

INTERROGATING ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN CHUMA-UDEH NGOZI'S *FORLORN FATE*

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Abstract

Literature stands as a mirror through which society is reflected, the major functions of literature is to replicate the happenings in every human society, encourage virtues, expose vices and proffer solutions to them. Adaptation of ecocriticism came up as the literary artist's means of redefining man's interest in the preservation of nature. This research investigates the Nigerian writer's involvement in the preservation of nature, through their writings. This paper x-rays their concern for the protection of the environment from anti-natural and ecological activities such as bush burning, soil excavation, man-made erosion, oil spillage, artificial desertification, pollution, destruction of hills, mountains, and uncoordinated construction of houses. Again, this research re-evaluates the contributions of ecocriticism as a branch of literature from an interdisciplinary point of view where literary scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns in various ways with their subject matter as nature. This study intends to achieve this feat by re-examining the core environmental standpoints portrayed in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Forlorn Fate* to re-address environmental issues in Nigeria. The theoretical framework employed in this research is Ecocriticism. During the course of investigations, this research discovered that an objective analysis of environmental issues will bring about a certain level of control to man-made ecological problems. This research also elaborates into the discovery that the world is basically dependent on the continual and peaceful co-existence of man and nature. The method of research employed in this study is the qualitative method. The research also identified daunting efforts on the parts of the Nigerian writers to understudy and point out the hazards posed by environmental problems. This study concludes that in aligning environmental literature with politics, issues pervading Nigeria are given a literary identity and in confronting the political situations and environmental disenchantments that has affected the average, the peoples' dilemma and environmental issues in Nigeria is brought to limelight and probable solutions proffered. This paper re-examines and interrogates aspects of environmental degradation found in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Forlorn Fate*.

Key words: Environment, degradation, Eco-criticism, literature, Politics

Introduction

Destruction of man's physical environment over the years have been a predominant issue. Ecological problems have occasioned by many factors ranging from misuse of mineral resources down to economic, political and social problems. Some of these problems include lack of accountability, diversion of public resources to private ownership, different types of discriminations, ethnicity lack of competence, inefficiency etc.

The ecosystem, according to Enemugwem, "is the desirable conditions that influence the development of organisms. It relates to the natural air, land, water, flora and fauna and the creative climate within which human possibilities are actualized" (55). It follows therefore, as he rightly argues that the wellbeing of inhabitants of any place depends on how well the habitation or environment is kept from practices and conditions that seek to destroy it.

Degradation, therefore, becomes a predominant issue in the Niger Delta novel, is explored with a view to underscore its impact on the place and the characters. This paper seeks furthermore to establish degradation as the result of willful tendencies by persons to destroy in order to establish conquest of the environment and of other people.

Degradations of the environment, as portrayed in the novel go beyond just the physical environmental elements to those of structures of culture and of values. Therefore, different nuances of the term ecological are applied in analyzing settings and characters in the novels. Specific attention is paid on how the socio-cultural fabrics of the place have been affected by introduction of alien cultures and practices, in the process of exploitation of the natural resources of the place. Some of these (not necessarily treated in this order) are the degradation of the people's cultural values; degradation of the natural innocence associated with primal existence; degradation of the psyche

as well as intellect of the youth; and degradation of socio-economic cultures of the place, all of which are perceived through the overturning and supplanting of the people's means of livelihood, with oil exploration and exploitation activities bringing nothing but woes to the place.

However, it seems reasonable and is not seen as propaganda. Readers will judge it as common sense or universal human experience. An idea is no longer felt as the idea, because it was considered fair or conventional to assess human acts in a novel. Jane Austen's works epitomize the idea as a convention. Thanks to political novels, an author can define him or herself by consciously engaging in deliberate actions. This position is a reaction against the creed of "art for art's sake" and against the "bourgeois" writer, whose obligation is to his craft rather than his audience. The discrepancy between the ideal and reality matters and is extreme. Difficulties arise once attempts are made to implement the ideal, with unforeseen consequences. The lack of enthusiasm for writing about politics is mystifying. Pop song writers have long composed songs of political protest, so why on earth would literary persons demur at following a similar path.

