

Rethinking Activism in the Literary Representation of Nature in Selected Nigerian Drama Texts

Prince Oghenetega Ohwavworhua

Abstract

The literary study and representation of nature is one that has gained prominence in Nigerian literary discourses in recent times. This has often been interrogated in the course of man's radical agitation and activism to put an end to environmental despoliation and injustice. However, the expressions, radical agitation and activism by nature itself has not gained deliberate attention in Nigerian drama texts. This essay attempts to portray how Nigerian playwrights have been able to position nature as one that expresses herself and reacts to environmental degradation and injustice. The selection of J.P. Clark's *The Raft* and Greg Mbajiorgu's *Wake Up Everyone* is therefore purposive in advancing this proposition as both playwrights engage elements of nature in action. It engages eco-criticism which is a viable literary theory for interrogating environmental topicalities in literature. The study, therefore, attempts to engage activism, which is an ever-growing aspect of the theory using Lawrence Buell's second-wave eco-critical postulation, by first establishing nature as an active character from the position of passiveness in ecological discourses, and then examining how she reacts to degradation and injustice meted on her. The study suggests, by way of critical discourse and analysis, that eco-criticism is a literary discipline that can be broadened as ecological issues develop. It also advances the idea that the expressions and resistance to environmental degradation is not a human affair only, but that of nature also.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, activism, nature, J.P. Clark, Greg Mbajiorgu.

Introduction

Over the years, man has engaged in certain activities that mar the natural environment and invariably threaten his own existence. This has brought about a widespread and growing concern about nature – ecology and

environment – across various disciplines, especially within the academic world. The environmental question has, likewise, drawn a high degree of attention from Nigerian creative writers and literary critics and, as such, has developed rapidly to join the league of social, economic, religious and political preoccupation in the large span of Nigerian literature.

As some scholars have suggested, ecological issues are not new to Africa, as the African and by extension, Nigerian, has, from time immemorial, been culturally linked with his land even before the advent of the white colonisers. By implication, harm done to his land (nature) is harm done to him. Frantz Fanon (1963) in *The Wretched of the Earth*, affirms the emotional and social connectedness of the African to the land (nature), which often has been seen as the dwelling of the supernatural that oversees her cultural endeavours. Thus, he avers, “for a colonised people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity.” (p.9). In fact, for Eldred Jones (1973), the supernatural symbolises the total African environment. No wonder many African societies protested against white colonisers who tried to displace them from their land and cultural roots. Since then, African literature and by extension, Nigerian literature often tends towards protest and agitation for an end to all forms of colonialism, exploitation and marginalisation.

The agitation for the better treatment of nature by man as a result, has taken over a major part of Nigerian literature, especially those emanating from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This environmental agitation in Nigerian literature, however, suggests a deficiency in nature’s ability to express herself by fighting back to put an end to her despoliation. This brings to mind, Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) claim that the subaltern can speak for itself. Bruce Robbins (1992, p.50) corroborates Spivak’s idea and further suggests it is only appropriate for the subaltern to speak for itself. He posits, “the critic who accuses another of speaking for the subaltern by denying that subalterns can speak for themselves, for example, is of course also claiming to speak for them”. Although, the subaltern in Charles Feghabo’s (2014, p.23) opinion indicates a colonised people, this study attempts to situate nature as a subaltern figure since she often tends to share a similar colonial experience as actual humans.

However, the radical agitation, activism and expression of nature is an approach that some Nigerian creative writers have engaged consciously and unconsciously and is yet to gain significant attention in Nigerian literary dialogues. This essay pays attention to J.P. Clark's *The Raft* and Greg Mbajiorgu's *Wake Up Everyone* as an attempt at repositioning nature from docility to an active character as one which has the ability to express herself and retaliate man's oppressive and exploitative might. This is made possible by the engagement of a new eco-critical perspective of the representation of nature in Nigerian drama. This is basically conflict centred, as a means to better understand and assert nature's activeness and might.

Protest Tradition and Activism in Nigerian Literary Manifestations

From time immemorial, man has encountered conflicts in one way or the other. These could be within him and/or with others. In man's quest for freedom and self-actualisation lies the tendency for conflict with obstacles in his way. Consequently, he resists, protests and fights back such oppositions and exploitative ideologies (Nwagbara, 2010). Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993) suggests that the foundation of this condition can be traced to Western invasion. He asserts:

First it has been the external factor of foreign invasion, occupation, and control, and second, the internal factor of collaboration with the external threat. Whether under Western slavery and the slave trade, under colonialism and today under neo-colonialism, the two factors have interacted to the detriment of our being. The greedy Chief and other elements bred by the new colonial overlords, collaborated with the main external imperialist factor. The storm repeats itself, in a more painful way under neo-colonialism (p.78).

