, one could understand that these environmentalists are all saying the same thing and that is: Gas Flaring and oil spillages have devastated the Niger Delta region. He also considered the health implications of these activities owing to the fact that these oil companies flare is injurious to human health. Unfortunately, these oil companies are foreigners who will not do the same thing in their home country.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher adopted the theoretical approach of eco-criticism. Eco-criticism is the study of representation of nature in literary works and of the relation between literature and the environment. As a separate movement or school of literary criticism, eco-criticism started developing in the 1990s. There is a close relation between eco-criticism and literature. It is an interdisciplinary study of Ecology and Literary Criticism which is unusual because it is a combination of natural sciences and humanities. By analogy, eco-criticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationship with his physical environment is reflected in literature. According to Uha Christopher in his work, *Developing Ecological Consciousness*,

The word eco-criticism is a semi neologism and eco is the short form of ecology, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment." The term Eco-criticism has a broad domain and has been expressed through many literary genres. Eco-criticism is not only the application of ecology and ecological principles but also the study of literature and theoretical approach to the interrelations of nature, culture and sometimes even supernatural elements in nature. It attempts to explore the expressions of environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse. (32)

In many literary works in English, nature has been a prime issue. The transformation in the social and cultural environments of the world has completely changed the representations of man's attitude towards nature in literary expressions. Trees have been cut down to make ways in the forest: bushes have been burnt to create wider roads for explorations of several mineral resources and animals have been slaughtered in thousands to meet the increased

demand for meat and skin hide markets. The ozone layer is under continual threat and will face greater threats as the world continue to pillage nature for her monumental growth and industrialization.

From another angle, Asika views eco-criticism as a literary theory that strives to preserve and protect nature for the sole benefit of man. He however stressed that nature should be treated with care and respect, because any act of negligence towards nature will spell doom for man and other natural elements. In line with the above view, Asika Ikechukwu in an article “That We May Be Saved” stated that:

Eco-criticism takes its concern in the fact that man is part of the natural existence and those actions against nature invariably are actions against humanity and well-being of man. It tends to mediate between man and nature as means of providing more conducive, comfortable and habitable environment for man in his world. Nature plays an integral role in the lives of human beings and negligence to this fact calls for a serious concern. (18)

Eco-criticism as a rapidly expanding area of research covers a wide range of texts and theories which study the relationship between man and nature. This study could not have been carried out without a keen understanding of the environmental crises of modern times, so using eco-critical approach. The study investigated the Nigerian natural environment with close textual attention to Ngozi-Chuma-Udeh’s *Forlorn Fate*.

Environmental Issues in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh’s *Forlorn Fate*

The environmental crisis of recent decades in Niger Delta has put the science of ecology at the centre of popular culture and has given rise to a new philosophical paradigm. Despite being endowed with rich mineral deposits, the region cannot boast of any government presence and developmental strategy to help improve it. Instead of being taken good care of as the nation’s source of livelihood, it is left by negligent successive Nigerian government to be ravaged by hazards such as gas flaring, oil spillage and massive extinction of sea life.

It is common knowledge that a writer’s concern for his contemporary society is a great source of inspiration for his arts. The two novelists in this study both portrayed the dangers inherent in the gross abuse of our natural environment through their works. In Chuma-Udeh’s *Forlorn Fate*, the reader begins to feel the horrors and realities of the seismic explosions that characterized oil explorations right from the first pages. Man, nature and indeed all animals were drastically affected by the dreadful event.

Chuma-Udeh painstakingly captured the horrible effects; from the animal kingdom, to the Odua riverside, to the *Amanyabo*’s palace and to the individual homes of the very first casualties of this cruel nightmare in Odua kingdom. None was spared, as the kingdom was thrown into confusion and a mad rat race for survival.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh’s *Forlorn Fate* is reflective of the consequences of the pervasive environmental challenges in the Niger-Delta and the hopelessness the indigenes felt at the inability of the Government to proffer a lasting solution to the mayhem. Indeed, the future of the Niger Deltans appears to have been killed as the oil boom of the 1970s turned out to be a stark prognostication of doom and canker in which the future has been methodically gnawed and swallowed. Dickson Sotonye (Cobra) while being interrogated by Nina, the Colonel sent by the US Army to Africa for the rescue mission of Bois Senior, captured this hopelessness in the following rhetorics thrown at her;

...What do you know about the Niger- Delta? What do you know about my people? You say I have my whole life before me. It sounds quite sweet in your mouth... such great words! However, I ask of you Madam, what type of life do I have before me? A despondent life riddled with forlorn fate? There is no life in the Niger Delta. I have no life... we have no lives to live... (80-81)

The above speech Nina noted was delivered with perfect English and in a refined manner. With shock, she realized she was dealing with a “graduate militant” and by the end of their encounter in the interrogation room, Cobra succeeded in getting Nina on his side to the chagrin and anger of the other members of her rescue team.

