

# POETRY AND THE NIGER DELTA ENVIRONMENT: AN ECO-CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

Poetry of protest is not uncommon in Nigeria literary landscape. It has a direct relationship and relevance to the socio cultural institution and serves as a medium of engagement, decrying neo-colonialism, cultural imperialism, socio-economic oppression and political tyranny. This paper explored the fore-grounding of nature-poetry, especially those from the Niger delta of Nigeria. It examined how eco-poetry had brought national and international awareness to the realities of ecological imperialism and exploitation of the region. The poems that constituted the basic materials for this paper are adopted largely from selected poems and works of Niger delta poets and critics like Gabriel Okara, J.P. Clark, Obiware Ikiriko, Tanure Ojaide, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Nnimmo Bassey, etc. The theoretical framework adapted was the eco-criticism theory with interfaced with one of the characteristics of postcolonial criticism which stressed ‘cross-cultural interaction’. We deduced from our findings that the wanton exploitation and negligence of the Nigerian natural environment which has helped to degrade the land and dehumanize the people of Niger delta is symptomatic of a macro-eco-cidal phenomenon, it is the microcosm of a global disaster that beset our common corporate humanity.

**Key Words:** Niger delta, the natural environment, eco-poetics, postcolonial theory, eco-criticism.

## Introduction

“As a people we have developed a life-style that is draining the earth of its priceless and irreplaceable resources without regard for the future of children and people all around the world”  
- Margaret Mead -

At the heart of the struggle for participatory environmental governance is the question of land control and preservation. O.A. Mayowa, the Nigerian political scientist opined that violence and ethnic agitation in Nigeria can be described from environmental and economic perspectives (Mayowa, 2001). The search light of eco-poetics is on the consequences of this interplay of social politicking on the Nigerian natural environment. Based on this dismal socio-economic landscape, Nigerian writers have risen to the occasion. It brings to the fore the environmental state of the Niger delta. As an environmentally conscious poet, Ojaide allows the social facts in his lived environment to find expression in his art. This trademark is also characteristic of the style of Ken Saro-Wiwa: the martyred poet and eco-activist. Saro-Wiwa was killed by the Sanni Abacha military regime for daring to stand for the natural environment against the wanton destruction of the Niger Delta eco-system by oil cartels.

Doki (2008), observes that the African poet occupies a very prominent and unique place in the literary firmament in his capacity to use orature as a medium to re-enter the essence of his tradition and culture. According to Doki, the African poet stands tall above others because of “his ability to employ in African poetry elements from African flora and fauna and devices from traditional African images.”(30). His imagery, themes and symbolisms are also drawn from a communally accessible pool and he can express himself in a truly African idiom. He observes that what distinguishes the African poet from the European poet is that “Africans are more closer to the natural environment than the West are. The African poet, he opined does not distinguish himself absolutely from other objects of nature such as, fauna, flora, mountain, etc. On the contrary, the European poet is detached from the object and this tendency tends to isolate man from his environment. It is from this attribute that African world view that we can better appreciate the greatness of African poetry and creativity. These same attributes have earned the African an eminent place on the literary map.

Doki’s position may be true to a point but not wholly true for a European nature-poet like John Keats who in one of his letters to Richard Woodhouse in 1818, observes that “The poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other body, - the sun, the moon, the sea, men and women who are creatures of impulse, are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute. – the poet has none, no

identity, no self” (Gittings, 87). Based on this position, Keats, Ojaide, Osundare etc, are the most unpoetical of all things: They are not “detached from the object nor isolated from their environment”. They are “more closely related to the object” and do not distinguish themselves from objects of nature like trees, mountains, rivers, stars, moon, etc. The study by Ezenwa – Ohaeto (1994) continues the discussion on the interaction between literature and nature, but it only makes passing remarks on literary ecology. Its focus is on orality in Nigerian poetry. Niyi Osundare’s and Obiora Udechukwu’s poems are effective because they portray the environment of modern Nigerian poetry in terms of craft. They combined in their artistic rendition African oral poetry and foreign poetic elements. Their poetic craft are fresh and innovative and so can be classified as modern Nigerian poetry. Ezenwa’s observations are obvious in respect to Nigeria nature poems. This paper looks into the areas where nature poets, especially those from the Niger delta use a combination of personal experience, poetic artistry and foreign poetic elements to project and promote the cause of the Niger delta environment.