From its inception in African societies, literature has been adopted as a medium for passing positive suggestions, dialogues and solutions on the conditions of the African society. In Nigeria and other African countries, there have been changes over the years in the trajectory of drama as an art form in the service of man and his society. The crucial point

emphasised here is that modern dramatists deploy their literary productions in advocating change in their respective societies. In this light, the dramatist is seen as a ‘protester’ or ‘crusader’ against vices which are inimical to societal progress.

The culture of protest, however, is not new to the literary manifestations in Nigeria and Africa at large. Abubakar, A.S. (2002) asserts:

Revolutions, especially politically influenced ones, predate colonial domination in Africa. Africans have not been known to accept oppression and domination lying down. The agitation for changes in leadership and political systems gave rise to numerous uprisings which became popular in the region prior and during the colonial conquest. (p.19)

However, beyond the colonial exploitation, armed conflict, gender configurations, and political manipulations that have been fondly associated with the Nigerian society, issues of corruption, economic, ethnic and religious-inspired uprisings are conflicts Nigeria has been, and is still, contending with. It is evident that such issues as listed above have spurred Nigerian playwrights to construct their art in a way that it would not merely portray the social milieu of the country but effect change as well. As a consequence and overtime, writers have advocated a sense of liberation and an attendant radical tone in their art.

Chinweizu, et al (1980) and C. Amuta (1986) are amongst a host of scholars who share a common view on the authenticity of literature as a tool for advancing social commentaries. For Chinweizu, et al (1980) “a work of art has social value only in so far as it is a means for serving society” (p.252). Such social values as depicted in the social condition, like the classification of the society, in which Nigerians found themselves soon after independence, necessitated the adoption of a protest ideology by post-civil war dramatists. Gbilekaa, S.E.T. (1997) argues:

The enormous wealth as a result of oil boom dichotomised and intensified class struggle in Nigeria as the gap between the economically privileged and their grovelling proletarian and peasant class yawned

abominably. The aggressive and dehumanising capitalism which the nation pursued called for a serious examination of our past, the present and the future (p.iv).

It is important to mention here that the ecological crisis emanating from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been part of the socio-historical process of Nigerian literature (Onukaogu, A. & Onyerionwu, E., 2011, p.53), and which has often taken to social protest; this informs much of Nigerian protest drama in recent times. Such protests may have stemmed from a pile of frustrations on the lack of socio-economic cum political redress. In recent times, such redresses that are lacking include the tireless attack and exploitative activities on the natural habitat of a people, and this invariably implies a resultant effect on almost, if not, all aspects of their existence (Enajite Ojaruega, 2013, pp. 31-46). This is because the Nigerian, and by extension the African, is culturally connected to his land (environment) which he directly depends on for his sustenance. Al Gedricks (2001) buttresses this when he asserts:

The close connection between native people and their land has made them particularly vulnerable to change in their ecosystems. Because of their direct dependence on the earth for subsistence, they suffer more acutely than others when toxic materials pollute their lands... . there is an inseparable connection between the assault on the environment and the assault on human rights (p.41).

Over the years, the environmental question in Nigeria has taken a political outlook, involving the unbridled struggle for oil wealth, environmental degradation, as well as, human oppression and marginalisation. Enajite Ojaruega (2013) advances this claim using the example of Ken Saro-Wiwa as a Niger Delta activist. She asserts:

the issue of the environment fuses with other socio-economic and political matters that African writers deal with. Nigeria's Ken Saro-Wiwa's activism on the Niger Delta environment is linked to political, economic, and cultural issues in propagating the marginalisation of minority groups in a large Nigerian federation with numerous ethnicities (p.33).

Apparently, the challenges of exploitation, oppression and marginalisation, oil spills and environmental pollution, have given rise to various protest movements and groups (C. Onyema, 2011, pp. 189-209). W.S. Oghenememo (2013) suggests that the consequence of the dejected state of the Niger Delta environment is social revolt. It is a revolt against foreign oil explorers and their Nigerian counterparts on one hand. On the other hand, it is a revolt against the oppression and unjust killing of the Niger Delta people who find reasons to question or interrogate the unfair treatment meted on them. A vivid example, as mentioned earlier, is Ken Saro-Wiwa, who spearheaded some of these movements. However, he was executed alongside eight others by the then military authorities for being courageous enough to challenge the cruel devastation of the Niger Delta ecosystem by oil merchants and the government of the day. Since then, the Niger Delta region “which holds the key to Nigeria’s survival has remained the main issue in Nigeria’s social stability and socio-economic growth” (Uzoji, 2014, p.130). G.G. Darah (2011) is among a host of scholars who have acknowledged the experience of the Ogoni men that were the first to initiate sustained resistance of environmental degradation, social oppression and marginalisation. Given the foregoing propositions, there are many literary productions that address the environmental challenges facing Nigeria with a view to enlightening the society about and towards their possible solutions.

