

RIVERINE POETRY AND THE EXPLORATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Literary artists have, over the years, used literature to mirror the society in which they live. These artists are not just concerned with man's relationship with the environment in which he lives. What happens to the wild life in the bush and the fishes of the sea and the sea in which they live and what happens to the birds of the air and even the free air in which they fly are of great concern to the artist especially as these ecological conditions affect man and the general peace of the environments. This study examines the effect the environment has on Riverine Poetry. In every aspect of life, you attribute certain qualities of a man, certain behavioral patterns, and certain modes of perception to the environment. When related to literature, certain innate qualities of literature of a place are affected by that environment. In other words, one can just see the prevalent issue of environmental degradation, human right violation, abuse of power, and how these factors affect the life and destiny of the people in the affected communities. This study, therefore, examines riverine poetry and how the poets and the poems are affected by the environment.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT ON RIVERINE POETRY

INTRODUCTION

The culture and tradition of a people are always very evident in every aspect of their lives and that is why one's environment influences one's way of life and the general perception one has of things. The influence of the environment permeates one's thinking, attitude, perception, relationships and of course the literature of the people. That is why some people see literature as a mirror of the society. While reading any work of arts, one must encounter flashes of people's life and history. It may manifest in the religion, economy, clothing or just the dominant issues addressed in the literature of the people who live in a given community. If we take oral literature for example, we see that most of the folktales, objects like thatched roofs, palm fruits, gong and clan warriors are a regular occurrence.

In the same vein, the poetry of the Niger- Delta people which is also referred to as riverine poetry is hugely influenced by the environment and the dominant issues that affect the Niger- Delta people are always talked about. Many riverine poets have written extensively on some of these issues like the worship of the river goddess, fishery, beauty of the river, environmental degradation, water pollution, armed robbery, oil bunkering, human rights abuse, political neglect, leadership abuse, bribery and corruption and militancy. Poets like Gabriel Okara, J.P. Clark, Mike Osofisan, Tanure Ojaide, Odi Ofeimuna, Jumoke Verissimo and others have, through their poetry, brought to light these major issues that have affected the life, growth and death of the Niger- delta citizens. These poets in their works demonstrate a deep passion for their people as they seek to address these dominant issues.

Those who are affected by what happens in their environment have these issues imprinted in their heads which is why even when they pick their pens and papers to write, they write riverine poetry. Obu Udeozo agrees with this as he writes.

Having studied the works of the past masters of African Literature in English, given my own heritage and the strong voices of my parents, I have realized that nobody can touch the limit of literary excellence without carrying his culture along. The works of Achebe, Soyika, Christopher Okigbo, NgugiWaThiongo and Bedekeremo Clark are startling testaments of the conjoint resource fullness of the folk imagination and

literature genius (War and peace in the end Time, Udeozo 17)

This work tries to take us closer to what happens in the Niger- delta, the struggle to manage properly the environment while exploiting the natural resources of the people. In most of the works, the beauty of the environment is highlighted while extolling the beauty of the rivers, seas and the ocean and that is why it breaks their heart to see what has become of the once lush environment.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Political history reminds us that the Niger Delta as a region predates Nigeria's emergence as a British colony. Britain's Niger Delta Protectorate and the Niger Delta Coast Protectorate were already well established by the mid 1880s and the late 1890s before the formation of southern Nigeria in 1900. In the decades before Second World War, many Niger Delta communities had their own local leaders who distinguished themselves in the service of their people while serving the British masters. But it was only as a result of the Arthur Richards Reforms of 1946 that regional representation became important in British colonial arrangements. The people's experiences with the treacherous British policies served them well in the leaders who emerged to represent them in the late 1940s.

It was agitation by Ijaw Rivers Peoples League that led to the creation of River Province in 1947. It was here and during this period that the Niger Delta Congress was founded by the young Harlod Dappa- Biriye to fight for equality for the disadvantaged people of the Niger Delta. He later represented the people in the London Conference of the Minorities and the report of the Willinks Commission in 1958 described the Niger Delta as a "poor, backward and neglected region".

At Nigeria's independence in 1960, the injustices against the Niger Delta People prompted Isaac AdakaBoro, the young radical nationalist, an Ijaw born revolutionary and master campaigner of resource control to champion a revolt against the oppressors of the people of the Niger Delta to effect a change of the environment so that "man can be man". On February 23, 1966, he landed at Tontoubau a sacred forest in Kaiama town in the present Bayelsa State in the riverine areas of the Niger Delta with one hundred and fifty-nine comrades to launch a guerrilla war against the then Federal Military Government. Earlier in January 1966, Boro had proclaimed the Niger Delta

Peoples Republic with himself as Head of State. He engaged the Nigeria Police Force in a bloody battle, but the Armed Forces of Nigeria went into the war and Boro and his men held up the federal troops for a while before he was defeated on the 12th day. This rebellion has today become known in political history of Nigeria as the Twelve-Day revolution.