It is rather unfortunate that the closest form of government’s intervention policy to address the ugly situation the Niger-Deltans suddenly found themselves in as a result of the discovery of oil on their land was the Decree 99 promulgated in 1979 aimed at barring oil companies from flaring gas. This decree was to have the full effects of the law in the year 1984 but unfortunately, an exemption clause or a Proviso added that gas flaring may be allowed in certain oil fields for which a ministerial verification must be issued. Some of such clauses are what Geologist Murray found and exploited while dealing with the indigenes of Odua Kingdom in Chuma-Udeh’s *Forlorn Fate*.

...He cashed in on the lame land use decree promulgated by the Federal Government and saw through the absurd law which afforded the Federal Government full ownership and rights to all Nigerian territorial land mass as well as the laughable one that all compensation for land would be based on the value of the crops on the land at the time of its acquisition, not on the value of the land itself...(285)

Such loopholes like the one above afforded oil companies the effrontery to seize and destroy vast areas of land from indigenes in order to mount their seismic equipments. All the Federal Government seemed concerned about was how to seize every life threatening opportunity as a means to generate more money for their selfish end, therefore growing fat at the expense of the host communities.

As a result of the government’s negligence and lack of commitment to the welfare of the occupants of the oil rich Niger-Delta region, gas flaring and oil spillage unfortunately have continued, thus rendering the farmlands of the Niger Delta infertile and unproductive. Not to mention the outbreak of diseases. These ravaging effects of oil company’s activities prompted Aluko to state that:

Since oil exploration started, there has been an increase in the incidence of certain disease like bronchial asthma, upper respiratory tract disease, gastroenteritis, cancer and children suffer from hearing problems because of the noise associated with gas flaring. Again, in human terms, much of the water in the Niger-Delta is so polluted that illness from water borne disease has become a part of daily living. (6)

It is in consonance with the above view point of health devastation in Niger-Delta that Akpofure also opined that:

When there is an oil spillage on water, spreading immediately takes place. The gaseous and liquid components evaporate. Some get dissolved in water and even oxidize, and yet some undergo bacteria changes and eventually sink to

the bottom by gravitational action. The soil is then contaminated with a gross effect upon the terrestrial life. With the resulting emulsified water affects aquatic life. (43)

The environmental hazard caused by these anti-environmental practices cannot be over emphasized. This is so because the effects of oil spills are extremely harmful to both animals and plants. Accumulation of oil on the surface of rivers, oceans, and streams threatens the very existence of organisms living there. The effects of oil spill are extremely harmful to the environment so much so that oil kills plants and animals in the estuarine zone. Oil settles on beaches and kills organisms that live there. Oil poisons algae, disrupts major food chains and decreases the yield of edible crustaceans. It also coats birds, impairing their flight or reducing the isolative property of their feathers, thus making the birds more vulnerable to cold. Oil endangers fish hatcheries in coastal waters as well contaminates the fresh commercially valuable fish. Nina observed as much in *Forlorn Fate*;

She feared that in no distant time if left unchecked, Odua kingdom would be subjected to severe and heavy contaminations of both land and underground water courses, which may lead to widespread greenhouse gasses effect. Gradually, the pollution was already decimating the livelihoods of the Odua community and she wondered how people in the affected areas have been living in this putrid situation for decades. (250)

Eventually, if the degradation of our environment continues, it means that most of the organisms in our environment will be forced into extinction. The outcome of such extinction is a disruption in the ecosystem's phenomenon of inter-dependency. As a result of all these environmental hazards, many of the occupants of the Niger-Delta region have been made jobless considering the fact that the fisher men and farmers woke up one morning to find that the water resources that used to sustain good farming and functional ministration have become polluted.

Chuma-udeh captured this common dilemma and hopelessness when the Amanyababo of the Odua kingdom, out of desperation took some elders to visit the State Administrator and report the harmful activities of the RUM petrochemical oil company. Instead of helping, the State Administrator calmly urged them to quietly go and settle with the oil company, pointing out that they were the ones that signed the papers authorizing their operations in the first place. Aghast, the Amanyababo in consternation replied thus:

My son, how do you talk to an unwanted visitor who wakes up in the morning to spray sooth on the owners of the house? We have helplessly watched these people forcefully take our land, plunder our kingdom and are now bent on rooting us out of existence. (294)

The degradation of the environment in *Forlorn Fate* appears not to be the only cause of persistent conflicts between the youths in Odua kingdom, the Federal Government and the foreign oil corporations. It seemed that beyond the turmoil of the oil spillage, the anger of the natives and the bewilderment of the federal government, there was also the sabotage on the side of some chiefs and elders of their land who partook in the nefarious activities against their own people just for personal gain. This despicable act equally pushed the youths of the kingdom into violence.