## **Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Framework**

The postcolonial criticism emerged as a distinct category only in the 1990’s and one significant effect of postcolonial criticism is to further undermine the universalists claims once made on behalf of literature by liberal humanist critics that claimed that great literature has a timeless and universal significance (Barry, 1995:191) and by so doing demote or disregard cultural, social, regional, and national differences in experience. According to Peter Barry (1995):

Postcolonisation critics examines the representation of other cultures in literature as a way of appreciating the criticisms which rejects the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and seek to show its limitations of outlook, especially its general inability to empathise across boundaries of cultural and ethnic differences”(198).

Liberal humanists standing on this Eurocentric, master/servant premise disregards ethnic and cultural differences and the uniqueness of peoples and societies. This blanket classification of cultures and societies has a profound impact on the land exploration and exploitation by commercial exploiters of the lands also. This leads us to consider the second theory: the eco criticism theory which is the study of literature and the environment.

Eco-criticism celebrates the purity and the sustenance of the natural environment on one hand, and addresses man-made and natural disasters on the other. The latter are deeply problematic

issues which conflict with disinterested nature of our environment. This theory emerged from an ever-increasing enlightened consciousness and concern about the state of global environment.

The framework for this study is based on Eco-critical literary theory. Eco-critical theory attempts to find a meeting point between literature and environment. It is located within the framework of eco-criticism (Barry, 1995: 249). Ecocriticism refers to a critical approach which began in USA in the late 1980s and UK in the early 1990s respectively. Glotfeltry is considered to be the founder of this academic movement. She co-edited with Harold Freeman, a collection of essays on nature related matters titled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* and with a house journal called *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE).

Eco-critical literary theory emerged from an ever-increasing enlightened consciousness and concern about the state of global environment. Post-colonial studies have been involved in environmental issues, particularly in terms of the relationship between humans and his environment, between land and language. Recently, anthropologists, geographers and environmental managers, historians and literary critics have shifted focus from these broad areas to relationships between neo-colonial interests and eco-centred or eco-critical perspective. The ethical acceptability of the systematic, institutionalized killing of ‘non-human others’ (Barry, 1994: 213) by the industrialized world is one of the reasons for categorizing other peoples as animals and thus justifying the liberty to exploit colonies, their environment and the general eco-system for economic ends.

Tiffin (2008) contends that Post-colonial studies have been involved in environmental issues, particularly in terms of relationship between humans and place, between land and language. Recently, anthropologists, geographers, historians and literary critics have shifted focus from these broad areas to relationship between neo-colonial interests and eco-critical perspective. The scramble for modernization has enticed developing countries like Nigeria into the destruction of their own environments consequently, making the destruction of the natural environment one of the most damaging aspects of Western Industrialization. This is a further evidence of the continuing importance of eco-critical analysis of global crises.

Locally, this theory helps to reveal the peculiarities and similarities of the natural environment and the impact this has on Nigerian poetic creativity. According to Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1997) “Literature” and by implication poetry “does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a