Having established the connection between environmental and social issues, it is therefore not surprising that Nigerian playwrights use their art to sensitise the public on the deteriorating environment in the forms of decreasing biodiversity, environmental pollution, and other acts of genocide. This, in recent times, has birthed eco-criticism as an approach to environmentally related discourses.

From the foregoing, it is evident that human and social protest forms an important style in the literary manifestations of Nigeria. A vivid example of writers whose styles tend towards human and social protest is J.P. Clark, who is a front runner of dramatists from the Niger Delta region. However, an analysis of protest by nature through her reactionary actions is not far from reach, as it plays out in the two selected drama texts.

Reactionary Trends of Nature in J.P. Clark's *The Raft* and Greg Mbajorgu's *Wake up Everyone*

As suggested earlier, eco-critical studies have often depicted nature at the periphery as setting and at other times, something to be explored. Such discourse on nature has, before now, relegated the natural environment to the status of a silent and inactive participant in Nigerian drama texts. This is evident in the numerous advocacies for nature by several critics, as earlier suggested by Bruce Robbins (1992, p.50), who further silences nature's voice by speaking on her behalf. Eco-critical reviews, as indicated in this study, suggests that, although vocally silent, nature has a voice depicted in her reactions to man's exploitation and despoliation. Be that as it may, nature has been observed to have always reacted to man's unbridled and inconsiderate exploration on it, and its seeming lack of resistance to these forms of insensitivity is the reason many critics have stood in as advocates for nature. On the other hand, it has been observed that nature has devised its own resistance mechanisms and strategies to curb this insensitive and mindless exploration, and warn man against his negative actions and intentions. Establishing nature as an active participant in drama then becomes a serious concern because she is often portrayed at the periphery as setting in drama texts.

Greg Mbajorgu's *Wake Up Everyone* is centered on the insensitivity of man to the devastating effect of climate change on the Nigerian environment (Ndoli Local Government Area). The Chairman of Ndoli Local Government Area initially poses as an environmental activist before an oil spillage that claims the life of his father gives him advantage to align with oil companies. As a way of compensating the Chairman, the oil companies sponsor his election as the Local Government Chairman. In the midst of the sabotage and insensitivity of these mindless politicians to the consequent problem of climate change, the playwright insists that there is still hope through Professor Aladinma, whose role in educating the rural farmers on the modalities of coping with their changing world is a significant effort in the direction of climate change adaptation and mediation. However, the effort of Aladinma and the rural people at salvaging the situation and preventing future occurrences is unsupported by the Ndoli Local Government Chairman. Consequently, the flood which occurs at the end of the play is a clear indication of the dangers of neglecting the warning signs of nature.

In the play, Professor Aladinma introduces the natural disasters caused by man's despoliation activities in the opening scene of the play. He suggests that disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes and floods, are nature's ways of reacting against and resisting man's evil activities. He says, these are "nothing but reactions to man's mindless activities on earth" (p.13). Professor Aladinma also adds that "farmers are complaining that their farmlands have become unproductive, and the fishermen say the fishes have disappeared from the rivers and stream" (p.14). Here, we see nature's incapability to give back to man because she has been violated. This inability, however, can be seen as a silent reaction against man's unbridled activities on nature. On another hand, nature, in reaction to human-induced eco-injustice and neglect, claims the life of the Chairman's father through a massive oil spillage (p.20). Having examined the state of environmental havoc, Professor Aladinma proposes that a dyke be built to fortify the river banks to avoid flooding in future. The one hundred and seventy million naira proposed by the Professor however seems outrageous to the Chairman. He scoffs, "imagine that fool walking into my office and asking the local government to get involved in a One Hundred and Seventy Million Naira project for no just reason" (p.19). This neglect by the Chairman, however, lands the people of Ndoli Local Government Area in a state of helplessness. In the play, the insensitivity and low interest in salvaging nature which will in turn be productive to man is portrayed here with the Chairman of Ndoli L.G.A., who ironically sees a project geared towards salvaging nature as irrelevant and exorbitant (p.19). Dimkpa also demonstrates this neglect to issues of the environment when he laments about the dryness and unproductivity of his farmland. However, Ugodiya blames Dimkpa, who prefers attending his friend's daughter's traditional marriage to a meeting with Professor Aladinma. This makes Dimkpa miss out on the free extension services provided to those in attendance (p.26).

