

Scourge of Militancy in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: An Ecocritical Reading of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and Oyeh Otu's *Shanty Town*

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Abstract

The paper is an ecocritist reading of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and Oyeh Otu's *Shanty Town*. The study reveals that the activities of oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria have contributed to the degradation of the Nigeria ecology system especially through oil spillage. Several youths from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria engage in the kidnapping of some multinational oil corporation staff, violence and destruction of oil pipelines to protest against oil companies' exploitation and government neglect. The activities of militants have led to the destruction of lives and properties especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. High rate of unemployment have contributed to the alarming increase of the scourge of militancy in region. The study recommends that government should provide jobs especially for unemployed youths as it will help in the reduction of militancy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Niger Delta, Oyeh Otu, Esiaba Irobi, Militancy.

1. Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria produce crude oil in commercial quantity which has generated massive revenue for Nigeria but the irony is that the region which is explicitly exploited by the Nigerian government and the oil multinationals. The destruction of human lives as a result of oil exploration activities which has drastically affected the ecology which include land and water may have given birth to the scourge of militancy in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. After crude oil was discovered in 1956 in Oloibiri in Bayelsa state of Nigeria by Britain in colonial Nigeria, there have been colossal damage done to the ecosystem and destruction of the environment through oil spillage. Maduka (2013, p.79) is aggrieved by the predicaments of some inhabitants of oil producing environments; he stated that "... playwrights all decry the enormity of the environmental degradation of the region brought

about by the insensitive exploitation of the region's natural resources by oil companies". The host communities that accommodate these oil corporations who are predominately farmers and fishermen suffer enormous destruction of their farms and rivers as a result of oil spillage. Missihoun points that "... African writers bring together insights from political, ecological, ecocriticism and environmental activism" (2016:2) some of the aspirations of these writers have not been realized. It is indeed very unfortunate that the various host communities are been exploited and not taken proper care of by the Nigerian government and more importantly the oil companies operation in the region. Anyokwu (2014, p. 237) had noted in an earlier study that:

Beside, oil companies are duty-bound to either evacuate the inhabitants of the affected area to an alternative location, if their economic and social activities might be jeopardized by oil exploitation. Otherwise, the explorers are supposed to provide their host communities with social amenities such as good roads, hospitals, schools, electricity, potable water and housing.

It is unfortunate that the aspirations, hopes and desires of the host communities might not have been met by the oil corporations and the Nigerian governments hence the agitation by militants from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been a beehive of militancy over the past ten years; these various militant groups such as Niger Delta Vigilante, Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta and Niger Delta Liberation Front are agitating against the exploitation of human and natural resources by the Nigerian government and oil cooperation's operating in the region. Uzoji postulates that there is "the relationship between drama and ecology and more significantly the role of drama in addressing both human and the ecological concerns of the earth" (127). Factors such as unemployment, destruction of lives and properties as a result of oil exploration activities, lack of social and basic infrastructural amenities in their communities and more might have triggered the formation of various militant groups in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Furthermore, the states that cover this region include Rivers, Edo, Delta, Cross River, Imo, Akwa Ibom and Bayelsa. These states in Nigeria produce crude oil which is government major source of revenue in Nigeria. However, irrespective of the fact that these states mineral resources are use in the development of other parts of the country, the suffering masses of the state that accommodate various oil companies are neglected. Members of these communities in the region who are predominately farmers and fishermen are not compensated as the money meant for them are distributed among some government officials.

The government of Nigeria is yet pay critical attention to the plight of the people of the regions. Murphy (1999:1099) states that "literary ecocriticism relies not only on the insights of literary studies to analyze

fictional and nonfictional prose, poetry, and drama but also on those of environmental studies, environmental history, postmodern geography, neurobiology, cognitive rhetoric, and a host of other related disciplines.” This is the reason environmentalists are still crying out in protest to the neglect and exploitation of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This paper therefore examines Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die* and Oye Otu’s *Shanty Town* from an eco-critical perspective. It is therefore pertinent to note that ecocriticism has been defined by various scholars across the world. Lawrence Buell had defined ecocriticism as “a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (qtd.in *Wikipedia* 2). Gomides in *Wikipedia* defines ecocriticism as “The field of enquiry that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations” (3). Also important is that *Wikipedia* provides fresh insight on the critical theory of ecocriticism:

It is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function- thematic, artistic, social, historical ideological, theoretical, or otherwise- of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents that contribute to material practices in material world. (Shakespeare and Ecocriticism” 16-17. qtd. in *Wikipedia* 3)

Militant activities in the Niger Delta region is often associated with pipeline vandalization and kidnapping of oil workers until a ransom is paid before their freedom. Their activities also contribute to the underdevelopment of the region as many prospective investors might be afraid of investing their money in regions prone to violence and instability. In addition Uzoji notes that:

The militarization of the struggle and the seeming criminality this struggle has become all in a bid to free the area of further exploitation takes the wind off the sail of genuine efforts at resolving the evident eco-crisis in the (Niger Delta) region. (p.130)

Oil exploration has its merits and demerits, the various oil companies should always clean up oil spills in order to ensure that they do not destroy the ecosystem of the host communities. Unfortunately they are engrossed in the exploitation of the natural resources in the land and destroying the ecosystem. Uwasomba had observed in an earlier study that “The facts about Niger Delta are narrated the way they are without any attempt to transpose them into imaginative creations” (2013:98). The inhabitants of communities affected by oil spillage are hopeless as their source of livelihood namely fishing and farming are already devastated.

Maduka (2013:86) asserts that “Economically, the people (of the Niger Delta) are despondent because of the ruining of their means of livelihood by

the environmental degradation of their region”. The negative impact of oil exploration activities of various oil companies have left many people disillusioned and exploited. Levin (1999: 1097) is of the opinion that “... ecocritical dialogue often aims at nothing less than the transformation of human environmental and ecological consciousness.” It might interest us to note that the Niger Delta region of Nigeria had suffered colossal loss of eminent men like the late environment activist Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other Ogoni men that were brutally murdered on the 10th of November, 1995 after series of dialogue with the Nigerian government failed.

2. Scourge of Militancy in Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die*

In Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die*, we come to the realization that the beginning of the agitation by members of the Suicide Squad (militants) was as a results of the embezzlement of compensation money the federal government gave Izon state for oil spillage by Chief Isokipiri Erekosima. They are aggrieved by the exploitation of a government functionary represented by Chief Isokipiri. It is during the dialogue between Yekinni a hangman and a doctor, (morbid anatomist) we realize the true reason why Yekinni is reluctant to hang members of the Suicide Squad.

Doctor: Why did they kill the man?

Yekinni: Thank you. You see, some time ago, the Federal Government gave the citizens of this state, which as you know is a riverine state, the sum of three million naira as compensation money for the oil spillage which has ruined their farms, their homes, and their lives. But the man they killed, one Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, a commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs, connived with his councilors and local Government Chairmen to confiscate the 3 million naira. The Councilors took one million and shared it among themselves. The Local Government Chairman shared one million. The Commissioner himself, one million. No single citizen, no matter how wretched, got a single kobo. That was when these young men (militants) stepped in (*Hangmen*, 22-23)

It is indeed ironic that the colossal amount of money given by the Federal Government to compensate the communities whose rivers and farmlands have been polluted as a result of oil spillage never got to them. Members of the Suicide Squad decide to take laws into their hands by applying jungle justice in the brutal murder of Chief Erekosima. Pivotal is the fact that these militants (members of the Suicide Squad) are all university graduates without gainful employment. They terrorized their communities until Tamara educated them about the ideological vision of their group, she talked them into redirecting their energy towards their real enemies who have deliberately

decided to embezzle the money meant for the compensation of the suffering masses of Izon State. d. During the dialogue between Tamara and Ibiaye, Ibiaye reveals to Tamara how he became blind. Probably, if environment impact assessment was carried out before oil exploration activities, it might have drastically reduced the destruction of lives and prosperity.

Tamara: How did you lose your sight?