particular society” (xv). Poetry is used to encode and communicate certain nature related ideologies. In the same vein, Chidi Amuta (1987) highlighting the importance of social realism in African literature says that “the writer is not only influenced by society; he influence it” (46). John Haynes (1992) argues that ideology permeates every level of human endeavour such as language and social situations. It also conditions our social activities including artistic productions. Robert Fraser (2002: 10) affirms that the style of artistic presentation is shaped by the writer’s ideology, his linguistic choice and world view. These views remain true to the Niger delta nature poets. Philip Sidney in “An Apology for Poetry” contends that “With poetry, you can move stones and imbue stones with passion. With poetry, you can make stony and beastly people listen to you” (Enright & Chickera, 4: 1979). Mathew Arnold, an English educator and poet, considering socio-cultural conflict of his day, observes in his books *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), *Culture of The Best* and *The Study of Poetry* (1880) that poetry in particular, will one day, come to help resolve all human generated conflicts. Placing his theory in a spiritual context, Arnold’s central idea was that, apart from its aesthetic and pleasing qualities, poetry has important things to teach humanity. He foresaw a crucial semi-religious role for poetry. he argued that mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us and even to sustain us and, I make bold here to add, the need to re-green the earth and to see the natural environment as a subject preserver and an object to be preserved and cared for remains the panacea for the present dismal state of the worlds natural environment and the Niger delta in particular (4).

Arnold contends that without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. He prophetically foresaw a tomorrow where science, poetry and religion will combine to make our world more eco-friendly. While Arnold’s 19<sup>th</sup> century was threatened by class struggle and culture persuasiveness of scientific thinking, especially Darwin’s theory of evolution which confronts religion; African poetry as, largely served as a medium decrying colonialism, cultural imperialism, socio-economic oppression and the political tyranny. Unfortunately, the decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century are beset by a more grievous challenge that is universal – the violation of our kinship with nature and a possible extinction of the eco-system. Margaret Mead (1978) succinctly puts it that “We are living beyond our means. As a people we have developed a life-style that is draining the earth of its priceless and irreplaceable resources without regard for the future of

children and people all around the world”. It is in the light of this grand design of scorch-earth exploitation, wanton eco-cides by succeeding governments and oil cartels in their insatiable bid for economic gains that nature-poetry of resistance, a new mode of poetic enterprise emerged called eco-poetics.

Generally, the American ecocritics prefer the term ‘ecocriticism’, while British ecocritics frequently use the term ‘green studies’. Ecocriticism tends to be more ‘celebratory’ in tone, in their writings on nature, while Green Studies is more ‘minatory’, that is it warns on matters regarding nature. The niger delta poems, largely, lean towards the latter. They seek to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governments, industrial, commercial, and neo-colonial forces.

### **The Colonization of the Nigerian Eco-system**

Bate’s book, *The Song of the Earth* (2000), argues that “colonialism and deforestation have frequently gone together” (Barry, 1995:251). There is today the colonization of our natural environment. Man has become, practically, a parasite to the natural environment. Ecologists tell us that the tropical forests harbour as much as half of all the plant and animal species and produce about a third of all living materials on the land. When man came with chainsaws and bulldozers and the colonizers started to level forests for western industries, the ‘tragic epic combat’ and eco-cide had started. The poet laments the eventual defeat of the ecosystem. The sentiments, concern and celebration of the natural environment which abound in the creative imaginative literature of poets like Ojaide and Osundare are a testimony of the relevance of eco-criticism for the study of the Niger delta region.

Patrice Nganang (2006) discusses the negative relationship between natural environment and literature as it is constructed in films and in the process of film making in Congo by Colonial Belgium. He contends that such destructive effects on the natural environment are more evident in Africa than in other parts of the world. While making adequate textual references to the devastating effects of colonialism on natural environment in the Congo, he describes colonial attempts at domesticating nature, penetrating the landscape, installing colonial plantations, and exploiting the natural resources. Though his study on the natural environment is not directly relevant to the discourse on the Niger delta, it explains the extent of the exploitation of African continent’s natural environment in general. In a contrary development, Adeleke’s (2013)

dissertation looks at Nigeria's poetry from sociological and psychological perspectives. Using Osundare's *City Without People: The Katrina Poems (2011)*, Tanure Ojaide's *The Beauty I Have Seen(2010)* and Tayo Olafioye's *Arrow Heads in My Heart (1999)*, he discusses these authors' pains about their home land while in Diaspora. The poets constructed the psychological impact and lament the human degradation and inhumanity they suffer. Their writings capture the writers' experience of the two worlds – their home land, Nigeria and the Diaspora (34-36). This paper though, interested in the degradation that the Niger delta's natural environment suffers and how nature poets like Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare capture these in their poems.

