

RETHINKING THE ENVIRONMENT: *OIL ON WATER* AS A METAPHOR

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Abstract

The twenty first century is, arguably, embroiled in a lot of social issues, which have become a clog in the wheel of its progress. Man's environment in this current time could be said to be depleting at a very rapid progression. This is largely due to neglect and/or man's unwholesome activities or practices. The Nigerian society in general, and particularly the Niger Delta region, is one part of Nigeria that comes to mind when the issue of environmental degradation is mentioned. Thus, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria becomes a metaphor for environmental degradation and rape of the ecosystem. This paper is an attempt to investigate the practices of man in relation to his environment. The paper focuses on the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, with a view to interrogating the effects of the damage on its ecosystem. The paper deploys the theory of Eco criticism in its investigation, using Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. The paper, therefore, seeks to advance that man is an accomplice in the degradation of his environment.

Key words: Environment, Degradation, Ecosystem, Eco criticism, Metaphor

Introduction

The issue of man's environment has become a critical aspect of literary discourse. While one could say that the society has evolved over the years, it may be added that, with the advancements in the society, comes a growing trend of degradation. This is so because of the negative attendant effects of man's activities. These practices by man have made him and his physical environment vitally endangered. As argued by Tošić (2006:49), polluting or pollution cannot be avoided in any talk about man's environment. Hazardous waste and toxic substances discharges give rise to the changes in the biosphere. For

Jones (1990:145), these changes in the biosphere are “reflected in the impaired performance, reduced growth, lowered reproductive capacity and ultimately the death of individual organisms. Suffice to say, the level of degradation that the environment experiences in the 21st century is, to some extent, the manifestation of some of the diseases confronting man.

Therefore, the twenty first century is, no doubt, facing a lot of social issues with growing concerns. Issues such as those related to man’s environment have not only become topical in daily discourse, but have become key concerns in the literary world, of which the Niger Delta is a metaphor. Oguche (2012:3), in describing metaphor, avers that, “metaphor accentuates meaning by bringing into focus, what is felt or conceived...it is metaphor that brings to physical dimension, what has been a cloud, and a shadow...metaphor allows multiple interpretations”; hence, for Oguche (2012:3), “it is metaphor that allows the critic to deconstruct and reconstruct a literary text”.

One can, therefore, argue that the attitude of man towards his environment has provided a fertile ground for literary ingenuity and criticism to thrive. The society, therefore, becomes a conduit through which the corpus of literature is enriched within the context of a given epoch. In other words, the historicisation of a literary theory “is often, if not always, facilitated by certain historical needs or circumstances, facilitated rather than determined or conditioned in the Marxist sense of those concepts” (Nwadike and Onunkwo, 2018:196). Thus, the society, in its fluid state, has continued to record divergent opinions, philosophies and ideologies for which literary arguments are built. This means that the literary writer takes advantage of the inadequacies of man, especially his treatment of his social milieu, to interrogate the level of devastation that man’s negligence might have brought upon his environment. This position illustrates the idea that literary writings are products of the society. This is so because the literary writer, being a product of the society, always sources his materials from the society. It is on this basis that Nwadike and Onunkwo (2018:196) affirm that “...conceptual tools and practical approaches used within the broad

background of research and scholarship are sometimes informed by real life situations”.

The corpus of literature is, thus, enriched by man’s treatment of his environment. It is within this context that a writer like Helon Habila contemplates the issues of environmental degradation and neglect, among others, in *Oil on Water*. The text, therefore, becomes a metaphor for the contemplations of the unwholesome activities of man on his environment, especially the Nigerian society; using the Niger – Delta region as a microcosm. Therefore, the Nigeria literary scene is replete with issues of environmental degradation occasioned by the abuse of the ecosystem. This, creative writers have deployed, to give varying narratives on how the 21st century Nigeria is grappling with issues of the environment.

The Niger Delta region has gained attention in the international media since the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995. He was the man who drew the world’s attention to the environmental pollutions and the impoverishment resulting from the activities of oil companies in the region. His killing by the military regime at that time further ignited interest in the kind of “slow violence” that the people and the land of that region have been subjected to (Kaze, 2013:14).