Ibiaye: ... Everything we own was lost except our lives. Our lives and our arms. So we swam. On to the shore. But little did we know that the water had been poisoned by the film of rancid crude oil where we saw our faces as we swam. ... Seven days later, the darkness fell. And now, I who once showed strangers the way through the creeks, am now led by the hands, ... I, who once fed people, I am now fed people, I am now fed. And why else would I be here, if not to find some crumbs for my empty stomach? (*Hangmen*, 97-98)

It is obvious from the excerpt above that the natural inhabitants of the people of Izon State have been destroyed as a result of the destruction of their ecosystem by the activities of multinational oil companies. The predominant sources of income of the people which are fishing and farming have been drastically affected. Since Chief Erekosima have decided to make life difficult for the people he govern by his deliberate act of selfishness he eventually becomes the sacrificial object as he was brutally killed on the day of his coronation by members of the Suicide Squad. Ibaiaye foregrounds the demise of Chief Erekosima during a discussion he had with Sotonye. Ibaiaye is aggrieved by the inhuman attitude of the collaborators who are indirectly inflicting pain on the suffering masses.

Ibiaye: It means that someone will pay with his crown, if not his neck or his head for three million naira which the Federal Government gave us a compensation for the oil spillage which blinded me. Whoever stole it, must pay with its head. (*Hangmen*, 93)

It is unfortunate that the likes of Ibiaye and many others suffering as a result of the oil exploration of the multinational companies have resulted to the degradation of their environment. The ecosystem is disturbed as well as the living conditions of the communities that accommodate these various multi-national oil companies. It is also vital to observe that the collective effort of the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria to engage government in the past had only resulted to futility as the government does not channel and monitor the effective distribution of the money meant for the affected communities in the Niger Delta. The yearning of the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria to be heard and cared for especially by the Nigerian

government has not been realized. In Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*, the militants (Suicide Squad) activities was not properly defined and co-ordinated until Tamara was able to redirect the ideological vision of the Suicide Squad. Tamara assisted the members of the Suicide Squad through her directives which encouraged them to channel their aggression towards those that have continued to making life unbearable for them. She succeeded in convincing them to direct their aggression towards Chief Erekosima who epitomizes the ruling and corrupt class in Nigeria.

Tamara: Then prove to me that you are men. Disrupt the ceremony. Harass the chief. Recover what is left of our 3 million naira compensation (for oil spillage) money. We will share it out to families whose children suffer from marasmus and kwashiokor. And that will make you real heroes, make you great men, giants, heroes of your state. It will also erase the stain you have already stamped on your faces and yourselves as thieves, rouges, never-do-wells. In fact I don't see anything meaningful or useful or brave about what you have been doing so far. (*Hangmen*, 83)

The members of the Suicide Squad (militants) eventually disrupted the coronation ceremony at Chief Erekosima's house and they lambast him for all his atrocities and eventually hang him. The embezzlement of the funds meant to compensate the communities that were affected by oil spillage contributed to the prolong suffering of the people Izon. Chief Erekosima is brutalized by members of the Suicide Squad, before he eventually groans when the stool he was standing on was removed by Dayan a member of the Suicide Squad, he exclaims.

Erekosima: Hangmen ... Also ... Die. (*Hangmen*, 22-23)

3. Scourge of Militancy in Oyeh Otu's *Shanty Town*

Oyeh Otu's *Shanty Town* is a play that depicts the exploitation and total devastation (oil spillage) of Nembe Waterside in Port Harcourt Nigeria. In Otu's *Shanty Town*, a major factor that have re-enforce the need for Finecountry to engage in militant activities is the pollution of his immediate environment as a result of innumerable oil exploration activities by oil co-operations. The ecosystem is destroyed and the major source of livelihood of the people living in the riverine communities is threatened. It is vital to note that the effort of the exploited people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in ensuring that they are adequately compensated by the oil companies and the government has unfortunately not been accomplished. It is indeed very unfortunate that the exploiters keep exploiting the environment to the detriment of the host communities in the Niger Delta. During the dialogue between Biriye and Sonye the parents of Finecountry, we realize that

unemployment is indeed a major factor contributing to the spread of militant activities in the Niger Delta region in the excerpt below:

Biriye: I hope they did not kill innocent people.