### **The Poetics of Impoverished Niger Delta's Natural Environment**

The Niger Delta is a microcosm of the larger world's eco-system and these explains why this paper focuses on Nigeria nature-poets and their literary enterprise on eco-criticism as it concerns literature and the natural environment of the Niger Delta Region in particular.

The question of environmental degradation, which has brought this region to the attention of the world is foregrounded through eco-critical poetics. Thanks to current national awareness and consciousness of the realities of ecological imperialism in the Delta region of Nigeria. Most prolific among nature poets from the Niger Delta include Tenure Ojaide, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ibiwari Ikiriko, etc. Nwagbara (2008) observes for example that Ojaide's activist, artistic enterprise finds ample expression in using poetry for resistance dialectics, which culminates in environmentalism and cultural reaffirmation. His eco-poetry is a testament to this artistic commitment. According to Oyesola (1995), Niger Delta is the economic base of Nigeria and it has witnessed one of the uncanny forms of neglect and marginalization – and yet 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange comes from oil exploration, exploitation and marketing by the multinational corporation.

Landscape is considered in this paper under its physical geographical terms. Landscape is an area of land or countryside, particularly when reference is made to its appearance or aesthetic disposition. Landscapes could be appreciated as flat, mountainous, hilly or rolling. The land landscape of the Niger delta area is largely made up of waterlogged, flat topography and the mainland is largely below sea level. This naturally accounts for its occupational setting of fishing and farming. Its flora is restricted to the coasts and uplands like Bigbara-Dere, kegbare-Dere,

Bori, Port-Harcourt and its environs, Calabar in Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Delta states etc., where farming remain their main occupation. Nnimmo Bassey, the founder of Environmental Rights Action in Nigeria, who has also been at the forefront of the campaign against the presence of Shell Oil in Nigeria, contends that Africa, symbolized by the Niger delta region is “where everybody goes to extract resources. Our land is being grabbed, torn into plantations, torn into agrofuel farms, torn into where people would plant trees and claim carbon credits. Africa is being taken as the backyard where resources are extracted at the least cost and at a maximum profit. When we look at the impacts of global warming, climate change, Africa is directly at the front line being hit by global warming. And we all know that Africa is the least contributor to the store of carbon in the atmosphere. Africa has little space left for development (Retrieved: May 12, 2013).

### **Eco-Poetry and Domesticating the Niger Delta Natural Environment**

The natural environment remained just an object of passing referent in the literary works of earlier writers on the Niger delta. While man remains the centre on which everything revolves, the natural environment and Niger delta eco-system remain and still is endangered by exploitation and neglect until nature-poets came to reverence the earth and its environment - then focus starts to shift to the eco-system. The Niger delta’s natural environment was before now largely celebrated by poets like Dennis Osadebay and Gabriel Okara distinct from contemporary poets like Tanure Ojaide whose literary output are more minatory in their stance. For instance, there is that contrasting creative output which common themes on nature can elicit from different poets. In “The Call of the River Nun” Gabriel Okara experiences the nostalgic pleasure of youth. It gives him excitement of sweet memories:

I hear your call!  
I hear it far away;  
I hear it break the circles  
Of these crouching hills.  
I hear your lapping call!  
Listening where river birds hail  
Your silver-surfaced flow ...  
(K. Senanu & T. Vincent. 2003, 103-104)



Several years after Okara's "The Call of the River Nun", Ibiwari Ikiriko (2000), in his *The Oily Tears*, writes a poem of disgust, regret and disappointment on the same river Nun. The same river Nun that Okara celebrates becomes a sad symbol of sorrowful loss of the beauty of nature for those who live along its banks.

Okara's silver-surfaced Nun is no more  
Now effluent – effete, sludge – silvered  
Its slop lumbers to the sea  
Rendering brackish zones barren  
Like poisoned ditch water (26).