By popular perception, the marginalization and balkanization of the peoples of the Niger Delta, the exploitation of their environment and the resultant conflicts have their roots in the discovery of oil as well as the exploitation, exploration and production activities by the oil multinationals. Incidental to and indeed compounding this ecological devastation is the political marginalization and total neglect of the people and especially the denial of their rights, including land rights. The above political background as given by Akpobibibo (2001) in a fortnightly programme of the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, United Kingdom provides important information that make for proper appreciation of the Niger Delta socio-political terrain and the kind of poetry that flows from there.

One thing that we have tried to establish is that literature is very much influenced by the environment and having had a background insight on some of these issues and problems besetting the Niger Delta people, we will discuss the different themes which these works examined.

A. Theme of Nostalgia

Many of the riverine poets always remember how the environment was before the discovery of oil and other natural elements. They remember how green the grasses looked, how serene and peaceful the waters and seas used to be and how the sea animals used to swim and go about their daily businesses in peace which is no-longer the case. In Ojaides poetic imagination, we learnt that

“My roots run deep into the Delta area. Its traditions, folklore, fauna and flora no doubt, enriched my children of Iroko and Labyrinths of the Delta. This area of constant rains, where we children thought we saw fish fall from the sky in hurricanes, did not remain the same. By the 1960s the rivers had been dredged to take in pontoons or even ships to enter our backyard. Shell-BP had started to pollute the rivers and streams, and farmlands with oil and flaring gas. Forests had been cleared by poachers and others to feed the African Timber Company in Sapele. Streams and marshes dried up (...)”
(Ojaide 1996:122).

He concludes by saying:

“The world into which I was born has changed drastically over the years. It has gone without being replenished (...). But the major problem had to do with the discovery of oil in the Delta. The oil boom became doom for inhabitants of the region”.

Here, he provokes, great nostalgic reflection on the lost beauty and natural wealth of the region following the discovery and exploration of oil. The prevailing consciousness in this tradition is one of deep hurt and irreparable loss. The injustice and insensitivity that the Nigerian nation has visited on the people intensify the growing interrogation of the Nigerian experience in their popular response. Ojaide projects the collective memory of the people by stressing the tragic loss of the bond they once had with their environment. Ojaide’s recollection, with its inscription of the contrast between the past and the violated present, captures the shared memory that is given expression in various ways in the works of the Niger Delta poets.

In spite of his very short career as a poet, Ibiwari Ikiriko’s work is probably the most representative of contemporary Niger Delta poetry in the sense that it primarily articulates a regional consciousness. Ikiriko’s “[The Palm and the Crude” (2000:31) appropriates this historical awareness. In constructing an economic history of Nigeria, it privileges the Niger Delta as the source of wealth, suggesting that the transition the country underwent from an agrarian to oil economy was based on the discovery and exploration of crude oil.

“In the beginning

Was the Palm

And the Palm

Was of us

And the Palm

Was by us

And the Palm

Was with

Then came the Crude

And the Crude

Was of us

But by them

And with them.”

But as:

“The Palm

Propelled the pacification process

And with us as proud partners Merchants and Missions

Rode triumphant unland To let in light

Birth as palm fruits

Births as palm fruits

In the sun”

The poet’s argument inevitably locates the source of the crisis in the master/servant relationship which seems to have been normalized in the Nigerian political economy. This has seen the exclusion of the oil-producing region from managing and utilizing the resources within the region.

“Then came the Crude

And the Crude

Wasted our waters

Soiled our soils

And lacerated our lot

And we, Aborigines

Of the riverside, bereft, stoic,

Wash our palms

With dry spittle

As legs move up to tie hands,

And sahelian

Dune boom with

Marine doom” (31-31)

Ikiriko: *The Palm and the Crude* (2000:31-32)

He just cries about the level to which the environment has come and weeps for the fact that there is also no hope in sight.