Sonye: Ha! You don't even understand what I'm telling you. People died. Many others were wounded. My own is that the Government should give the militants what they want (jobs) so that we have peace. Develop the region that provides so much money for the Government. Employ the youth. Is that too much to ask? Or is it difficult to do? (*Shanty Town*, 14)

Biriye is frustrated by the activities of oil companies in Oloibiri that have destroyed his once fishing community as a result of oil spillage. He is pessimistic that he will not be able to take care of himself and family when he eventually when he travels to his village with his family. It is as a result of the devastation of Oloibiri that Biriye laments bitterly and is unwilling to travel home.

Biriye: (Exasperated) We've discussed this a million times. How many times will I tell you that I can't go to that village without my gratuity and pension? What shall we feed on? ... do you have another one waiting for you at Oloibiri a community raped and abandoned like an empty shell on the shore of swamp after an oil spill (*Shanty Town*, 30)

It was during the exchange of words between Finecountry and his father Biriye that Biriye's worry of his son been a prospective militant is revealed to us in *Shanty Town*. Finecountry's father does not want his son associated with militants and he vows to disown him if he eventually discovers that he is a militant. The scourge of militancy has claimed the lives of many young men especially in the Niger Delta region during the exchange of fire between the Nigerian Army and militants. It might also be that Biriye have a reputation to maintain and does not want his son associated with militancy. It is also important to note that the unemployment factor especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria might have motivated Finecountry to becoming a militant which is a fast way to enriching himself and escaping poverty. His vision and aspirations negates that of his biological father Biriye who distastes all forms of militant activity. Finecountry is aggrieved about his parents' inability to provide for him especially a decent accommodation. Finecountry engaged in various crimes in order to enrich himself, he castigates his father for remaining in the slum and calls him a 'slum dweller'. He thinks his father is a failure and does not want to be associated with failures. Biriye is troubled by Fincountry's disappearance and sudden return with lots of money and a car he bought for his father. Biriye's verbal utterance illuminates his view about militancy from the passage below:

Biriye: Whoever told you that misinformed you. I will not only disown you, I will place a curse on you. I cannot have a militant or an armed robber for a son. No offspring of mine will be a menace to society. God forbid! (*Shanty Town*, 52)

Finecountry was eventually wounded by a gang of four kidnapers when he was shot; his parents became helpless as their effort to save him was unsuccessful. The negative effects of militant activities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria are enormous as properties and lives are lost. While the destruction of the ecology by the activities of oil companies in host communities have influenced the likes of Finecountry to take to militancy in order to enrich himself and take care of his ageing parents. In addition, the senseless destruction of lives and properties by militants is also counterproductive.

4. Conclusion

The underdevelopment of some regions in the Niger Delta is a result of the activities of various militant groups in the area. Their activities range from kidnapping, killing; destruction of oil pipelines and other forms of violence which are evident in Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and Oyeh Otu's *Shanty Town*. The activities of militants in Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and Oyeh Otu's *Shanty Town* shows that it have brought about underdevelopment in some parts of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The militants in the texts studied are young, educated but unemployed youths who took to militancy as a means to kidnap, kill their oppressors and become rich. The government of Nigeria should ensure that peace is restored to the troubled regions in the Niger Delta and the necessary infrastructures are put in place for the benefits of the youths and communities. Government should also ensure that environmental impact assessment is done before oil exploration activities commence and should guarantee that oil spill cleanups are done immediately when they occur. We also encourage the Nigerian government to continue the amnesty program she started to encourage more militants to lay down their arms. This researcher therefore suggests that government and the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria should provide jobs, infrastructural facilities and employment especially for the youths in order to reduce the scourge of militancy in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Government should ensure that they regulate the activities of oil companies to reduce the destruction of the ecosystem. Furthermore, oil companies should ensure they conduct an ecological impact assessment before they embark on oil exploration activities in the communities and also ensure that they provide social amenities in their various host communities.

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