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Apocalyptic vision and the quest for ethnic identity in Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*

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Abstract
In this epistolary novel, Okpewho emphasizes the natural relation of the Ijaws to their land and the threat posed to this land by oil exploration activities. The Paper argues that the creeks and swamps function in the text as symbols of cultural memory and ethnic identity. This essay traces the images of ecological destruction and its significance as a new critical idiom. The themes of environmental crisis appears as a recent phenomenon in modern Nigerian literature. The paper examines *Tides* in the light of the issues raised by eco-criticism and environmentalism. It traces images of apocalyptic vision in the text in order to point out the relationship between the characters and their responses to these environmental practices. Specifically, the aim is to contribute to the burgeoning debate within eco-criticism and African environmental history, as well as to show how concerns with environmental practices can lead to national development and the amelioration of the crisis of the natural environment.

Keywords: Okpewho emphasizes, apocalyptic vision, ethnic identity

Introduction

The subject of environmental criticism has received scant attention in Nigerian literature. While colonialism and feminist ideologies in African literature have attracted substantial interests from both writers and critics, the same level of interests have not been sustained on literature dealing with the issues of the environment. Besides, despite the inscription of the issues of environmental concerns in literature of the 1990s, not many critics of African literature have taken up at length the issues of the relationship between the environment and the Nigeria novel.

Regrettably while the great critics of our literature have offered their probing minds to theories of formalism, Marxism, sociology of literature and mythic criticism, and have used these critical models to interpret Nigerian literature, Nigeria critics are yet to record one great critic who has devoted his talent to the literature of the environment, in spite of the flowering of this literature in the 1980s and 1990s. Obviously landscape writing has had a minority tradition in Nigerian literary culture. But with the celebrated pollution of oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and the increasing vocal struggles of the late environmental activist, Ken Saro-wiwa in the 1990s, the literature dealing with the subject of the environmental pollution has become an increasingly aspect of Nigerian writing. Literature of environmental dispoilation, it seems to me, presents an alternative to cultural praxis. Therefore nature writing presents an alternative view point to the dominant culture in our time.

In recent times, a number of Nigerian writers, particularly those from the Niger Delta extraction have used fiction to represent the relationship between the dominant culture and the Niger Delta natural landscape. Evidently, these writings are antithetical to the dominant culture's practices. Therefore, this paper offers an insight into the culture's shifting relation between the environment and the literary imagination of the landscape. Indeed, the recognition of landscape writing is one that represents a major shift in literary imagination. The eco-imaginative literature is one step further in the corpus of "African imagination.

Niyi Osundare's 1986 collection of poems, *The Eye of the Earth* may be said to be the first to inaugurate the literature of the environment and themes of ecological concerns in Nigerian literary writing. But while "Osundare is the best example of a black African writer, critic, and academic whose critical energy is focused on environmental themes…" (Slaymaker 686), and while his poetry could be classified as pastoral, Okpewho's *Tide* tilts toward apocalyptic vision. It is a novel that shows sympathy with the exploited minority villages of the Niger Delta in Nigeria, ruptured by capitalist greed and social neglect.

Apocalyptic vision, land and identity in *Tides*

The subjects of nature, ecology, and the environment have also been explored in the works of the minority Ogoni environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa (Slaymaker 686). However, a greater part of Saro-Wiwa's concern with the environment is mostly found in his political activities and historical treatises, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni* Tragedy, and A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary, rather than in his fictional narratives.

In recent times, following the effects of pollution on the environment, two notable novels have schematized, to some extent, a concern with the poisoning of the Niger Delta environment. These are Isidore Okpewho's epistolary novel, Tides and Tanure Ojaide's The Activist. This concern with oil pollution and its aftermaths to fishing and farming is the main pre-occupation of *Tides*. This novel, in the main, prefigures apocalyptic themes. This may be due to two key issues: oil pollution seems to function as a trope for the general fear about the collective dangers to the survival of the means of livelihood of the indigenous people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Again, the pollution consciousness in Nigerian fiction also reflects shifts in historical consciousness and cultural identity. These perceptions of self and others and of apocalyptic vision are

well illustrated in *Tides.*

In *The African Imagination* Abiola Irele points out that African literature is "distinguished by a fundamental unity not only of reference but also of vision" [3]. He further adds that the African imagination deals with the larger question of a "collective vision of the world" as well as "the larger question of black identity [4]. Similarly, since the mid 1980s, Nigerian literature has embedded the environmental and ecological vision. Because of its ethnic orientation, it is a literature that comes under what Irele calls "the territorial imperative [6].