Adaora further presents the unpleasant condition of the environment which on its own is a punishment that man must endure. She avers, "the rivers of the north have gone dry and their great water spirit now reside in plastic water tanks. Their rivers are no more, their source of life has gone forever and the modern oracle, Obumese, says it is global warming that dried up the river of life" (p.35). This suggests that

the dryness of the river has indirectly rendered the supernatural homeless. Although, the environmental challenge here is man-induced, the destruction of nature in a bid to initiate global warming shows that the absence of nature poses more danger to man.

Also in the play, Adaora's reference to the Calabar flood is a reminder of nature's destructive might when unjustly treated. She makes us aware that the flood washed her entire family away from the face of the earth. She refers to the flood as "angry waters" (p.38) which makes her feel hopeless and this suggests that nature inflicts more pain on man when it is angry, as it claims the life of everything she cherished.

From the foregoing, the playwright's underlying message is that nature, when unfairly treated, signals doom as suggested by Obioma. He says, "the signs are here with us, brother, it's doom, doom and nothing but doomed" (p.48). He also blames these reactions on man's insensitivity as he has "completely destroyed the immune system of our planet" (p.49) and this has led to "weeping and wailing everywhere and fear of increasing extremities" (p.49).

The reactions and expressions of nature in Mbajiorgu's play is quite similar to that in J.P. Clark's *The Raft*. Over the years, Niger Delta literary scholars have been saddled with the responsibility of commenting on the environment through works based on their first-hand experiences of degradation in the Niger Delta environment. This assertion is given credence by Fortress, I.A. & Abiodun-Eniayekan, E. (2016) when they suggest that nature writers, especially those from the Niger Delta use a combination of personal experiences, poetic artistry and foreign poetic elements to project and promote the course of the Niger Delta environment (p.3). Be that as it may, Clark as a Niger Deltan, may have been influenced by his personal experience of the region's ordeal and thus reflects it in his work. Although, it is not made known and obvious in Clark's play that nature has been destroyed by man, his experiences of environmental despoliation may have spurred him into a presentation of nature with an expressive might and a retaliation or reactionary strategy as indicated in the text.

In the play, Clark presents four lumbermen, who sail on a raft along a creek in the Niger Delta. At the beginning of the play, the four characters are faced with a wrecking raft which goes adrift. Part of the raft gets detached from the other as a result of loosened knots which

they all claimed were properly done before they set out on their journey. They cast the blame on a ghost, an evil god, a madman aboard, sea cows, among others, not knowing the cause of their being adrift. No doubt, the water on which they sail is not friendly and in tune with the medium of their journey as Kengide suggests. More so, just before Olotu, who is the first to get separated from the rest members of the raft by the whirlwind, a natural phenomenon, one is presented with some chaos caused by the wind. First is a wind-propelled bat (a swallow) that hits Ogro on his ear and this is seen as one of the signals of a storm. Another chaos is that of a flying hat. Kengide asserts, “a storm is here, that must be their one message. See, there flies off someone’s hat” (p.110). He further describes the intensity of the storm as one “fit to take an iroko by the hair and lift it clean off its feet” (p.111). Even when Ogro decides to swim out to rescue Olotu, Ogro is warned of sharks in the water on which they sail. However, as an expert swimmer he thinks of himself, Ogro eventually jumps into the water clamouring for rescue at the sight of a ship (p.118). Although the water does not pose a problem to him, instead the people in the ship throw him pebbles thinking he was a sea-monster. The water, here, may be a signifier of a transition mode between man’s precarious predicament and his help. It therefore becomes a determining factor in the quest for help by man.

Ibobo and Kengide are the only two characters left on the raft as they engage in discussions of different topicalities. Towards the end of the play, they are faced with a fog just when they have a glimmer of hope at arriving at the shores of Burutu. Kengide speaks, “it’s the fog; fog has come upon us (p.132) ...fog has stuffed its soot and smoke in our eyes, has shut up the world like a bat its wings (p.133)”. The fog causes them to lose sight of each other talk less of the water and their destination. They are totally adrift as the play ends. The play presents the storm, tide and fog as natural phenomena which play a major role in the fate of the four lumbermen.