Environmental Degradation

In addition to crying about how the lands, seas, vegetables, fish and animals used to be, is the cry for how things are at present. The riverine poets always cry and weep for what has become of their once habitable environment and the ruins it has become. Tenure Ojaide reveals in “When green was lingua franca”, how the Niger Delta had become uninhabitable due largely to the activities of oil companies and allied agencies of government that made no plan for the environmental impact assessment of their activities. His nostalgic collection of the lost homely and safe environment affirms the dislocation in the socioeconomic routines of the people, ascribing the development to the conspiracy of multinational companies in the oil sector with an uncaring government:

*“Shell broke bond
with quakes and a hell
of flares. Stoking a hearth
under God’s own very behind!
Stop perjuring women for
Their industry, none of them
Drove God to the sky’s height;
It wasn’t the pestle’s thrust
That caused the eternal rift” (13)*

Adiyi Bestman’s perception of the tragic shift in “Kiabara, Dive No More” is no less pathetic, he writes:

*“The land is drying out
Kiabara, can’t you see
for the fish are stiff
fly to distant horizons
call the gusts
to flush this desolate web of pain” (Bestman 1998:41)*

The plight and degradation that the Niger Delta people have gone through have got to the stage where they no longer believe in the government or any other agency to save them as they now

believe that it is only their original deities that can come to their rescue. Ikiriko in his poem “Odo” writes thus:

*How much tears can fill a basket of calamities?
What Marshal Plan can fill a basket of calamities?
What gestures can raise ruined relics to mansion?
O, a brazen demolition of our land and lives
Has replaced the foxy looting of our lot
As the tactics shift from marginalization to pacification
But as no tears can rend a calabash of community will,
So will Odi rise again?
Like the son on an Easter morning
And lighten this darkness wreath Delta” (:63-64).*

In this light, we see that the Niger Delta environment is not what it used to be because the environment has lost its glory, splendor and originality.

Political Exploitation:

Another thematic projection in the influence of the environment in the riverine poetry is that of political exploitation. Most of the show that how the federal government has no interest in the welfare of the Niger Delta people but instead has continued to exploit the natural resources God has given to them. Most of these woks bring to light how the federal government has collaborated with the multinational companies to loot and take advantage of these resources and in the process leave the environment in a state of dissatisfaction. In a poem like “The Raped” by Jumoke Verissimo, she likens the activities of the federal government and these multinational companies to rape as she writes:

These days ages vulvas live in fear of poverty
weakened thighs seek or change
from violent thrusts on impotent will
vulvas of our lands have name contagious
the fear of unreached orgasms trails them
their once virgin thighs now over-raped,
plead for menopause (Verissimopg 2)

When talking about the once virgin thighs over-raped, she examines the blatant abuse of their God-given natural resources. Going down, she talks about them pleading for menopause and the use of that personification has its significance because we understand it to be a plea to those who perpetrate the evil against them to stop because they have grown tired and faint.

Tenure Ojaide in his own works does not embellish words like some other writers because he goes all out to call a spade a spade. In the poem “Smoke” from one of his anthologies, we hear him saying:

There are traps and ambushes waiting there are liveries of the general force, they were blood painted armour in battle once foreigners came to take away what enriched us, they cared not for our cries. They took our youth and sprintled comfort over heads of hungry and helpless ones other tidbits closed the mouths of chiefs and that started the tribulation of mistrust (Ojaide 19).

From this, we know that it is very common to see this consciousness of Political exploitation in most riverine works. Here we see the reference to the Chiefs as corrupt because the foreigners came and took what enriched them, without caring about their cries. These Chiefs never talked because they have been bribed.

DIFFERENT PHASES OF ENVIRONMENT IN RIVERINE POETRY

It is always thought that writing is an art and the artistic genius is made obvious in advanced art of imaginative literature. This paper argues with Onuigbo (2013) that literature may not always be intellectually provoking but literature, fiction drama or poetry is most often emotionally compelling. Anyone who is conversant with riverine poetry will agree that this brand of poetry may not be really entertaining but it always has a firm grip on the human heart. What one experiences in some of these poems is like Don Lee’s production of

*Assassin's poems, poems that shoot guns poems that wrestle
copes into alleys and take their guns, leaving them dead*

Just as the Africa-American uses poetry to whip up emotions against the white power structure, the riverine poets use poetry to project the hostility of the multinationals against the environment and Niger Delta people. It needs to be said, however, that the relationship between human action and environmental hazards is not limited to the Niger Delta. Ekpoh (2009) indicated that the whole world is grappling with various kinds of environmental problems ranging from global warming, ozone deflection wild fire to floods, water pollution and deforestation. What is even more interesting is Nwoma's (2003) ecocentric exposition as he advances the obvious connection between ecocriticism and treatment of the forces of human oppression. Emerging trends in ecofeminism forces a complex connection between ecocriticism and ecofeminism: a connection in which women see no liberation for them and no solution to ecological crisis in a society whose model of relationship is based on domination and unequal partnership. Ecocriticism is a growing literary movement that did not start with riverine poetry and will not end with it. Instead, it is a movement that examines man's handling of nature through the medium of literature. Just as Don Lee was producing assassin's poems that shoot guns, ecofeminism was producing what Nwoma (2013) calls "global ecological sisterhood" that calls on all women to "link arms" against the oppression of natural environment and the oppression of women. The emerging global ecological sisterhood sees the hatred of women and the hatred of nature as the two sides of a coin that are complementary to produce an acceptable whole.