Environmental issues such as tropical warmth, drought, desertification, deforestation, acidifying of oceans, frequent coastal inundation, tsunamis, cyclones, increasing food and shelter shortages, accidents at nuclear power stations, oxytocin applied vegetables, industrial pollution, and many more lethal activities have become prevalent. It is interesting to note that these are global concerns, and Nigeria, especially the Niger Delta region has its own share of these challenges.

At the discovery of oil in Oloibiri, River State, in 1958, and the subsequent oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s, the nation’s attention shifted from agriculture to crude oil, thereby “tying the nation’s fate to the fortunes of a single commodity: oil” (Larkin, 1997:108). One therefore, wonders if the discovery of oil was a blessing or a curse, especially to the Niger Delta region which could be argued to be one of

the worst hit by the effects of oil exploration. For, while Edebor (2017) puts it that, “the Nigerian physical environment has suffered untold hardships due to wanton exploitations of nature’s resources and oil pollution, particularly in the coastal areas, the pipeline ways, the road networks, swamp and mangrove farmlands, among others”, Adeyanju (2004:217) on the other hand avers that:

... the creeks and coastal areas are noted for oil pollution hazard resulting from exploration, transportation, fresh water areas are polluted through waste disposal generated from oil and industrial affluent (sic). Also, the pipeline way and road network are polluted during transportation of petroleum products as well as crude.

The activities of oil exploration companies in the Niger Delta region have not only become hazardous to the community, but also to the inhabitants. As projected above, the pollution in the environment as a result of exploration becomes a recurring decimal. Aghalino, as cited in Dawodu (2011:3), points out three major effects of oil exploration on the oil-mineral producing communities. He avers that it leads to environmental pollution; it destroys the ecosystem and ways of life of the people; and lastly, it impoverishes the oil producing communities. Suffice to say that whatsoever affects the environment, affects man. So, man becomes endangered if he does not treat his environment accordingly.

The issue of land becomes paramount, as the people see it as an embodiment of postcolonial recuperation, sustainability and dignity; hence, whatsoever affects their land, affects their living. This view is heightened by Fanon (1963:44) who argues that, “for a ... people, the most essential value...is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread, and above all, dignity”. This goes to show that the onus to keep the community and environment working is the sole responsibility of the people. Therefore, the community suffers from lack of “bread”, when it fails to tend its environment.

Theoretical Approach

The paper deploys Eco criticism, in its attempt to contemplate the issue of environmental degradation especially in the Niger Delta region. Eco criticism which was synonymous with the American nature writings as well as the British Romantic literature has now gained its momentum with worldwide eco-literature. It has changed its colour from local to global perspectives in view of the present ecological crises around the globe.

Eco criticism is a recent evolution in the area of literary appreciation. Evolved first in the US and then in UK, it gained momentum only during the 1990s. From the very inception, Eco criticism has been based on the assumption that the human world and the physical environment are closely interlinked and that one is shaped by the other and therefore the study of the representation of the human-nature relationship in literature is of utmost important to understand the environmental predicament of today 's world.

William Rueckert was the first person to have used the term 'Eco criticism' in his essay - "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco criticism" published in 1978. He defined the term as the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature (cited in Gogoi, 2014). For Tošić (2006), the word *Eco criticism* is a semineologism. *Eco* is short of *ecology*, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. By analogy, Eco criticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. It examines "the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (cited in Kumar, 2016). It, therefore, aims at providing care for the environment. Therefore, a conspicuous feature in Eco criticism is the analysis of the differences in attitude towards the environment that are attributed to the writer's race, ethnicity, social class and gender.

Glotfelty (1996: xx) draws attention to the importance of works that are Eco critical in nature when she states that:

Regardless of what name it (Eco criticism) goes by, most Eco critical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. 'We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. (Cited in Edebor, 2017:44)

Oil on Water as a Metaphor

Set in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, during the military era, *Oil on Water* captures the experience of Rufus and Zaq, two journalists who are investigating the kidnap case of Isabel, the wife of James Floode, who works as a Petroleum Engineer in one of the oil exploration companies in the Niger Delta. Their mission is to confirm if Isabel is still alive, so that the ransom demanded by her militant abductors can be paid by her husband, James Floode. Upon investigation, it is realized that Isabel's abduction becomes an opening through which the larger picture of the war plaguing the Niger Delta region is brought to the fore. Therefore, *Oil on Water*, as the title suggests, becomes a metaphor for the projection of the plight and peril, squalor and impoverishment, as well as danger, confronting a people whose land, water and livelihood are left in ruins as a result of oil exploration and abuse of the ecosystem. The gory and harrowing effects of the activities of these oil exploration companies are, therefore, socio-economical, as they expose the people, not only to economic hardship, but also to some despicable and deplorable conditions; resulting in incessant deaths, diseases, displacements, violence and other forms of criminality, among others.

