

HAEMORRHAGES AND HEALINGS IN NNIMMO
BASSEY'S *WE THOUGHT IT WAS OIL BUT IT WAS
BLOOD* (2008) AND *I WILL NOT DANCE TO YOUR
BEAT* (2011)

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&

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Abstract

No doubt, the crisis of ecology has remained one of the topics that has received prominent attention in the evolution of modern poetry in Nigeria. The space of reference has always been the Niger Delta area whose serenity has been ruptured by multinationals in search of oil in that sub region. For stated reasons, poetry has become the most responsive to the issues. However, a clear line can be drawn between the traditional/ passive and radical/ militant poets who have involved in the engagement. This article is an ecocritical inquiry that engages with Nnimmo Bassey who exemplifies the second categorisation in the study of his *We thought it was oil but it was blood* (2008) and *I Will Not Dance To Your Beat* (2011). This article distills the peculiarities in Nnimmo Bassey's engagement which lie in his hybrid model that localises and universalises mans' infractions against nature on the one hand and his commitment to truce on the other hand. The conclusion of the article disagrees with the poet's conservationist proposal but aligns with his prescription of a meaningful and practicable dialogue that will assert the complementary roles in the interactions between man and nature.

Keywords: African ecology, Man, Nature, Oil Exploration, Climate Change, Intervention

Introduction

The reframing of the relationship between man and man on one hand and man and his environment on the other hand has always been very central to the art. With particular reference to poetry, a pacesetter, which turns out to be a globalised reference, is seen in the Romanticist movement where poets, such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron and others standardised the importance of nature by aligning its usefulness to man. However, in modern African poetry, as regards nature and man, the foundation laid by Negritude poets brings to mind the violations against humanity through colonialism and its consequent impacts on Africa's flora and fauna. This horns their aestheticisation of Africa's landscape in poems such as David Diop's "Africa" and Leopold Sedar Senghor's "Nuit de Sine" and "I Will Pronounce Your Name".

The ecological thrust in modern Nigerian poetry also connects with its inception as seen in the compositions of pioneers such as Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo and John Pepper Clark. With respective examples that can be drawn from coastal poems such as "One Night at Victoria Beach", "Watermaid" and "Olokun", it is safe to say that the lure for aesthetics and spirituality harness the ecological thrusts discernible in the pioneer interventions on the relationship between nature and man in modern Nigerian poetry. Even though we see a diversion from this trend in the next generation through the representations made by poets such as Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide, a linear distinction can be made. Whereas Niyi Osundare has graduated from his private concern about human infractions against nature and its impact on the food chain in *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) to a globalised traction of climate change and preservation of "green life" in *Green: Sighs of our Ailing Planet* (2021), the commitment of Ojaide in his works, such as *Children of Iroko* (1973), *The Endless Song* (1989) and *The Fate of the Vultures and Other Poems* (1990) as well as

Delta Blues and Homesongs (1998), are etched in his responses to the despoliation of the earth through activities of oil exploration in the Niger Delta area, the region which Tsaaior (2011, 19) described as a “reservoir of priceless mineral resources [with] rich, fertile and alluvial wealth with prodigious crude oil deposit”.

Unfortunately, it is the exploration of the natural treasures bequeathed to the environment that has precipitated crisis in manifolds that trigger the torrents of interventions dispensed predominantly through the genre of poetry. Isidore Diala (2022, 210- 211) endeavours to explain what gives poetry the edge above other genres within the context of topicality and expediency when he says:

Given the characteristic density of his/her art... the poet seems uniquely placed to respond to topical issues with a comparative promptness that normally eludes the novelist and the dramatist whose appropriations of the same experience are typically hindered by the labyrinth of greater details. [For instance] The enduring tradition of publishing poetry in the newspaper certainly sets in relief the art’s characteristic compactness and underscores the affinity it shares with the print media for a thirst for the topical.