Exploring the attitudes and ideas stemming from the immediate environment typifies what Edward Said has described as "the situation of writing in history" (qtd. in Irele 68). The imaginative and ideological distillation of the issues of environmental concerns, issues of land and identity, and of the consequences of pollution to individuals and wildlife, of people who dwell in this environment are the topical issues in recent Nigerian writings. Recent Niger Delta literature is centred upon a collective vision: the vision of a society in danger of extinction due to the combined activities of multinational companies and their Nigerian government accomplices. These works paint a gruesome picture of insensitivity. It is a literature that appropriates images of doom to awaken in human consciousness the consequences of human activities on the Niger Delta landscape. In this respect, the African imagination has undergone some changes to include the eco-imagination. The resort to environmental imagination is a pointed indictment to the stark realities of socioeconomic practices in Nigeria in the post-independence era and how this has threatened the Niger Delta landscape. It is within the context of apocalyptic vision that I shall attempt a critical analysis of Okpewho's *Tides.* But to explore this vision, of course, one must clarify the concept of the literature of the environment.

The study of literature and the environment is a recent phenomenon in literary studies. Until the 1980s and 1990s not much was heard of this brand of critical discourse, though there were traces of ecological concerns in some works published in the 1960s and 1970s in Nigeria. However there was still lacking an organized theory of criticism about this brand of studies. According to Peter Barry, the first systematic organization in the West may have emerged in William Rueckert's 1978 essay entitled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Rueckert effectively enunciated the term "ecocriticism" to describe the literature of the environment (249). Rueckert's main purpose is "with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology "… has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world…" (Rueckert 107).

Rueckert's essay led to the burgeoning consideration of environmental literary criticism in the 1980s and 1990s. Even though there are scattered approaches, Cheryll Glotfelty and Fromm's working definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader* is generally accepted by most eco-critics. According to them "eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii); Glotfelty and Fromm further articulate the need to study what they call the "undervalued genre of nature writing" (xxxi). Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* defines "'ecocriticism'… as [a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (430, n. 20).

Simon Estok in "A Report Card on Ecocriticism" notes that "ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, especially in its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and secondly, by its commitment to making connections" (220). This consciousness is embedded in the definition offered by Abrams and Harpham. According to them, "Ecocriticism designates the critical writings that explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the demage being wrought on that environment by human activities" (98). Therefore to speak for nature is to appropriate nature's voice. In whatever disguise, a more conscious insertion of environmental issues in criticism would lead to a better understanding and appreciation of the consequences of the human activities on the environment and help in activating a more environmental consciousness.

More broadly, literature of the environment or rather ecocriticism constitutes a process of recasting and broadening the traditional canon of literary studies. Buell states that any work qualifying to be placed as literature of the environment must display the following characteristics:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history…
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest…
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical framework…
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text…. (7-8, emphasis in the original)

Okpewho's *Tides* interpolates these features. While it may be true that its vision is essentially anthropocentric, it nonetheless interrogates the place of ethnic minorities in the age of oil exploration and the place of nature in a Nigerian culture shaped by global economic greed and shows concerns with the biological natural world. In other words its vision is more biocentrically construed. As Rigby has noted "Ecocriticism, then, remembers the earth by rendering an account of the indebtedness of culture to nature"(154) and moreover, an ecocritical text must internalize that "the defense of nature is vitally interconnected with the pursuit of social justice" (Rigby 154).

In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria today the major issue that has dominated sociocultural discourse in the last decade may be said to be the issue of environmental crises. *Tides* derives its subject matter from the environmental vision ensconced in Buell's dialectic. In his words, "Environmental literature launches itself from the presumption that we do not think about our surroundings, and our relation to them, as much as we ought to" (261). In *Tides* therefore, Okpewho keeps environmental consciousness activated by objectifying and concretizing the oil spills and other forms of pollution that threaten the existence of the indigenous people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. There is a heightened perceptual sensitivity on the consequences of these on both human and nonhuman species. In other words, we find a congruence of environmental themes and

apocalyptic rhetoric. Apocalyptic imagination dates back to 1200BCE with a vision of "a sense of urgency about the demise of the world" (Garrard 85).

Tides presents characters, in this case Tonwe and his friend Piriye Dukumo (and also the radical Ebika Harrison) whose thoughts about the consequences of oil exploration in the Niger Delta and the industrial activities of the Kwara Dam emerge through a series of letters written largely by Tonwe and Dukumo. The two former journalists, erstwhile colleagues at the *National Chronicle* had just been retrenched. Ironically both of them from Beniotu, in the Niger Delta, were the only ones affected by the redundancy policy at the nation's top daily, *Chronicle*, thereby giving a hint of ethnic purge. Following this development, the older Tonwe decides to retire to his little village of Seiama where he hopes to "now enjoy the peace and security" of village life, while his younger friend, Mr Dukumo opts to remain in the city of Lagos as a freelance journalist.