Through the eye of the narrator, Rufus, the disturbing contamination and degradation of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta region as a result of oil spillage and gas flaring are awakened. He,

therefore, in contradistinction, brings to wake the plight of a people caught in the web of seemingly irredeemable gloom and doom occasioned by the selfish roles played by the military government and its officials, in connivance with the transnational companies; and the roles played by the militants; while also showing the grim effects of the reckless actions and inactions of these forces on the environment, the society (man), and other living things (animals, fishes, etc.) on the other hand.

The title of the text is symbolic, as well as metaphoric, as it echoes a situation that is not conducive; a picture that is destructive. For, even though the Niger Delta region is projected to be economically buoyant and viable, the living condition of its people is worrisome and deplorable. This is so because the oil which is meant to be a blessing to them appears to be the reason for the hardship, restiveness and diseases plaguing them. For, while oil symbolises wealth, the water on the other hand reveals the living condition of the people, occasioned by the oil. Significantly, it depicts an aberration and destruction of the ecosystem, as the mixture of oil and water portends danger to the people because of the tendency to negatively affect not only aquatic life but that of the people whose sources of livelihood are derived from the water. That is to say, the oil which is symbolic of wealth is used in polluting the water that is meant to sustain the people. The image of the mixture of oil and water that the title of the text evokes is, in fact, an illustration of destruction, not only to human lives, but also to the ecosystem. It is against this backdrop that this paper interrogates man's activities on the ecosystem, and their attendant effects; using the Niger Delta region as depicted in *Oil on Water* as a microcosm.

It is imperative to note that the Niger Delta problem is that of a chain reaction, where the activities of the oil exploration companies and the subsequent abuse of the environment lead to pollution and increase in the wave of crime and militancy. The increase in crime, such as kidnapping among others could, therefore, be said to be due to destruction of sources of livelihood arising from gas flaring. This is succinctly captured as Rufus reveals that "The militants always

concealed the location of their camps, because their lives depended on that” (*Oil on Water* 2012:6). For the militants, it seems that their only strategy for survival, especially since the multinational oil companies have consistently destroyed their farmlands and water, is to engage in further destruction of pipelines, which in itself becomes inimical to the environment and the people. This, Rufus further reveals as he echoes thus, “what was certain, though, was that they never strayed too far from the pipelines and oil rigs and refineries, which they constantly threatened to blow up, thereby ensuring for themselves a steady livelihood” (*Oil on Water* 2012:6). The pathetic situation here is that both the activities of the transnational oil companies, as well as those of the militants are, no doubt, threats to the ecosystem.

In another twist, the inactions and carefree attitude of the government in dealing with the incessant rape of the Niger Delta ecosystem is further heightened. It seems the attitude of the government is that of nonchalance. In another breath, the ignorance of the people is depicted, as they seem to be satisfied with the gas flaring, which to them provides illumination at night. While the text attempts to display the ignorance of the people on the harmful effects of gas flaring in this regard, there seems to be a subtle indictment of the government which has failed in providing basic amenities such as electricity for the people. This gross display of ignorance by the people is graphically captured thus:

...there was oil in commercial quantities. The villagers feasted for weeks. They got their orange fire, planted firmly over the water at the edge of the village. Night and day it burned, and now the villagers had no need for candles or lamps, all they had to do at night was to throw open their doors and windows and just like that everything was illuminated. That light soon became the village square. At night men and women would stand facing it, lost in wonder, for hours, simply staring till their eyes watered and their heads grew dizzy. Village meetings, which used to take place early in the mornings on Saturdays...now, took place at night.... (*Oil on Water*, 2012:144)