To confirm this assertion, even though there are memoirs such as Ken Saro Wiwa’s *A Month and a Day: & Letters* (2005), dramatic engagements and narratives such as J.P Clark’s *All for Oil* (2000), Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* (2010) and Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2012), the intervention in poetry, mostly by indigenous poets, is quite overwhelming. Apart from Tanure Ojaide’s works already cited, we also have Ogaga Ofowodo’s *Oil Lamp* (2005) Ibiwari Ikiriko’s *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000) and Basse Nnimmo, whose texts are the subject of inquiry in this article. Sule Egya (2015, 1) attempts to mark the scope and content of the poetry from the Niger Delta when he says that:

What is increasingly known as Niger Deltan poetry is a poetry that distinctly identifies itself with the peoples and environment of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The poetry of Gabriel Okara, Christian Otobotekere, Tanure Ojaide, Ogaga Ifowodo, Nnimmo Bassey, Ebi Yeibo and others seeks to draw attention to the fate of both humans and non-humans in the face of oil exploration and its negative consequences in the region. The ecocritical imagination informing this poetry is two-pronged: a celebration of the flora and fauna of the region before the advent of exploration, and a combative engagement with institutional powers responsible for destroying the rich environment.

In a similar vein, Ohwawworhua and Orhero (2019, 302) draw the tension of engagement in the poetry of the Niger Delta thus:

Since this outrage of nature is as a result of man's own cruel exploitation and maltreatment, there is a need for restitutive intercourse between man and the innocent nature for the balance and safety of life. Correspondingly, this situation has given rise to varying degrees of human outrage and protests; an instance of which was the prevailing restiveness of youths in the Niger Delta region, who took up arms against oil multinationals and the government... Many Nigerian writers especially those from the Niger Delta region... Their advocacy for justice and their environment... adopted the burden of spearheading a change, especially in rage and resistance against spoilers of nature. With an advocate's and activist's voice, the poetry of Nnimmo Bassey, Albert Otto, Ibiwari Ikiroko, Odia Ofeimun, Ebi Yeibo, Ebinyo Ogbowei, Tanure Ojaide and a host of other poets.

But Situating the Niger Delta Poetry within the trajectory of resistance in the evolution of Nigeria modern poetry, Okunoye (2011, 79) submits that the Niger Delta Poetry affiliates with the

...third major trend in Nigerian poetry in the 1990s. Apart from being one of the most imaginatively recreated events in Nigerian poetry within the decade, it has inspired the flowering of a trans-ethnic tradition of resistance poetry in the Niger Delta region. The tradition [which] thrives on a shared sense of violation and marginal consciousness.

The justification for the isolation of Nnimmo Bassey stems from at least the two distinctions that can be made from the interventions on the ecology traumas in the Niger Delta. One, which takes a traditional or diplomatic approach seen mostly in plays and narratives cited, sensitises the audience or readers to the belligerence of oil exploration in the region. However, while the intervention through poetry retains this tempo, the combative or radical stride is predominant in the verses of poets, especially those, such as Bassey Nnimmo and Ibiwari Ikiriko, who came after Tanure Ojaide. However, Bassey Nnimmo stands out by adding to the combative ingredients in his poetry the candour that globalises ecological infractions and trepidations. Apart from his Nigeria's Niger Delta homeland therefore, Bassey's verses, in the studied texts, also spill into other nations within and outside Africa such as Benin Republic, South Africa, Australia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Colombia.

We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood highlights issues of space constantly in chaos as a result of destructive extractive activities of multinational oil corporations who have the tacit backing of the Nigerian government. According to Martinez in his foreword to one of the texts, Nnimmo Bassey creates "poetry from the pipelines that destroy the soul of the forest, the towers that bleed the earth and leave it without a future, and the fires that burn the past and the memory of

a people, until we are strangers in our own land". However, the past, the present and the future coalesce in the poetry of Nnimmo Bassey, revealing his insight, foresight and ability to forge a new humanity out of the prevailing dusts of crises, melancholy, distress, hopelessness and ruin.

From the perspective of Aghoghovwia (2014, 61) Bassey's lines strings "a narrative that ridicules the logic of pro-modernity by offering a long evaluation of modernity's promise to bring relief to life's toil which seems to describe humanity's existence"... however his "ecotopianism", in the words of Odia (2020, 178), demonstrates the love for the eco-world and expresses his intention to combat environmental destroyers".