Conclusion

No doubt, literature is made alive as a result of a wide range of theories with which it can be interpreted and deconstructed. A re-evaluation of nature in the dramatic genre of literature is a worthy attempt as the environmental question constantly evolves. Nature can now be

interpreted, in a different manner from its stereotype of docility in dramatic texts, as that which is gifted with various forms of expression, action and reaction, which may be understood as its own reactionary strategy to man's unbridled and insensitive activities on her. Although, this change is often induced by man, the inability of nature to give back to man forms part of her reaction to her unjust treatment. In *The Raft*, however, it is not the case of nature reacting to man's unfair treatment to her; it depicts the active presence of nature in the affairs of man as seen in the different challenges the elements of nature poses to the four characters. On the other hand, nature's reaction in *Wake Up Everyone* is one that is induced by man. The insensitivity of the Chairman to the challenges of the environment causes havoc to him and the entire inhabitants of the Local Government. Man's nefarious activities on the environment birth a different appearance of the environment. In other words, man's activities determine how the environment turns out to be. However, this change in appearance suggests nature's reaction, although man-induced, to man what he gives her.

References

- Abubakar, A.S. (2002). Ideological Conflict in Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of Earth*. *Alore: Ilorin Journal of Humanities, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin*. Vol. 12. (Ed.) V.A. Alabi. Ilorin: University Press. pp. 14-24
- Amuta, C. (1986). *Towards a Sociology of African Literature*. Zim Pan, Oguta.
- Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa, J. & Madubuike, I. (1980). *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Clark, J.P. (1964). *The Raft*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Darah, G.G. (2011). Revolutionary Pressures in Niger Delta Literature. *From Boom to Doom: Protest and Conflict Resolution in the Literature of the Niger Delta*. (Ed.) Nwabunanya, C. Owerri: Springfield Publishers Ltd. pp.2-16.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translation by C. Farrington. McGibbon and Kee, London.

- Feghabo, C.C. (2014). *Alienation and Ecoactivism in Selected Works on the Niger Delta Crisis* (Doctoral Thesis). Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria.
- Fortress, I.A. & Abiodun-Eniayekan, E. (2016). *Poetry and the Niger Delta Environment: An Eco-critical Perspective*. A Publication of the Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University, Lokoja, Kogi State.
- Gbilekaa, S.E.T. (1997). *Radical Theatre in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications Limited.
- Gedricks, Al. (2001). *Resource Rebels: Native Challenges to Mining and Oil Corporations*. Cambridge: South End Press.
- Jones, E. (1973). *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*. London: Heinemann.
- Mbajiorgu, G. (2011). *Wake Up Everyone*. Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993). *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Culture Freedom*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Nwagbara, U. (2010). Poetics of Resistance: Ecocritical Reading of Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*. *African Study Monographs*, 31(1): pp.17-30.
- Oghenememo, W. S. (2013). The Niger Delta in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry. A Study of Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*, Uche Peter Umez's *Dark through the Delta* and G. Ebinyo Ogbowei's *The Heedless Ballot Box*. School of Postgraduate Studies, IMSU, Web. 3 May, 2013.
- Ojaruega, E. (2013). Eco-activism in Contemporary African Literature: Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness* and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*. *Ecocritical Literature: Regreening the African Landscape*. Ogaga Okuyade (Ed). New York: African Heritage Press. pp.31-46.
- Onukaogu, A. & Onyerionwu, E. (2011). Crisis and the Literature of the Niger Delta: The Dual Aesthetics of the Lachrymal and the Revolutionary. *From Boom to Doom: Protest and Conflict Resolution in the Literature of the Niger Delta*. (Ed.) Nwabunanya, C. Owerri: Springfield Publishers Ltd. pp.50-72.

- Onyema, C. (2011). Jungle and Oil Green: Currents of Environmental Discourse in Four Upland Niger Delta Narratives. *From Boom to Doom: Protest and Conflict Resolution in the Literature of the Niger Delta*. (Ed.) Nwahunanya, Chinyere. Owerri: Springfield Publishers Ltd. pp.189-209.
- Robbins, B. (1992). The East is a Career: Edward Said and the Logics of Professionalism. *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*. (Ed) M. Sprinker. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Spivak, G. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds). Urbana: University of Illinois Press. pp. 271-313.
- Uzoji, E. (2014). Eco-literacy and the Planetary Crisis: Nigerian Protest Drama and the Niger-Delta Dynamics. *Covenant Journal of Language Studies (CJLS) Vol. 2, No. 2*. pp.127-145.