It is crystal clear from the foregoing that man, being the custodian of his environment, has continued to treat his environment with levity. And the implication of this could be catastrophic. For, while the people see the flame from the gas flaring as a 'breakthrough' to the lingering crises of lack of electricity confronting their community, they fail to see the effects, even when being warned by their doctor. Dagogo-Mark narrates his position on the situation to the journalists, Rufus and Zaq, as he recounts: "well, I did my duty as their doctor. I told them of the dangers that accompany that quenchless flare, but they wouldn't listen" (*Oil on Water*, 2012:145). Predicated against this backdrop, one could argue that man's negligence is a resultant effect of the decay and rot in the environment, as Doctor Dagogo-Mark confirms:

And then a year later, when the livestock began to die and the plants began to wither on their stalks, I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab, I measured the level of toxins in it: it was rising steadily...the people didn't listen, they were still in thrall to the orange glare. When I confronted the oil workers, they offered me money and a job. (*Oil on Water*, 2012:145)

It is obvious, from the foregoing, that man is cast as the destroyer of his environment, as the devastating effects of his activities spell doom, not only to him but to other living organisms. Pathetically, however, man has not come to realize that his actions and inactions can either preserve or destroy his environment. As captured above, "the people didn't listen" to the warnings by Doctor Dagogo-Mark who could be likened to an environmental activist and the resultant effect of their recalcitrant disposition is the death of plants and livestock. This, no doubt, will further impoverish them as the tendency for food scarcity becomes rife. The effect, therefore, of this negligence is catastrophic. The attitude of the transnational company towards the people's safety is even worrisome. It can be deduced that the oil companies are not after the wellbeing of the people and their community. They seek only to achieve their selfish desire, which is to exploit the people's resources, without considering the negative effects

this will have on the people and their environment. This attitude is vehemently resisted by Doctor Dagogo-Mark, who, confronting the oil companies, is offered money and a job. Again, here, Doctor Dagogo-Mark brings to the fore the corrupt disposition of these multinational companies who use money and influence to stifle the course of justice. Therefore, the Doctor exposes this corrupt attitude of the oil exploration companies in the Niger Delta as he reveals thus, “When I confronted the oil workers, they offered me money and a job (*Oil on Water*, 2012:145).

In his attempt to ensure that the ecosystem is preserved, and the safety of the Niger Delta people guaranteed, the Doctor, who could be seen as a symbolic representation of an environmental activist, carries his campaign and the outcries of his people further to different NGOs and international organizations, having documented the pollution levels on the environment, in order to get justice. But pathetically, he does not get the expected result as even these agencies seem to be accomplices in the destruction of both the ecosystem and lives of his people. He laments, “They thanked me and dumped the results in some filing cabinet” (*Oil on Water*, 2012:145). Suffice to say that the devastating result of this nonchalant attitude of the NGOs and international organizations is the increase in death rate in the community, as enunciated further:

Many people died and I sent my results to NGOs and international organizations, which published them in international journals and urged the government to do something about the flares, but nothing happened. More people fell sick, a lot died. I watched the night market fold up and the council meeting cease... almost overnight. I watched the whole village disappear, just like that.... (*Oil on Water*, 2012:145)

Through a graphic display of reminiscence, Rufus reveals that although man benefits from nature, he indulges in practices that adversely affect the ecosystem, resulting in serious consequences. *Oil on Water* is thus replete with images of such abuses and degradations.

Through a nostalgic rendition, Rufus goes back into the pristine Niger Delta environment that was devoid of pollution and environmental abuse(s). He reveals how therapeutic the environment was to the people. For instance, the speech of Naaman, the Chief Priest of Irekefe village, reveals the beauty and therapeutic power of nature. Similarly, Zaq, who had been down with a prolonged health issue regains stability after listening to the Chief Priest describe nature as a healing mechanism. Naaman, therefore, tries to discourage Rufus from asking Zaq to seek medical attention elsewhere. Naaman reveals that, "...the air alone will heal you. I have seen it happen...it is pure" (*Oil on Water*, 86).

In another breath, the conversation between Rufus and Gloria brings to light the healing power of the uncontaminated sea, which by extension is nature. Gloria holds that the result of this power has drawn the attention of so many worshippers, including Boma, Rufus' sister, who, in spite of the challenges she has gone through in life and marriage, eventually takes advantage of the therapeutic power of nature for comfort, as confirmed thus, "Boma was still on the island. She had joined the worshippers, walking with them in a procession every morning and every evening to immerse herself in the sea and sing a hymn to the rising and setting of the sun..." (*Oil on Water*, 223).