We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood (henceforth, *WT*) presents a total 36 poems in six sections. There are eleven poems in the first untitled section which is followed by "Naija Project", "Tidbinbila Poems (or do greens grin)", "The Road to Sogosoma", "Ouidah Trails" and "Puff & Die... (Tobacco sticks of death)" which have five, eight, two, seven and three poems respectively. Whereas sectionalisation is not prioritised in *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* (henceforth, *IW*) which has thirty-three poems, the "dedications" in the two collections draw a similarity that sets the tempo of engagement. The dedication in *WT* reads "A salute to/ the Champions & Arrowheads/ of the Struggle.../ That our earth may not die" (5) while its parallel in *IW* is a declaration ... "to all who stand/ for/ climate justice/ ...for our collective future" (5). In these "dedications", the poet's recourse to the Judeo-Christian text, is not only visible but comparable. In *WT* we read the reference to Amos 8:4 which reads "Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to / make the poor of the land to fail" (p) to set the tone of the poet's engagement with oppressors but in *IW*, we have Isaiah 21: 11-12, which, in the NLT version, reads "This message came to me concerning Edom: Someone from Edom keeps calling to me, **Watchman, how much**

longer until morning? When will the night be over?" The Watchman replies, "**Morning is coming, but night will soon return.** If you wish to ask again, then come back and ask" (6). The reference to Edom coincides with the same character in the Judeo Christian bible, also called Esau, twin brother to Jacob, but here used by the poet's to show perplexity on account of theft of patrimony to underscore his sensitisation to injustice and justification for the call to reverse his mirrored dystopias. The poets' response to "the prodigality of today's man" which has been accentuated by what he calls [the] "profligate bent of man to [which] manifests in the drive for genetically modified crops, animals and maybe humans" (8) in *IW*, is complimented by the general vision that drives his poetry, especially in the "Forward" in *WT* where Esperanza Martinez noted that "the past the present and the future come together in the poetry of Nnimmo Bassey, revealing his ability to create humanity in the midst of pain, hope from death, and commitment in the ruin of defeat" (7). Relating to the paradox of oil exploration, Martinez also says:

Today in the midst of financial crisis, of governments blinded by globalization, of transnationals which grow everyday more powerful, of companies glutted with cases of corruption, of millions of migrants who look in the North for what is denied them in the South, of the most serious environmental crisis in history...the myth of the triumph of the free market remains, and which is the forgetting of the past and the future. (6)

But the poet, while giving adequate space to this global narrative inserts the peculiarities of his homeland as lens in order to attract global empathy and inspire action that would reverse the situation.

**Ecocriticism and the Scope of Engagement in Modern African/
Nigerian Poetry: An Overview**

This study naturally falls under the ecocritical framework. Ecocriticism, the term derived by William Rueckert in 1978 to ramify issues relating to ecology, ecosystem, social, political, cultural, and economic aspects of the society, is generally a critical inquiry that seeks for the reframing of the relationship between man and his environment. This broad perspective has been reiterated by other scholars such as Glotfelty (1996, xviii) and Abrams (2009, 87-88). However, Slaymaker (2001, 683-4), while trying to aggregate the African ecology with the Western, arrives at a necessary conclusion that sees a void in attention given to the environment by African writers. But Caminero-Santagelo (2014, 699) has countered this view asserting that the deep ecological concepts of environmental studies propagated by the Anglo-American ideologies, which advocate a 'hands off nature, to ensure a total conservation and preservation of the ecosystem is unfit in African reality. Vital Anthony (2008, 87), in his "interpretative approach", furthers this thought by noting that ecocriticism, in Africa, is "the ways modernity in African contexts transforms human relations with nature and, as a result, the impact of societies on natural environments... [to foster a] social world... to find more equitable, sustainable and healthy way of inhabiting their place- as well as strengthening historical self- understanding". Dasyuva's (2022, 425-6) refraction of this view is that "Eco- poetry and African ecocriticism... [expresses] resistance against environmental degradation, pollution and the agencies responsible for the ecological disequilibrium... [and describes] how writers respond to the issue of environmental degradation and the implications on people's lives, livelihood and psyche". An aggregate of these perspectives, no doubt, problematises the scope of ecocriticism in Africa since it links with diverse branches of knowledge such as postcoloniality, marxism, new historicism and other postmodernist theories.