We witness this appalling sabotage in the actions of Chief Timipre, who teamed up with Mr. Murray to continuously deprive the people of their rights. He pocketed the meager

compensations meant for affected land owners and used it to erect a mansion for himself in the outskirts of Odua kingdom where he presumed he would be safe from the environmental pollutions.

Commenting further on the governmental negligence of the area, Mukagbo, a CNN reporter on Inside Africa states: “In Niger Delta, a scene of abject poverty pervades the area, which is very similar to what one is likely to find in a refugee camp notwithstanding the fact that the region fetches the government the money for running the affairs of the nation” (10).

Quite a good number of Nigerians have continuously decried the frightening rate at which the Niger Delta region is being degraded. There have been public calls to compensate the people of the Niger Delta for the negative impacts of oil production on their environment. Recourse can be taken to the struggles of late Ken Saro Wiwa and his efforts to make Ogoni land a better place and of course the Niger Delta in its entirety. It is for this same reason that, as oil exploration turned Ogoni land into a waste land, Ken Saro Wiwa did not fear the noose. He spoke out for his society with so much fervor that it cost him his life. Through his art, he fought for the life of his people by alerting the world to the horrors his people were subjected to. He asserted thus:

Oil exploration has turned Ogoni into waste land: lands, stream and creeks are totally and continually polluted; the atmosphere has been poisoned, charged as it is with hydrocarbon vapour, methane, carbon monoxide, Carbon dioxide and soot emitted by gas which has been flared twenty four hours a day for thirty-three Years in very close proximity to oil blowouts have devastated Ogoni territory. High pressure pipelines crisscross the surface of Ogoni farmlands and villages dangerously. (96)

In the end, this environment that man tends to degrade and abuse usually takes its revenge on man. This is aptly captured in the way Chief Timipre ends up in the cauldron of the oil spill his cohort Mr. Murray had planned to use for his operation flush the vermin meant to finally eradicate and annihilate the indigenes of Odua kingdom.

Conclusion

Indeed oil is being discovered in many regions of the earth and in the bid for the privileged and benefitting countries to build formidable economies and measure up on the international front, everything possible is made to ensure that it is harnessed to the height of economic boom. However, in all these visions and plans, it is recommended that nature should not in any way be made the sacrificial lamb to be slain on the altar of globalization and economic growth.

Works Cited

- Akpofure, Jacob. *Oil, Soil and Foil*. Blackwell Publishing. 2003.
- Aluko, Dayo. *Niger-Delta: When Will Peace Be?* *Sunday Vanguard*. 2 May, 2014.
- Asika, Emmanuel. *Literary Appreciation: A Practical Demonstration*. SCOA Heritage, 2015.
- Bagu, Lawrence. *The Environment and Formation*. Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Benson, Dayo. *Niger Delta, When Will There Be Peace?* *Sunday Vanguard*, 2 May, 2004.13.
- Braide, Victor. *Civil Society and the Environment*. Elcroft Publishing, 2007.
- Byron, Santangelo. *Different Shades of Green: Eco-criticism and African*. Quayson, 2011.
- Chuma-Udeh, Ngozi. *Forlorn Fate*. Paperworks, 2019.
- Cohen, Micheal. *Anthology of Criticism*. Princeton Press, 2003.

- Ekwere, John. *Reflections*. African University Press, 1999.
- Environmental Issues in Niger Delta.<http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>, edited 10 May, 2016.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Rereading the African Novel*. Currey Press, 1997.
- Lundbag, Micheal. *What Eco-criticism is Not*. Cheryll Publications, 2007.
- Ken, Saro- Wiwa. *Environmental Justice*. Black Renaissance, 1995.
- Mukagbo, Edet. CNN Report: 4 July, 2003.
- Onuekwusi, Jasper. *The Prose in Literature*. Alphabets Nigeria Publishers, 2013.
- Uha, Christopher. *Developing Ecological Consciousness*. Rowman Publishers, 2013.
- Vanguard Newspapers. "Odili demands enough equity for host communities." Vanguard Publishers 7 June 2021, www.vanguardnews.org/blog