This contrast in experience of these poets about the same River Nun is as a result of oil exploration in the Niger delta area of Nigeria today which has destroyed a considerable part of the natural environment, the agriculture and fishing potentials of River Nun. It has lost the natural beauty and attraction that inspired Okara to celebrate the river. This shows that poetic creativity is more of an action of man's imagination, his consciousness and indeed his experience located in time and space. Both poets express what they see and feel at various times in the life of the river; and go on to express these. The first poem represents the beauty of nature in Okara's young mind and the second poem by Ikiriko, the destructive effect of men's activities on the river.

While 'The Call of the River Nun' is a personal nostalgia of childhood, Okara's poem 'Piano and Drum' is a subtle nostalgia of the primal life of Africa before foreign intervention, and the exploitation of Africa's natural environment. It presents to us a sense of loss and nostalgia for that sense of mysticism associated with the river, the 'jungle', 'green leaves' 'the flowers', 'the panther' and 'the leopard' all of which are elements of nature and characteristic of romanticizing by nature poetry. There is an overwhelming influence of the natural elements in J.P Clark's poem 'Night Rain' (Senanu & Vincent, 2003:20). The ultimate effect of the rainfall in the poem is built up through vivid imagery involving the fauna and flora like "fish", "cocks", "ants" "owls", "bats" and "iroko". Clark's setting in "Night Rain" was a typical Niger delta rural home during the rainy season. Using the theme of rain, the poet depicts the living condition of a people and broader phenomena of how they identified with their natural environment "joined to that of the sea". Through technical devices like simile, metaphor and alliteration, the persona conjured a vivid picture of a dead fish floating in the sea:

Like some fish  
Doped out of the deep  
I have bobbed up belly wise  
From stream of sleep (103).

There is also the juxtaposition of two pairs of nature images: ‘rainwater’ and ‘ants’, “water drops” and “fruits” which continue to recur in the larger part of the lines:

Great water drops are dribbling  
Falling like orange or mangoes  
Fruits showered forth in the wind ...  
The run of water  
That like ants filling out of the wood  
Will scatter and gain possession  
Of the floor (103).

Osundare’s poem ‘Ode to a Falling Tree’ in *Songs of the Season (1990)* is a praise poem on a tree. The tree remained the dwelling place ‘for a harvest of birds chirping crisp serenades for a parting day’. The beauty which this element in nature confers on the environment is contrasted with the bareness that comes to it when: “One noon a thoughtless matchet hurried out of its/ Itching sheath a few maddening scoops and the/ Towering glory crashed to the muddy earth (143). In the above poem ‘Ode to a Falling Tree’ Osundare laments over man’s mindless destruction of nature as he strives after modernization. In the place of the lovely songs of the birds is silence. Though man thoughtlessly destroys good and useful things of his environment, the global trend today is the crusading for the preservation of the natural environmental and the importance of literature is apparent. Onuekwusi opines that this is crusading for environmental preservation which is the global trend and also metaphoric statement that speaks of the propensity of man to thoughtlessly destroy things that are good, useful and admirable, be they fellow human beings, ideas or even elements of nature (99) like air and water.

### **Environmental Sustainability in the Niger Delta**

The current environmental realities – earth warming and its consequent impact - that have made the cry for a ‘Greenearth’ imperative, has become the new sensibility in the Niger Delta. These challenges give nature poets like Ojaide the spur as a social critic to see the significance of setting creative imagination as an agency of change of attitude and enlightenment over mere ornate and fanciful writing. Okpewho’s *Tide* (2003) is an example of the nexus between

literature and the Natural Environment. Mogborukor's (2012) study highlights the causes and effect of water pollution which come in form of acid rain on the water resources in the Niger Delta region. Basing his study on 300 water samples which are collected from 100 water sources: rain, open well and river water resources, he argues that before the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta area, all rivers, streams, ponds, well and rain water which served as a source of domestic water supply to the inhabitants were free from pollution. Further, the exploration and flaring of natural gas in the environment, gives rise to emission of carbon into the atmosphere and the resultant acid rain which "increased the level of acidity in most of the water bodies rendering them to be turbid and toxic" (217). Today, acid rain in this region has adversely affected the ecosystem. Fish in the rivers and sea have disappeared. Because the petroleum industry has degraded the physical landscape and water ways, the attachment of the population the natural environment become disoriented.