Nature, Africinity and Global Interpretations in “*We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* and *I Will Not Dance To Your Beat*”

Largely, Nnimmo Bassey’s assessment of nature and the condition of man in the selected texts are predicated on the principles of valorisation and essence. But the connection here is that his valorisation of nature, in poems such as “Ukpono” (WT, 44) and “In the backyard (or # 57 park street)” (WT, 46) not only justifies the importance he places on the essences of life, being and existence but also serves as prelude to his harping of the values of nature to man. His commitment to nature, represented in his metaphor of the earth begins with his professed emotional attachment to the “earth”, especially in “Bounce back” (21) and “Winamorena” (29), in WT. Indeed, the epistolary style in the former ascertains the fact that the filial bond between the poet and the ‘earth’- nature- breeds fond reminiscences unbound by space or ephemeral limitations. This explains why the poet, in the midst of man’s ignorant “bent on murdering/The weather”, he issues this counsel in “Climatic climax”, one of the poems in WT

Do not depart the shores
Of this land *my friends*
With textiles, crafts and e-mails
Alone in your pouch
Take some sands along
Touch it to your head
Keep some in your chest
Connected we stand
For we are children of the earth. (19)

However, beyond what appears like his counsel to prospective travellers out of his homeland, the poets iterates the universal essence of nature to man. The intricate connection between man and nature is established in compositions such as “Without the sun...” (WT, 61). The Romanticist tenets on nature in relation to man come to mind as the

poet aligns with the capacity of nature to inspire, rejuvenate and reinvigorate famished minds in “Alone” (*WT*, 43) and “Banal crowns” (*IW*, 58). However, this identification is best exemplified in “Canberra”, one of the poems under the third section in *WT* titled “Tidbinbila Poems (Or Do Greens Grin?)”. The poet says, in his recall of an experience:

My face is
 Warmed by the risen sun
 My back cooled
 By gurgling fountains rushing
 Down manmade rocks as
 I sit sandwiched between the
 Unlikely twins one housing
 Legislature and other museum

Sprayed off my seat I
 Dive beneath a thousand nozzles
 Breath bated
 Face drenched in the sweetness
 Of noonday emotions
 I emerge grateful
 Alive
 Hopeful
 For humanity consumed
 Caught off guard
 By gross consumption (42)

The association with “Canberra” gets clearer in “Tidbinbila”, where, in the footnote to the poem, the poet reveals that “Tidbinbila” “is a nature reserve near Canberra, Australia. Famous for its koalas and kangaroos” (49). The poet, engrossed by the succour that nature provides him gives a revelation that says: “Lost in the beauty of Tidbinbila/ I caress an

assortment of ferns/And scrape my soles of paths/Beaten by folks in search of peace/ on this rocky trail” (WT, 49). While the resonance of “Lost in the beauty of Tidbinbilla” in the poem revalidates his claim that nature gives freedom, rejuvenates, inspires and consoles, among others, the poet’s recall of his visit to this recreational facility, which confers indiscrimination on nature, has a home based counterpart in *IW*. For instance, “In the wilderness”, where within his angst against deforestation, he reveals after his tryst into the groove that:

Reality we seek rises through
 Soles planted on mother earth
 Ears pressed to speaking drums
 Vibrations of ancient contemplations
 Honour regained
 Dignity reclaimed
 Life relived

Getting lost in the wilderness
 Is right thing to do (56- 7)

Unfortunately, the seemingly passive and indiscriminate credential of nature harms rather than heals in the poet’s homeland as nature characteristically does not absorb infringement but refers to men to bear its consequences. This assertion is in “Oceanic march”, one of the poems in *WT*:

This pile of dirt
 Heaps of death from
 The exhaust popes of death
 Can’t I refuse
 The poison
 And douse the flares from the nozzles of evil
 This cocktail of an air I’m forced to breathe
 Whose duty is it to mix

And to fix
 The death sentence
 In our homes? (20)

The same fact is reinforced in “Did you?” (WT, 18). While the poet recognises that nature is not the initiator of harm with his query of fuel construction pipes and consequent air pollution, nature by its passivity becomes an accomplice. The relevant lines read:

These waves...this breeze
 Sucked into your lungs
 From whence cometh they?
 Are you the breath of life?
 Or the wheeze of death
 From deadly oven
 Of Engen Petronas?

Submerged in the rising tide
 I break into a run
 On dreamland's shores
 Unhooked, freed from corporate quicksand
 In this no-logo-land
 Floating, rejecting the pipes of death
 And we show teeth without smiles. (18)

But one also finds intriguing other positive angles to the relationship between nature and man with particular reference to Africa in “Ouidah Trails” one of the sections in *WT* where we have “Zoungbodji” whose title is derived from “a community in Ouidah, Benin Republic. [that was] a very important community close to major slave port” (59). The reminiscence of the poet shifts from recalling nature as an accomplice to a witness of crime. The background is in “Tree of forgetfulness”

where the tree, as an agent of nature is captured as present in the contract of slave trade atrocities:

How can I forget that you must one day pay
 And this tree I call
 To witness against you
 This tree of forgetfulness (63)

The reopening of the scars of slave trade consequently leads to the call for restitution in “Memorial portals” in *WT* which reads:

Today I must claim
 With interest
 This centuries of debt
 Owed you
 Owed us
 Owed your land
 Owed our land (58- 9)

This experience of slavery continues in “Garden of silence” (*WT*) but linked with the sordid experience of oil exploration. The poet’s use of “garden of silence” in this poem contextualises and harmonises generational affinities and initiates a call for resistance:

Beyond the garden of silence
 Your children see your shadow
 Beyond the garden of silence
 We see taskmasters
 Beyond the garden of silence
 Your children shout
 No never again! (62)

The aggregate, from the cited verses, affirm the fact that in Nnimmo Bassey’s poems, the ecological thrust assumes a hybridised status which converses with universal familiar traditions and thoughts on the relationship between man and nature but garnished with Africanised

perception in a way that memorialises infractions and inspires resistance in justified circumstances mirrored by the poet.

Earth, Desecration and Dilemmas of living and survival in Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* and *I Will Not Dance To Your Beat*

Bassey Nnimmo's conversations about the interaction between man and nature juxtapose the past against the present to amplify some notable infractions against nature and comeuppances. In *WT*, everything appears well in the contact experience with the West especially through proselytisation in "Remember Wesley" (38) but the poet records that his homeland has since fallen into "awkward moments" that deny laugh" [ter] (38). With respect to the desecration of the environment. However, he sets the historical background to a past time that was ecologically crises free by saying in *IW*, with reference to "Bottled tears":

Our fathers and forefathers and mothers and
grandmothers say waters from Streams and rivers, creeks
and lagoons In their days

Were clear, odourless, tasteless, healthy In their days (53)

This excerpt, refrains the negative impact of oil exploration and gas flaring which have caused unquantifiable damage to man and the environment in the Niger Delta region. The second section in *WT*, "Naija Project", is devoted to this. For instance in "Glass blocks and bricks" (32) where the green environment becomes victim of desertification. The sad narrative continues in "Gas flares", where human beings, habitats and the green environment become dislocated as a result of gas flares:

The earth gassed
Dynamites rocked the storehouse
Of life

The earth gassed
 A fart delayed
 Belching dragons attack
 Leaping tongues lick
 Roofs, farms

~

Popping
 A million of explosions
 A shower of soot
 On open raw nerves
 Oil's not well
 That starts well

Now the earth is ablaze
 Where will the people go? (48)