Shortly afterwards, Mr Dukumo writes to his friend, inviting him to participate in his investigative project on the effects of oil exploration to the Beniotu nation, agricultural activities and aquatic creatures in the Niger Delta region. Initially, Tonwe is skeptical to engage in such project because of its ethnic colorations and more because of the prospects of such a book fanning on the embers of ethnicity in Nigeria. He would only be willing, supposing he had the mental and physical strength to engage in such venture, if it had a nationalist and multiethnic orientation or perspective.

However, everything suddenly clicks. Tonwe is paid a visit by some fishermen in his community who narrated their ordeals in the hands of Atlantic Fuels due to the oil exploration activities of the Atlantic Fuels, an oil prospecting company and the threat to the fishermen's economic and fishing fortunes. The fishermen's delegation to persuade the company to switch off its search-lights during hours of fishing activities had been brutally suppressed by armed soldiers.

Tonwe now realizes how the Kwara Dam and oil exploration activities threaten to destroy the Niger Delta communities, including, of course, the peace he so much craves for. Tonwe now realizes that the government looks the other way while the multinational oil companies indulge in practices that destroy the environment. The Kwara Dam which severely reduces the inflow of water down the Niger, constitutes an unhappy event that curtails fishing activities, while the freequent " spillage of crude petroleum from the rigs" (2) into rivers and nearby farm constitute a serious threat to agricultural life. Tonwe also becomes aware of the real dangers faced by fishermen in Brikama village.

The collaboration by the military convinces Tonwe that Dukumo's project might after all be necessary to save his people and their environment from extinction. He agrees to intervene on the ground that their strategies would remain peaceful, though he realizes how difficult this would be but he continues to nurse faint hopes that the oil companies and their collaborators in government would take necessary steps to make life more meaningful to the suffering oil bearing communities.

However, back in Lagos, Tonwe's peaceful insights are not shared by the more exuberant and radically minded Ebika Harrison (Bickerbug), who believes that the Niger Delta communities must wake up and save themselves from the multinational oil companies and their government accomplices, if necessary by means of violence to preserve their cultural and ethnic identities from being confined to the dustbin of history. Ebika Harrison initially aligns himself with the CCC- the Committee for Concerned Citizens whose goal is to highlight the cause of the fisherman, fight the industrial projects represented by the Kwara Dam as well as the frequent despoliation of the environment by oil spillages.

But due largely to ideological differences, Ebika Harrison splits with the other members of CCC. Harrison expresses serious concerns on the consequences of cultural practices; however, his ideological orientation alienates him from moderates like Tonwe. He eventually goes solo in his campaign to force the government and the oil companies to change their operational method in the Niger Delta, but his radicalisms frequently pit him against the authorities. He is frequently arrested and tortured, Harrison believes firmly in the use of militancy and violence in solving the environmental challenges in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Finally, he bombs the Kwara Dam, releasing water to flow again into the creeks of the Niger Delta. His action though leads to his arrest and that of other moderates like Tonwe who the government accuses of assisting Ebika Harrison even though Tonwe remains self-restrained despite government conspiracy with the multi-nationals to continue in the despoilage of the Niger Delta environment.

What is remarkable about *Tides* is its fusion of ethnic identity and environmental issues, the way it interpolates the issues of a marginalized group within the Nigerian geopolitical space. By this intermingling, the novel also appropriates a voice for the marginalized. Its vision is governed by a sense of affinity of the Delta people with their land. And Dukumo expresses this sentiment more acutely when he laments:

But it bothers me that you fail to recognize that Nigeria is becoming an increasingly ethnic society… I don't know whose fault it is and I don't really care a shit. All I know is that nothing matters to me now more than the salvation of our homeland and the preservation of our heritage. (8)

In effect, the survival of the environment is equated with the survival of an ethnic society. This is also an ideology of self-preservation. In the real sense man has always identified with the familiar physical environment and the physical environment represents an important trope in the cultural memory of the Ijaws.

In real terms, Bickerbug's violent agitation is also impetrated around the preservation of the land and self. His campaign therefore shows that the present culture is both contradictory and ultimately unsustainable as Dukumo explains:

Bickerbug had begun to show pictures of the devastation done to the Niger Delta environment by the oil exploration – deforestation of on-shore sites, desecration of traditional shrines, evacuation and tearing up of whole villages and farmlands, vast areas of oil spillage and great quantities of aquatic life destroyed…. (18)

What we see here is a metaphoric representation of the land as a cultural symbol. The vision here is similar to what Buell describes as a "kind of ecological apocalypse" (288).