With this background, one appreciates the different faces and phases of the environment in riverine poetry.

The different faces of the Environment in Riverine Poetry

The environment is portrayed in different ways in the riverine poetry of the Niger Delta. The environment is like the two sides of a coin which though one, could be viewed from differing perspectives. The environment by some of these poets is viewed from the negritude movement angle while others view it from the pan-African movement angle.

While the pan-African writers are more engaged in war of words, lashing out against the colonial masters as a means of achieving freedom, the negritude writers take a narcissist stand of talking about all the exploitations of the white over the black while extolling the qualities of the black

man. They are of the opinion that the white man behaves the way he does because of the inherent inferiority complex found in him. The negritude writers would always say that black is superior so that instead of crying “I am a human being like you white man”, he states I am better than you”. The above illustration also holds sway and captures the different approaches that the riverine writers take. One is a political movement and a forceful disapproval of the wrong things perpetrated against the environment which is a common theme among most of the riverine works.. The other extols the virtue of the environment, appreciating what they have regardless of what the mindless oppressors do. They achieve this by either going back to time or by imagining and projecting a brighter, greater and more glorious future where the environment still prevails above what is being done against it and moves back to the glories of the past. There are, however, a few poets who take this approach of extolling the virtues of the environment and one of those is Oyinpreye Christopher Dorgu who wrote “A poem from Ijawland”. From the beginning of the poem, we can see the environment in a different way and light from the ways other present it. Here there is no lambasting the errors of the environment like the normal riverine writer does but, instead from line one, we hear that:

*Oh most gracious Izonebe, land of the beautiful morning
adorned with bounteous soils I think the sounds of rushing
waters and your serenity from day to night and night back
into day. The joy of our people, I eagerly await the day of
your liberation Oh Ijaw nation! I patiently wait solemnly.*
(Dorgu pg 2)

The people are very appreciative of having been adorned by some of these beautiful natural elements with bounteous soil underneath. Still going down, the poet channels his energy in thinking of the rushing waters and green lofty mountains which he says are not always a common sight in other places. In stanza two, he continues thus:

Oh thou beautiful Ijo, home of tradition of truth cultured
activities have all the children of your youth engaged,
you are similar to a virtuous wife,
for you are truly a mother of many.
In you the martime merchants amass stacks of ancient wealth
How we long for the day of your emancipation.

Oh land of the most precious 'Black Gold'-crude oil
May your true day be independence come in no distant time.
Ise (Dorgu, pg 3)

In this stanza, the poet keeps extolling the environment by calling her a home of tradition and truth. He also takes a look at the wonderful cultural part of the environment and likens the environment to a virtuous wife. We should bear in mind that the person who talks about all these does not do it because he is unaware of all the wrong doings in the society but because he has knowledge of the fact that something is wrong. In the last line of stanza two, he talks about a day of true independence coming soon just as the last line in stanza one talks about the day of liberation.

CONCLUSION

Having analyzed some riverine poems, the study shows that the environment is an important fact that is always seen in the work of a writer. The environment is one factor that always appears in the work of a writer, but in riverine works, we see it more in plays and poems than in other forms of writing. As stated earlier, the environmental problems are very peculiar to them and they consciously or subconsciously have them reflected in their works because when a house is on fire, it is very difficult to conceal the danger because the smoke always moves upwards. Just as we have also stated before, such environment problems peculiar to those in the riverine areas are usually problems of land, water and air pollution. Water pollution, environmental degradation, release of various harmful and toxic compounds into the air and fire outbreaks as a result of gaseous compounds released into the air are common occurrences in literary discourse. In most of the works, we see them pleading to those who are the perpetrators of these crimes, including the federal government, the oil companies and even the traditional rulers who collect huge sums of money in order to allow these crimes against both the environment and humanity.

Finally, we can see that the environment always goes hand in hand with the work and no matter how concealed, there would always be fragmentation of the environmental issues of a particular place where a work is produced.

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