The pun in “Oil’s not well/That starts well” regrets the business of oil on account of malignant emissions into the atmosphere which has contaminated the earth, the land and the seas. But more vividly, the poet presents in “What more can you sink?” (WT) the impact of oil exploration which has caused carbon pollution to saturate “city” and “village”, and vegetation, especially “Trees die and rot” (16):

Turrets hammer the skies in industrial layabouts
 Automobiles, a thousand other polluters
 Load the skies with choking gas
 Some smart guys dream of do nothing solutions
 Reap billions and con a captured world
 While skies get burnt (16)

However, in the context of air pollution, the poet moralises on its impact on health through his metaphor of Tobacco and the youths in “Puff & Die... (Tobacco sticks of death)” the last section in WT which has three poems: “Puff” (68), “A dream of Tycoon” (69) and “Hot Air”

(71). By alternating the symbolism of fumes and smoke into the atmosphere with its lethal effect on the health of inhalers, the poet provides a parallel which affirms that no survival consideration is given to that region as lives that “deserve a future” (*WT*, 71) are being wasted. This insensitivity comes into full reckoning in *WT*'s “Oil is thicker?” where the poet wonders:

Blood is thicker
Than water

To you who sucks my hopes
Tell me,

Is oil thicker
Than blood...? (47)

The poet in *IW* does not stop at calling the oil companies “pirates” who “[have] come... to Grab... at our stomachs.../ steal our seeds, our culture, our dreams (35), he profiles those companies in “The united niger delta oil co.” This poem, written “After Pablo Neruda’s *The United Fruit Co*”, lists the offending oil companies in the Niger Delta as “Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Texaco, NNPC, Elf, Chevron, Agip, Statoil and similar entities” (22) In the verse chorused at the beginning and end of poem, the implications of their actions are laid bare:

When the flares had come
And dis-united the day from the night
The surface of the earth was disunited in a dance
As Jehovah set the boundaries of the nations
And snakes bedeviled the apples
And Eve, poor Eve was told ... if
If you take and if you eat of these fruits
You will see the day and no nights!
And true to their lies there has been no day since ... (24)

The allusion to the creation story in the Judeo Christian faith here re-enacts the primal contact between man and serpent, the deception of man by serpent and the consequences of man's fall to serpent's deceitfulness. "The Road to Sogosoma" one of the sections in *WT*, where we have "Facial marks" (post-petrol era) (54) illuminates on the relevance of the biblical parable by associating perpetual agony, toil and pain with the acquiescence to oil exploration in the Niger Delta area. The poet hints at the universality of the sad experience of oil exploration by dedicating "Facial marks" (post-petrol era) "To the people of Mindo, Ecuador" (54) but the symbolism of "facial marks", which in primordial Africa marks permanence of identity and ownership, spotlights the "Environmental scars" inflicted on the environment "By seismic lines and illegal loggers/ Transnational eco-devourers" (54). The comparison made by the poet is captured in these lines that separate beauty, life and hell from unattractiveness, death and hell, respectively:

Facial marks beautify our folks
 They help us attract and scare and show our strength
 Environmental scars are death masks
 Forced, alien, wicked, hateful
 Slave masks, hellish scars...
 Alienate us from our land
 Now we are strangers to our own soil (54)

The cry against "alienation", in this excerpt, foregrounds the antidote that the poet will later amplify as an imminent call for a universal movement in his charge that says:

Come together valiant souls
 Drive off evil serpents from our land
 Sacred that is our earth
 Link those hands across the seas
 Let's block these ducts with our

Collective fists

These pipes of dreams
 Of dollars and sorrows and tears
 These ducts burrow into our hearts
 These pipes dry our lands
 These pipes drain our souls
 These pipes steal our dreams (54- 55)

Apart from the dangers of oil exploration, the poet is also interested in climate change which has become one of the ugly consequences of man's poor management of nature. The poet alerts to a changing world in *IW* where we have "Shivering in the sun" (41). However, in the same collection, with specific reference to "Mountains of food...oceans of hunger", there is a universal siege on the food chain expressed through a paradox of lack in excess. The poet bolds the refrain in this poem to emphasise the dire situation: "**We sing the same song/ And dance to the same beat**" (27). But the paradox reads:

Mountains of food
 Oceans of hunger
 Proud people from fertile soils
 We stamped the earth with bouncing steps
 Once the rulers of the world
 Today we are the wretched of the earth
 Hands stretched out with empty bowls (27)

The reference to Frantz Fanon's popularized phrase associated with his *Wretched of the Earth* (1996) relates to polarities in conflict. Fanon had prescribed that "for the native... [the people oppressed] violence represents the absolute line of action" (67). However, the complication here is that the conflict between man and nature smacks of a friction between man and himself. The poet identifies the hypocrisy and complacency of the global community on the issue of climate

change in “if climate change were little change” (*IW*, 61), and in “Sequestered carbon” (*IW*, 21) with a reprimand that reads “Without foresight perfected by hindsight/ Who can see beyond the nose?” (21). These lines justify his expressions of despondency and warning in *WT*, in “Shuffle” where his allusion to Noah’s ark predicts the end of the world in the face of imminent carelessness and neglect.

In the domestication of response to infractions against nature and climate change, the situation is worse in the poet’s homeland. For instance, in *IW*, where we have “They charged through the mounted troops” (12), the poet exposes greed and exploitation in the conspiracy between expatriate oil riggers and the political class and by mentioning other nations in similar predicament in Africa such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. In relation to Nigeria, the poet blames the political class in “Excuse me” (*WT*, 37) for the infrastructural deficits orchestrated by leadership failure in “That is why we are so poor” where he laments that his nation is “very rich” but “so poor” because “those who occupy/ The stately houses of power”/ (*WT*, 64), have failed. In other words, custodians of political power have become serially associated with failure especially in “New moments” (*IW*, 49) where the euphoria of change in government fizzles out because profanity, ineptitude and irresponsibility personify the reins of government. For the poet, the situation is unacceptable and the “reasonable thing [to do] is demand the unreasonable/ Recover our memory of proud fighters... /victors /... living and fallen” (*WT*, 12)

Bandaging the Wounds, Survival and Preservation in *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* and *I Will Not Dance To Your Beat*

Many verses in the studied texts, such as “Lion- hearted” (*WT*, 34) and “Justice now” (*WT*, 33), reveal that Nnimmo Bassey’s mediation on the crisis between man and nature is predicated on justice. In “Justice now”, after noting that there can be “No

reconciliation ... without justice" (33) he makes this call: "Come/ Listen/Come to the/ Tent embassy/ hear us,/ Respect us/ Listen, the land is ours/ We have been here since the first sunrise/ *Justice now!*/ *No reconciliation without justice*"... (34). The desperate call for conversation becomes imminent but the poet reinforces urgency in "Old rio is dead" (IW, 25), which reminds that "Today's battles were lost yesterday/ Tomorrow's battles must be fought today" (25). "When the earth bleeds" (IW, 16) maintains this similar tone of urgency because although "The oil flows/ ... the earth bleeds" (16), so there is need to ... "bandage the earth...". But it appears, the call for conversation has fallen on deaf ears especially in *I Will Not* and "I will take issues with you" (IW, 44) and in the eponymous poem, "I will not dance to your beat". The poet, in what sounds like a vow, reels: "I will confront you with my fists/ If climate change means death to me but business to you/ I will expose your evil greed/ If you don't leave crude oil in the soil/ Coal in the hole and tar in the land". Then says, unequivocally: "I will not dance to your beat/ Unless we walk sustainable path/ And accept real solutions and respect Mother Earth" (IW, 11).