The Novel depicts the trials of the Odua people of Niger Delta and how oil exploitation started in the region. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh has always been a very descriptive writer and her powers of description made the novel a very beautiful one when it comes to highlighting the importance of nature in the lives of Niger Delta people. Before the first ever seismic explosion that occurred in Odua community, the people had lived in peace and harmony making their livelihood from products of nature within their local environment. They were mostly fishermen, farmers and palm wine tappers but when the first explosion occurred, the first explosion that announced the presence of oil exploiters in their once peaceful community, the people of Odua realized that their lives will never remain the same. From the river bank to the farms and the forests, the sound of the explosion caused havoc and chaos. It was like a rape of a peaceful environment, Odua was like a tender girl without breast, so, when she was pierced by the phallus of greed hardened by the desire to milk oil ceaselessly from the community, she felt the pain all over her body and she was forced into a new life, a life she was not prepared for. The author made an ecological presentation of the state of the communities;

The seismic explosions rocked the entire forest sending vibrations through the very womb of the ground. The earth quivered, growled, grumbled and erupted in unusual sensations. The juddering tremors unsettled all the children of nature within the vicinity and beyond. It was a clear message of imminent, unmistakable danger to the once tranquil environment (1).

To wake up from sleep to witness a once peaceful environment, beautiful in all ramifications to be covered in thick, black waste is a heart-breaking sight especially if such environment is where one has called home from his or her first breath. Before the coming of the exploiters, Odua's beauty was ecstatic, the riverbanks were as calm and beautiful as anything you can ever imagine, the farms were blooming with farm products and the seas offered fishes to the fishermen in a platter of gold but after the first explosion, things never remained the same. A community that has lived with utmost hate for the Whiteman due to the damages caused them during the time of slave trade swore never to welcome the Whiteman into their community ever again no matter what, but history has a way of repeating itself and before the people of Odua could muster the tongue to say no, Geologist Mac Murray has already burrowed into the soils of their land, seeking for "cool dough". The irony of the whole thing is that Murray, a well sort after geologist knows the full implications of oil exploitation but he didn't care a bit about the people who lived in the community that lay before him, all he saw was a means of making money and it tickled his heart to ecstasy;

Murray was one of the world's shrewdest geologists and he could predict with accuracy the effect of oil drilling on the ecosystem of these communities within the next few years. Nonetheless, who cares about the gate of the natives while there was oil lying fallow like an untouched virgin in the soil and wasting away (37).

Murray has no love for the ecosystem of the people who he is exploiting, the beauty of the environment which he had come to contaminate did not by any means appeal to his conscience. He knew the Odua region of Niger Delta is too beautiful, peaceful and calm for the introduction of oil drilling yet he didn't care. He has lived among these people and he understands that the relationship between these people and nature is almost like that of life and oxygen, they both go hand in hand and none will survive without the other. He knew that the people of Odua made their living from the environment but Murray was more focused on the money that was why he continued drilling for oil despite seeing the damages done to these people and their environment.

This community's case was rather more sinister than that of the other places he had worked in. They live in a sloped valley like terrain and the exploration would be right above their abode. This means that relocation was imminent within the next few years of the exploration. (37).

If the fish leaves the water where will it run to? If a child leaves his mother's bosom, where else would he find milk and comfort? The people of Odua must relocate within the next few years, so Murray thought, because he knew the impact of the exploration and if the people do not move in the next few years, it would be disastrous but the people have lived in that very community since their first ever breath and asking them to leave now would be a very difficult task because don't just wake up and relocate when they know they can fight and survive.

The Niger Delta people are so attached to their environment from the days of their ancestors to this very day that anything that separates them from their environment or anything that hurts their environment hurts them, they believe in the river goddess so much that they swear in her name and when they want to fish, hunt or farm they first pray that she blesses their handiworks and when these exploiters came burrowing into their lands, they felt that life itself had been taken away from them. Cobra, a militant during his interview with Nina plainly told her that; "there is no life in Niger Delta. I have no life.... we have no lives to live; no hopes" (81).