Accordingly, while *Oil on Water* establishes the relationship between man and his environment, signifying that man gets his sustenance from the environment or nature, it also reveals how man, through his practices, destroys the same nature that sustains him. In reminiscing, Rufus shows the interdependence between man and nature in the Niger Delta region, as he declares that "the villagers were fishermen, mostly, making their living on the river that poured its water into the sea" (*Oil on Water*, 108). However, this source of livelihood is being threatened due to the activities of the oil exploration companies. The projection here is that man becomes the architect of his woes when he fails to cherish nature. Doctor Dagogo-Mark, while subtly castigating the people for their negligence and nonchalant attitude especially in failing to listen to his advice on the need to preserve the environment,

reveals how the destruction of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta is as a result of man's activities. Doctor Dagogo-Mark shows how passionate he is about the preservation of nature in contradistinction to the people, as he affirms:

Well, I did my duty as their doctor. I told them of the dangers that accompany that quenchless flare, but they wouldn't listen. And then a year later, when livestock began to die and the plants began to wither on their stalks, I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab I measured the level of toxins in it: it was rising steadily. (*Oil on Water*, 144-145)

Similarly, one of the consequences of the gory effects of the abuse of the environment is the biting squalor or poverty it unleashes on the people. In other words, aside the exposure to health risks, it impoverishes the people. As a metaphor for the varying negative effects that environmental degradation portends, especially as reflected in the Niger Delta area, it becomes evident that economic activities become grounded, and this further compounds the people's squalor, and thus, increases the rate of criminality since their rivers are "...already polluted and useless for fishing..."(*Oil on Water*, 4).

Apart from the displacement of the Niger Delta people from their ancestral land, due to the vandalism of the ecosystem, especially by the oil exploration companies, there seem to be growing suspicion and mistrust among the people. These senses of suspicion and mistrust are evoked against the government, which the people feel conspires with the transnational companies to take over their lands. According to Edebor (2017), "due to the enticing offers by the oil companies (often assisted by government representatives), many communities sell out their lands to the oil companies, while those who refuse are conspired against and then charged with terrible acts that often result in their deaths-like the case of Chief Malabo". The almost forceful acquisition of their ancestral lands has not only increased the rate of crime, but has equally deepened the pessimism of the people. For instance, the situation has deepened the pessimism of the likes of Chief Ibiram who has become disillusioned, and cannot hide his disillusionment, as he reminisces thus:

Once upon a time they lived in paradise. It was a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy. The village was close-knit, made up of cousins and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters.... (*Oil on Water*, 38)

The image painted above is that of anguish. For, while the people have lost faith in the government, which they perceive to be responsible for their displacement, they seem to be comfortable with their former condition where they lived communally as a unified unit. Their present condition is thus, pathetic. One of the consequences of the abuse of the environment carried out by the transnational companies is that apart from the destruction of the ecosystem, it has broken the age-long unity among the people; hence the submission that “for the first time the close, unified community was divided” (*Oil on Water*, 39).

Conclusion

It is worthy to note that literature and the environment share a common ground; in that, literature thrives through prevailing issues in the environment. That is, it becomes a conduit through which environmental issues are contemplated. *Oil on Water*, therefore, brings to the fore such issues as environmental degradation, abuse of the ecosystem and pollution as occasioned by gas flaring as well as the altering of nature by man. It is on this ground that the paper advanced the earlier proposition that the twenty first century is grappling with a myriad of environmental issues of which man is the architect. The metaphor of the abuse of the ecosystem, resulting in multiplicity of crises as captured in *Oil on Water*, no doubt, shows man as being responsible. Similarly, and in a contrastive manner, the text delves into the past in order to reveal the current state of the environment. It, therefore, becomes evident that using the Niger Delta region as a microcosm, the twenty first century is not only grappling with issues of environmental abuse(s); but also with ways to redeem the environment

from its present sorry-state. *Oil on Water*, therefore, becomes a window through which the consciousness of man is drawn to the inherent dangers he is exposed to as a result of his activities on the ecosystem. The consciousness of man is, therefore, drawn to rethink the environment in order to stay healthy and safe.

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