Interestingly, Bickerbug's concern incorporates questions of social justice. This vision broadens his concern with the Niger Delta people to include the Niger Delta landscape. Here then, through Bickerbug, Okpewho imagines the perception of defilement – this defilement provokes the

necessity to resist, for, as Gayatri Spivak has argued, "the human subaltern cannot be heard without the mediation of more privileged supporters" (271). Bickerbug's intervention is constructed within the praxis of violence and this is what guides his response as he sardonically declares:

But I also know you are a Beniotu man like myself. Nobody is going to do anything about the suffering of our people if we don't do it ourselves… When the time comes that I feel my friends are not sufficiently behind me in what I'm trying to do, I'm going to cut loose from them. I have a mission, and that is the salvation of our people from the inhuman devastation which policies formulated by corrupt officials here in Lagos have constantly brought about (21).

Intermingled in Bickerbug's reaction is also a political critique. In a sense he locates the root of the environmental problems in the Niger Delta within the corridors of the political establishment. The root lies in the Nigerian military-multinational corporations' alliance. Although located within a cosmopolitan space, the voice which Bickerbug assumes predisposes affinity with the rural. The major motivation for the violent reaction of Bickerbug is that he feels threatened by the collaborative practices of both the government and the oil companies. This threat arises from the uncanny exploitation of the environment and its implications.

The issue that arises in this discourse is this, namely, how does Okpewho conceptualize the physical setting or space in *Tides*? The basic issue is the conditions of life of individuals in the Niger Delta landscape. This condition of life is gloomily captured and it is Bickerbug who remarkably expresses this apocalyptic metaphor as he explains to Dukumo:

Now, the dangers of all this oil pollution to the environment are sufficiently well known to you. The fishes die because the floating oil blocks the oxygen from the water or because their respiratory membranes are clogged by the oil. Even the birds that dip in the water to catch fish and other foods suffer…. The farms, too, are ruined – the crops won't grow because the oil floating on the irrigation chokes the soil. Even the drinking water is affected – your friend Brisibe was right…. (146)

This imagery of doom is envisioned with great urgency and is the most perfect example of apocalyptic rhetoric. The construction of images of doom is a necessary feature of the literature of apocalypse. It is also necessary because "we create images of doom to avert doom" (Buell 295). Buell also argues that "Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (285). Thus, Bickerbug presents his warnings with absolute authority. Not only are the material threat evil, in addition, he presumes that those who authorize it are also evil. The aim of his warning is to avert this disaster, because the perpetrators' target is to bring the Niger Delta to extinction. Among these agents of evil, sardonically made reference to are "the corrupt officials here in Lagos" (21). In effect Bickerbug suggests the event of a blighted Niger Delta where "The fishes die", and where "The farms, too, are ruined – the crops won't grow because the oil floating on irrigation chokes the soil" (146). For Ebika Harrison therefore, violence means the inversion of the primary basis of their marginalization – it is a form of cultural and ethnic identity.

The fact of the matter in *Tides* is that both the Kwara Dam and oil exploration constitute a serious threat to the physical environment. Gilpin more specifically describes the physical environment as "the built environment, the natural environment, and all the natural resources, including air, land and water" (74). In a reflective moment Tonwe tells his friend Batowei about the destructive effects of oil exploration:

A few weeks ago there was a huge underground explosion about one kilometer offshore from our village. My wife and I thought it was an earthquake, but we were assured later that it was a fairly common thing in our area. Not long afterwards, some of the spillage floated close to our banks. (78)

Through this, *Tide* expands and deepens the interest in the Niger Delta ecological crisis. The vision embedded in Tonwe's discourse is apocalyptic. Buell therefore argues that "the rhetoric of apocalypticism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis" (285).

Earlier in the novel, Piriye Dukumo paints a similar gloomy picture in a letter to Tonwe:

Tonwe, we are wasting our time if we pursue the mirage of national unity when our own local people are living in squalor and disgrace, when big machines operated from Lagos are gradually destroying the resources that have traditionally nurtured our people since time immemorial. (7)

By exploring these issues, Okpewho unmasks and frames the images of dominant ideology which embeds reality. There is also in this discourse a sobering realization of marginality and its consequences. Therefore ethnic identity involves the logic of minority power and identification.