To these people, the whole of their ecosystem or rather a strong part of it becomes their very identity and outside it, they do not have any other identity. So, their fight to protect the Niger Delta region is not done because they want to enjoy the fishes of the river or the loamy soils of the creeks but because protecting the creeks means protecting them too. When Dickson Sotonye and Nina met for the first time, they instantly had a connection, imagine two people from different worlds having this strong connection instantly just because they came from the same place. While the conversation went on, they discovered that the both of them had the Olekun Tattoo on their shoulders and instantly Dickson realizes that Nina is actually one of their people whisked away from the shores of Africa during the time of slavery. At this realization, Dickson insinuates that Nina is a daughter of the river and when she tries to reject it, he tells her; "you will soon understand that rivers harbour more than life" (88).

Meanwhile, Nina found herself feeling at home in a land far away from her home across the Atlantic.

Nina was enjoying herself in Odua kingdom. She felt an instant connect with this remote community. She was more like someone holidaying than a soldier on a mission. She marvelled at the haunting beauty of the kingdom and its natural endowment of prominent seashore and diversified waterways" (249).

Nina visited the Odua kingdom when oil exploration was at its peak and yet she was still able to feel the beauty and the serenity of the environment. She felt at home and at peace for a soldier on a mission, Odua was the peace she has always craved for. Here, the author made it expressly clear that there is a spiritual kind of connection between the people of Odua and their immediate environment, they are more of a natural people yet they find more peace at their own very environment even if the environment is already contaminated, this is a visible love for one's environment and one's ecosystem. A huge Characteristic of the Niger Delta and Chuma Udeh captured it so well. As for Nina, she soon understood that rivers harbours more than life, that snakes could speak and that the thickness of the Olokun shrine is actually peace in all its ramifications.

She was soon taken to the shrine of Olokun to meet the messenger of Olokun and her excitement bar filled to the maximum as she carried birds in a cage and feed it to snakes, snakes meant to be dangerous could not or did not attack her, instead of blazing eyes spitting hate and fright, the snakes looked at her in docility and awe, they loved her and she felt at home among the snakes too. Deep they wondered till they got to the very cave of Olokun and Goosebumps filled her entire skin. After meeting the messenger of Olokun and getting properly fortified, Nina felt more at home and everything around her became even more beautiful;

As they stepped out of the shrine, Nina felt a sense of well being. The sky looked more glorious than ever; emitting different colours...gold, indigo, violet laced with a strange sweetness. She felt renewed spiritually. Nature took a stranger alluring form; the breeze touching her face was titillating and cool, almost tangible (266).

Ngozi Chuma Udeh did not hold back in creating a Niger Delta where nature is life and life is nature. "*Forlorn Fate*" could easily pass for a romantic work of art that appreciate nature to the fullest, a work that expresses the importance of nature especially in the life of the Niger Delta people. She so placed nature above life itself that people were willing to die for their kingdom and sacrifices were made just to save the aged Kingdom from the grasp of destruction. The Geologist Murray was even surprised at the level of resistance the people put up; "he was upset as he was surprised by the level of resistance the Odua youths put up in defence of their kingdom" (308).

To him, it was just another unfortunate settlement of people with oil beneath their soil, oil meant to be exploited for money but to the people of Odua; the youth, the elders and even the children, it was their lives and they were willing to die in protection of this legacy that had been passed to them from ages they did not witness.

From ages called past, the people of Odua has been very close and intimate with their ecosystem and immediate environment that it almost controlled their lives and their way of living. From the days of Timi Sotonye the Chief priest of Olokun who was later sold to slavery to the days of the present Amanyanabo, the snakes of Olokun has

always been a very vital presence in the Odua community. They helped Timi defeat Timipre, the mad prince who killed his father and named himself king. The caves of Olokun protected the Chief priest when the mad prince came after his life, even in this present day, the snakes of Olokun yet again proved potent against the soldiers sent by the Whiteman Murray to disturb the activities of the Youth.