Agbada (2009), in his "Soil, Oil and Foil: Isidore Okpewho's Tidal Victims in Niger Delta Novel of Environment", contends that "The Niger delta has become both a geographical space and social constituent in the Nigerian lexicography of agitation for justice." The Niger delta in recent past and today has become a volatile region because of the wanton exploitation of the natural resources, oil and the unmitigated neglect of the people of the land. The people live in abject poverty and the built environment destroyed by shelling from the Nigerian military might, the top soil laced with oil, its air carbonated and its waterways milked without the required replenishment and sustenance by government and foreign oil companies. Agbada infers that the Natural Environment has "suddenly become an issue as if the people of Niger delta has just awaken from their sleep" (2). The dormant Niger Delta community suddenly became active. The result of this sudden awareness became what Ikiriko (2000) metaphorically refers to as 'oil tears' and consequently, the parasitic milking of the blood of the people and the land culminated into resistance, restiveness, violence and further destruction of the built and the natural environment. This turbulence is compounded when the people discovers that they are being short changed all along.

The sense of betrayal spills over into socio-economic sabotage which results into the hiking of the price of crude oil in the world market. This issue of degradation of Niger Delta's natural environment which draws Nigeria to world notice and shakes the world to the very foundation of its moral-economic conscience is of great interest to this study. Any community that allows its

Natural Environment to be unduly exploited suffers untold hardship and the Niger Delta is neither an exception nor the only region that suffer human and environmental degradation. Oghenememo (2012) preoccupied with the issue of the Niger Delta; stresses the role played by the Nigerian poet in his environment. The author looks at what writers and critics, over the years, have said about the poet in Nigerian society in relation to his environment. Emphasizing on the “waterside poet experiences” as reflected in Ibiwari Ikiriko’s *Oily Tears of the Delta*. The study presents the experiences of the people of Niger Delta and their natural environment, where despite abundant natural resources like crude oil, offshore and on land, aquatic fauna and vegetation, they are still faced with countless problems, exploitations and degradation(1).

Drawing also from Umez’s (2012) *Dark Through the Delta* (2012) Oghenememo (1) opines that the consequence of these daunting state of Niger Delta’s natural environment is social revolt: a revolt against foreign oil explorers and their Nigerian counterparts on one hand and activities of the politicians that resort to oppression and killing of the Niger Delta people who find reason to question or interrogate the unjust treatment meted to them. The result of neglect and exploitation of the natural environment on the people of Niger Delta remain an anathema: a tragedy which can only be averted and resolved if the cries of nature poets, eco-friendly people of goodwill and the poor masses are heard, about the immediate need to take environmental friendly steps by government officials and all foreign interests in Nigeria.

Before Ken Saro-Wiwa’s death, upon his winning the 1995 Goldman Environmental prize for campaigning against oil companies’ environmental destruction in his native Ogoni land, he sent the following message from prison:

“The environment is man's first right. Without a safe environment, man cannot exist to claim other rights, be they political, social, or economic” (Encarta, 2009).

The shared interest and inheritance of Ken Saro-Wiwa and Tanure Ojaide is clearly expressed in Ojaide’s *Delta Blues & Home Songs* which tells of the horrors and tragedies of multinational corporations’ presence and activities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria:

The inheritance I sat on for centuries  
Now crushes my body and soul ...  
My nativity gives immortal pain  
Masked in barrels of oil –  
Breaking the peace of centuries

And tainting not only a thousand rivers,  
My lifeblood from the beginning,  
But scorching their sacred soil was debauched  
By prospectors, money-mongers?

My birds take flight to the sea,  
The animals grope in the burning bush ... (21).