It is therefore no surprise that Opene, the leader of the fishermen's delegation to Tonwe frames more bluntly this logic of the marginalized:

We fishermen in the creeks have no other source of survival than the fishes. Now, the activities of the oil companies are posing a threat to our survival…. (29)

In this regard, the oil companies constitute the ultimate absurd symbol of this despoliation. The forgoing is crucial enough to make us understand how human activities rub off on the physical environment. Equally crucial is the economic implications of environmental politics in the Niger Delta. It is the leader of the fisherman, Opene who articulates this economic problematic in his discussion with Tonwe:

'Oil is money,' he said, spreading his fingers as though preparing to count the costs. 'Money for the government. Money for many people. But not our people. And they do not mind what they do to us so long as they protect this money from troublesome people like us'. (26)

There is at least a good reason to believe that environmental degradation is the outcome of capitalist imperialism. This is to be expected considering the global quest for oil – this is why Marxist critics see environmental despoliation in pure socioeconomic terms. In contrast however, "eco-critics point out that economics ultimately depends on ecology…" (Garrard 42). What is central to the vision in this novel is not just how the individual is being subjected to dominant culture, but also how the economic axis dominates environmental practices. Mr. Dukumo describes how important this is in the margin of Nigerian history:

In the first place, stopping all exploration just to clear the Delta oil pollution would virtually amount to holding the economy of the nation to ransom. Considering the centrality of oil in our economy, and the favourable price of the

commodity on the world market, it would be an unfortunate loss of valuable income to hold up work for three whole months. (34-5)

Thus the aim of all this destruction of the environment is the protection of the economic agenda. However, Caminero-Santangelo acknowledges that "In the context of colonial and postcolonial Africa, it is difficult to dismiss this kind of relationship between environmentalism and imperialism" (700). In this novel, Okpewho uses concerns about the state of the environment to oppose the economic oppression of minority ethnic groups. It is also a call for the protection of the environment, the cleaning up of polluted rivers is a call to a healthy land, defined by proper economic and political relationship. This call is appropriate coming in the wake of BP's response to the pollution in the Gulf of Mexico in the United States of America in 2010.

Without doubt, one major area through which Okpewho envisions the reconfiguration of the environment is the notion of human rights and ethical standards. Herein lies Okpewho's conception of the natural landsdape of his Ijaw ethnic nation and the totality of its cultural heritage. Tonwe, the moderate agitator reflects on the need for compromise:

We are not asking that oil exploration should be completely abandoned. Nobody who has any interest in the development of the country would contemplate such a request. But is it so difficult for the government to concede that it has a duty to guarantee the lives of the citizens of the country, and the sources of their livelihood? (69 – 70).

Implicatated in this dicourse is the broadening of Tonwe's conception and a move toward a biocentric world-view. This is the balance which Okpewho stikes in the search for an ethical culture. As far as it goes, this is a flawed vision, framed within the context of anthropocentrism. The major weakness of Tonwe's vision is that it largely remains human centred. Anthropocentric ideology, such as the one Tonwe holds "rather than sustaining an interest in nature in and for itself" (Garrard 35) articulates concern for the environment for the benefit of man. Tonwe's vision essentially deals with the questions of human identity and of the survival of ethnic identity. That remains the central issue of Okpewho's narrative. Though what locates and salvages *Tides* as essentially environmental and inscribed within apocalyptic imagination, even in Buell's terms, is its profound concern with environmental degradation, the urgency with which it offers the vision of preservation of the environment from oil exploration and globalized capitalist greed.

We might therefore conclude that *Tides* inscribes an eco-friendly vision. This is what puts it in line with Buell's notion of accountability in environmental representation and imagination (Caminero-Santangelo 703). According to Dominic Head the "environmental" novel promotes a more "ecological mode of perception in the reader, through a rethinking of nature and self's relationship with it" (qtd. in Caminero-Santangelo 704). Thus, *Tides* speaks for nature, and in this way, Okpewho's novel appropriates nature's voice.

Conclusion

The major concerns of this paper can now be restated. Its main thrust is that the relationship between literature and the environment or what is now known as eco-criticism has become a new form of literature in Nigeria. The main hypothesis is that *Tides* prefigures an apocalyptic vision symptomatic of the aridity and devastation occasioned by oil exploration in the Niger Delta. Therefore, the significance of the novel lies in appropriating a voice for the marginalized, and this appropriation, it is argued, is part of reconstructing and reconfiguring the traumatic experience of the oil bearing villages in the Niger Delta region. Largely, *Tides* succeeds by reconfiguring the Nigerian geopolitical space through the critique of the dominant culture.

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