In the end, the love for nature and its potency was fully portrayed when Nina with the help of the Olokun priestess and the snakes conquered the evil Murray and returned peace to the ones peaceful Odua kingdom reduced to waste by oil spilled by greed.

Other than the environment, there are sundry issues such as exploitation and identity crisis, right of the Odua people, survival, corruption, politics and economics of oil, etc. that confront the Niger Delta characters in *Forlorn Fate*. Nevertheless, consciousness of ecological issues as portrayed in the novel, deserve a great deal more exposure than any other issue in light of present day challenges of degradation of the environment.

Environmental degradation in *Forlorn Fate*

In a captivating bid to draw attention to the need and urgency for creating awareness of the damages that are being done to the physical American environment, Don Scheese expresses his belief, with Edward Abbey, that "It is not enough to understand nature; the point is to save it" (304); but how can nature be saved unless there is sufficient awareness created in people's mind of the need to do so?

The concern of this segment of the essay is to expose just how much the Niger Delta novels serve the global need of becoming "a counter friction against those forces that would destroy the wilderness" (306); even though unlike the desert and wild "American West" of Abbey, David Thoreau, and John Muir, which Scheese explores and considers worthy of preservation, the Niger Delta is neither a desert wilderness nor a wasteland. It is an ecosystem inhabited by a rich and diverse species of flora and fauna, both aquatic and terrestrial organisms, and including persons of rich socio-economic heritage.

Characters, incidents, and events create consciousness of modern ecological dangers in the novel's setting.

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Environmental consciousness is created entirely in forms of impact of oil exploration on the environment, the flora and fauna, and on the different persons in and outside the Niger Delta geographical area. From the onset, the issue is exposed to the reader through this incident of pollution:

The seismic explosions rocked the entire forest sending vibrations through the womb of the ground. The earth quivered, growled, grumbled and erupted in unusual sensations. The juddering tremors unsettled all the children of nature within the vicinity and beyond. It was a clear message of imminent, unmistakable danger to the once tranquil environment. As the quaking waves moved in the belly of the earth like an invading soldier, it spread panic in its wake. All forms of life rose up in one accord and acted in response to this absolute disturbances of the serenity they have enjoyed for ages (1). The passage above contains evidence of an attempt by the narrator to expose and bring to consciousness an aspect of the issue of pollution of the Niger Delta environment. Oil spillage and its aftermath are therefore vividly revealed in the expression: "The seismic explosions rocked the entire forest sending vibrations through the womb of the ground. The earth quivered, growled, grumbled and erupted in unusual sensations." It does not require a great imagination to feel the impact of an explosion caused by the mining of oil on the earth's surface. It could only spell doom to creatures in the area. The explosion spread panic in its wake and also disturbed the serenity which the environment has enjoyed for centuries.

The immediate destabilizing impact of the explosion is cessation of economic and other useful activities of the people. Energies dissipated in the farm and the production of food and other agricultural goods is diverted to protest. Apparently devastated by the experience, the people of Odua kingdom could only watch, wail and scramble to safety, it was horrible that even on the very first day of the explosion lives were lost and it was little Birinyo who became the first victim of oil exploration.

".....she drew back at the sight before her. She took in the ghastly appearance, wide glazy eyes, the contorted face and the wide-open mouth and fainted neatly on the sandy shore.

Fourteen year old Birinyo became one of the very victims of oil exploration in Odua Ancient Kingdom of Niger Delta" (9).