The poet finds a pathway to remedy in "We have one earth" (WT, 25-6), by calling for a halt. The relevant words reads:

If the chattering birds
Must not run out of breath
Men must give nature a break
And for a moment cease their jabber
To allow the weaverbirds chatter songs of life
Long postponed (26)

He adds to this his call for restitution in respect of slave trade in Africa and its scars in "I refuse to forget" by saying that "They/ Must pay/ For it" (WT, 65). Also in "Give back" (WT, 60), he addresses the beneficiaries of slave trade in a terser tone:

The stock breakers of hell

Give back
 Yield up the dead who yet live
 Your shoreless sea
 The victory dance is incomplete
 Send back those who left (60)

The poet is conscious of the fact that the struggle for the reclaiming of the earth calls for rugged determination noting in “We thought it was oil... but it was blood”:

They may kill all
 But the blood will speak
 They may gain all
 But the soil will RISE
 We may die
 And yet stay alive
 Placed on the slab
 Slaughtered by the day
 We are living
 Long sacrificed (15)

The juxtaposition of oil and blood relays vicious imagery of carnage which foregrounds the poet’s rally and call for unity among oppressed victims. In “Bio... safe...tea?”, one of the poems in *IW* for instance, the poet says: “We will not give up/ We will not despair/ A people united can never be defeated!” ...Standing united... we can never be defeated!”/ “Activists united can never be defeated!”/ “Farmers united can never be defeated!” (45- 6). On account of oil explorations that have turned farmlands into ruins and orchestrated food crises in his homeland, “Steamy bowls”, issues similar charge to “famers” to “...stand on guard and /Defend the roots that feed us” (*IW*, 51).

The poet, in *IW*, picks from the repository of his Judeo Christian heritage the metaphor of the watchman in poems such as “Watchman, how long is your day?” (15) to alert his countrymen to an

impending doom which has been initiated but will soon spill to posterity. The current sad situation is such that “Empty heads rejoice at / Calamities postponed and banked/ for none but their generation unborn” (15), just:

Like it was in the days of doom
Men dined and wined and danced until
Fireballs of sulphur fell, today acid rains on placid heads

Placid heads loaded
Tonnes of fantasies of silver bullets
Waiting to strike back (15)

In other “watchman poems” such as “Watchman, what of the night?” (13), “Watchman, how long is your day?” (15), “Watchful in the box” (17) and “Do watchmen sleep?” (19), the poet tries to inspire, alert and conscientise his countrymen to patriotic duty. Like we see in *IW*, in “Walking blind”, the narrative has to change from the current situation where “We walk blind!/ And dance to broken drums” (37) to a new dawn when “We must walk with seeing eyes!/ And dance to taut drums” (38). Notwithstanding the aura of doom that pervades his interventions a tiny light of hope shows in “Hopefully for a season” in the refrain that reads:

hopefully for a season
humanity caught napping at a moment's snap
of nature's revolt at man's mega schemes
driven by torrents of greed
and churning streets turned seas
hopefully for a season (20)

The poet extends this prospect to all nations of the world under the same predicament in “Yasuni”. In this poem that bears same title with a coastal town in Ecuador, “Yasuni becomes a microcosm and for all

spaces where people have been alienated from their lands on account of infractions against nature. The words in context read:

Yasuni
Sacred land
Children of the earth bandaging the earth's many bleeding spots
Your blood drained to run the lusts of men
Chains broken, fears dumped, gags burst, your children
Demand the bloodletting has run its day
Despots have made their kill
Humanity captured by plastics and sundry garbage drawn
from your veins (64)

Then concludes

Yasuni
Sacred land
Today your children follow the bloody fangs of panting
vampires
From Ogoni to Lofoten to Maracaibo to the Karoo and to
First
Nation lands of the North we shout silence the rigs,
hang the monster shovels, block the pipes
...
We refuse to fuel the engines of wrath and pains (65)

The profiling of actors and villains in these lines only confirms the epic struggle which continues to rage between diametrically opposed camps of life and death, greed and charity or modern civilisation and barbarism.

Conclusion

The engagement with the selected books of poems by Nnimmo Bassey, in this article, has harnessed the varied experiences in the

interaction between man and nature. Although the poet in his idioms tries to filter the diversified ordeals in the juxtaposing of homeland and foreign land experiences, the converging point remains in the general negative attitude of man towards nature. Few suggested antidotes prescribed by the poet, such as retaining mineral resources in the soil, appear in conflict with the attitude of the poet to civilization. It then appears that the poet's call aims at creating the needed sensitisation that could trigger the robust conversation which has become expedient in order to bring about a lasting truce in the self-inflicted crises between man and his environment.

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