The poem above tells of the horrors and tragedies of multinational corporations' presence and activities in the Niger delta region of Nigeria and 'The AT & P, Sapele':

When I first entered the AT & P  
On excursion from St. George's,  
It was next to the largest sawmill  
On earth...  
The planks smelt fresh,  
Sardine-packed for export;  
They came in raft by water...  
When decades later I went home  
To the delta of hardwood,  
A big clearing welcome me ... (30).

Also in his collection *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* Ojaide called forth pictures of the socio-physical disaster, the deplorable condition of man and the fauna:

Choking from the season's flagellation,  
Droves of wailers comb the breath of the  
Land...

Wild fires consumed barks and herbs  
What are the chances of catching the lion  
Alive...? (77).

Dogs will never shed enough tears  
To tell their sorrows,  
Goats will never sweat enough in a rack  
To show the world their desperation.  
Babies suffocate from the game  
Of loveless elders of state ... (70).

These poems paint a gory picture of the state and condition of the local and flora, fauna and man by the 'elders of state': the polluted atmosphere, the choking in the air and the battered

environment; ‘the gnarled barks of trees’, ‘babies’ and ‘goats’ all point to the perils of deforestation and the evil of imperialism wrought via gas flaring and oil leaks in the Niger Delta and Nigeria by extension. It tells of the horrors and tragedies of multinational corporations’ presence and activities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Ojaide considers the eco-critical art of poetry as a kind of public duty, which he owes to the Nigeria people, to expose, reconstruct, and negate the actualities of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Above all Ojaide uses literature for environmental purposes. He places premium on the biotic community – its sustainability and preservation. He is a poetic blueprint that is environmentally conscious and ecologically sensitive to the plights of the people and their environment.

Glissant E, the Caribbean writer, offered a statement to corroborate this literary pattern: that Ojaide is committed to “aesthetic of the earth” (Glissant, 1997: 149). In the same light also, Aldo Leopold, the American ecologists, in his *A Sand County Almanac* said that “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community (Leopold, 1966: 262). Ken Saro-Wiwa’s view on man’s right to his environment is succinctly corroborated by Saro wiwa’s views is corroborated by Seagal (2009) in his documentary film of the Natural Environment of the Amazon region of South America contends that it is a natural right to fight against oil cartels in order to save the natural environment: “Governments of the world have forced us to use gasoline for over 100 years. Oil Cartels and big business are responsible for destroying the water we drink, the air we breathe and the food we eat”. This fight for our natural environment includes the vegetation, desertification and fauna, most of the species which are already going extinct.

Today, the destructive effect of man’s activities on the environment has shifted from Africa and the developing world to the industrialized world like Britain. Unlike the attempt to domesticate the African mind and its natural environment for the West, Industrialization now attempts to domesticate the earth – its space, lands and seas and the consequences of this are the destruction of the world eco-system. This universal concern is expressed by Ross Parmanterin in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that “In remaking the world in the likeness of a steam-heated, air conditioned metropolis of apartment buildings, we have violated our kinship with nature. The recent Gulf oil spill on the Pacific Ocean, though far from African shores, it is human induced disaster against global aquatic system. The destructive effect on the American economics, aquatic life and the concerns of governments of the West is clearly expressed by president

Obama of the United States of American. On the 29<sup>th</sup> August, 2009 via web, he laments: “The people of Gulf Coast have demonstrated what it means to persevere in the face of tragedy - and rebuild in the face of ruin” (Microsoft Encarta, 2009).

## **Environmental Sustainability and the Way Forward**

Adeyeri (2009) contends that, built environment in each country is estimated to account for about 25-40% of the energy construction; 30-40% of the material resource consumption; 30-40% of the waste production and 30-40% of the greenhouse gas release. For most African countries, he further stated, the figures are mainly at the lower end of the intervals given above. Based on this statistics, it is safe to adduce that the Nigerian natural environment and the Niger Delta in particular, that is still largely untouched by the construction industry need protection and preservation. While infrastructure is very important for industrial development, it must be built to make development sustainable and the environment life sustaining. The infrastructure affects the environment just as the environment can affect the infrastructure. Thus, the impact of climate change on the infrastructure and the impact of industries on the environment must be considered in the location, design and use of the system.