Thus, from the very onset of the narrative, the theme of degradation is established with the incident of crude oil, from exploration site, over running the entire village. Yet many of the people themselves are ignorant of the extent

of damage to the environment. Pollution and degradation thus become extensions of cultures – cultures of pollution and degradation – apart of the realities of their world and time. At other times, following consciousness from the outside, they awake from their lethargy:

Awareness of degradation, no doubt, is felt more strongly from its impact on the place and on the characters than from such incident as the one portrayed from the beginning of the story. The contextual issues of violence, tension and poverty that make the place quite uninhabitable have their roots in devastation of the physical environment. Thus, when the author said “the signing of papers authorizing the exploration of oil was one irritating governmental edict of this country that really got under his skin. Some of these host communities are mulish and never freely consented to oil drilling in their villages. At times, it may even take the use of monetary pressure for the elders and prominent members of these communities and practical begging on bent knees with cap in hand before these primitive people would succumb to their fate...the fate of losing their lands to the oil drillers” (37) she could mean just one thing, degradation of the environment which these people did by any means necessary, through violence and through bribes.

Idleness in the village as a result of destruction of fishing and farming activities bring about poverty, frustration, drunkenness, violence, and sexual perversions that lead to teenage girls carrying unwanted pregnancies and having to cope with all the ugly consequences. These whole problems are heightened by the fact that compensations promised the people for the devastations on their places do not get to them.

The above situations drive the youths, and all who could, into picking up arms and constant quarrels with the police of the region who instead of protecting them arrested them and tortured them. With the fishing and farming environment lost toils and gas pollution. People like Cobra who couldn't just stand idle and watch the government and the exploiters kill their dreams, murder their families and take over their lands took up arms against these injustice and it resulted to the kidnap of a white man and when Nina questioned him and his criminality he said: “This conversation is over. How dare you stand there and pass judgment on things you know nothing about? What do you know about the Niger delta people? What do you know about my people? You say I have my whole life before me and it sounds so 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; No hopes!” (80)

These are just some of the consequences of degradation of the environment. Young children whose upkeep is hitherto sustained by proceeds from the land and waters have to contend with the harsh environment portrayed above and young boys who watched their dreams dug and shipped before their very eyes, young men who could do nothing more but pick up arms and fight for what is theirs and yet they are judged, arrested and tortured for speaking out.

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Conclusion

There is no doubt that environmental degradation is a global phenomenon. Opinions from various authorities in the fields of the Sciences, the Arts and the Humanities have shown that it is one problem that cuts across boundaries, intellectual and geographical. Activities of characters in the Niger Delta novels have moreover proved true the basic assumptions that degradation of the novels' settings is as a result of willful acts of human beings; and that consequences of the degradation such as poverty, moral degeneration, breakdown of law and order, general insecurity and unabated devastation of the place is retributive.

Considering the global and endemic nature of Eco-degradation, there is wisdom in a global exercise of ecological stoicism. This implies acceptance and appreciation of inherent gains in the pains of the moment. It means taking a moment's reflection on present challenges as means of achieving an enduring culture of “live and let live” between human and nonhuman nature. A popular adage – experience is the best teacher – tells us (technologically and scientifically advanced persons/world especially) that human survival on earth now depends less on many of the world's technological and scientific outputs.

The retributive nature of the problem is further revealed in the novels where instead of forging a common front to find solutions to the problems in the area, representatives of the people fall easy prey to economic manipulations of the oil companies. Why are these people not sensible enough to see beyond immediate gains? Why is it that

genuine efforts by well-meaning individuals to combat ecological damages in the area are so easily thwarted? And why is it that educated and economically and socially advantaged indigenes of the place relocate to cities far away and remain indifferent to happenings in the area?

The equally devastating activities of Ijaw youths and Eco-activists and the recalcitrant postures of all parties involved in the unholy business of exploitation and vandalizing make all occurrences in the place retributive. It is blind justice that must exert full vengeance before the eyes of the people will open.

Finally, environmental degradation is human-induced, only humans can reverse its retributive consequences by desisting from actions that engender it. Even then, it will take a long time for this to happen. This is because it has taken generations of systemic despoliation to bring the world to its current level of awareness of cultural evils inherent in our technological ways, in human ways of thinking and relating with the environment.

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