The government needs to recognize the importance of protecting and conserving the environment during construction and after construction of infrastructure projects. According to Adeyeri (13), “Environmental Impact Assessment should be mandatory before undertaking implementation of all project to ensure that the activities carried out do not impact negatively on the environment”. There is thus the need to consider some activities which when properly harnessed can positively impact the natural environment. These are sustainable designs and constructions like energy and water efficient design and incorporating pollution prevention measures during construction; Renewable energy technology – for example solar, wind and earth-energy technologies; Waste management and recycling facilities; Flood risk management like sustainable drainage systems, river rehabilitation schemes, Protection and enhancing biodiversity by incorporating natural habitats as part of project design and connectivity with public transport - i.e., providing cycle ways, footpaths, and vehicle free zones in some business centers (13).

Most of our utilities have a negative impact on the appearance of the landscape. Power lines and NITEL telephone lines go through many unplanned community settlements and these are sources of danger during rain storms. In order to help retain the natural beauty of the landscape and

protect lives, an enabling law should be enacted which would require that public-utility power lines for telephone, telegraph, and electricity be placed underground. Also some public utilities have destructive effects on the environment. Utilities such as sewage-disposal systems are directly connected to the rapidly increasing pollution of air, land, and water. There is also the exporting or dumping of industrial waste into the waterways of some African countries or even the emptying of toxic waste directly into sea as we have in the Niger delta. The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in recent times continues to be a source of concern to governments of that region and those whose livelihoods depended on that environment.

J.B. Adeyeri (2), contends that “Civil Engineering plays a critical role in determining how our environment looks and functions, it includes the planning, design, construction, and maintenance of structures and site topography to suit human needs”(2). Though this action is beneficial to man, the continuous quarrying of the natural environment for example gives rise to natural disasters. Where geological balance is tampered with, natural disaster is always the result: as we have in Katse Dame, Lesotho where the weight of the water diverted into this reservoir by the Katse Dam of Lesotho caused minor earthquakes and damaged houses in surrounding villages. The dam, which is 182 meters high, represents the first phase of the Lesotho Highland Water Project. Despite environmental concerns and allegations that several companies competing for projects contracts violated international policies, the Highland Water Project is scheduled for completion in 2015 (Encarta 2009).

Aize Obayan (2009) in response to Adeyeri’s (2009) lecture, said we cannot focus our emphases on built environment to the detriment of natural environment, “We cannot only meet human needs, there is also the need to sustain what prevents extinction”. Sustainable growth calls for a development strategy that does not compromise the balance of our ecosystem and welfare of future generations. Humanity and Nigerian government in particular need to discourage all activities that deplete our natural resources, with the consequent degradation of ecological systems. Environmental management and economic development are closely interrelated. The natural environment consists of complex ecological system: the floras for example, not only provide fuel and fodder, they build also soil fertility, prevent erosion, provide wild life habitats for the fauna and ameliorate climate changes. These intricate systems are central to human welfare and survival and also very valuable as ready-made raw materials for imaginative



literature, literary and the visual arts. They are invaluable sources of inspiration for nature poets. Consequently, these systems need to be preserved and well managed for the general good. McGrew (2012) contends that “Globalization emphasizes the multiplicity of linkages and interconnectedness” that surpasses and together constitute the modern world system. Globalization and literature become relevant when seen from the position of nature poetry because this builds a forum for eco-critical comparative discourse. Globalization applies not only to human societies and cultures; it impacts also on the earth’s eco-system – its fauna, flora and the physical landscape and seascape.

The state of the natural environment and the human challenge in this part of the earth’s ecosystem is local as it is global. The Niger delta remains a paradox in the conscience of Nigerian government and leaders of conscience. The wanton destruction the means of livelihood and the eco-system in general by the government and Oil Cartels remain a conspiracy against the people of the Niger delta. The unmitigated exploitation is both genocidal and eco-cidal. The general insensitivity to the plight of this region remains an anathema and a stain on our common global corporate humanity.

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