

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT OF OIL EXPLORATION IN THE NIGER DELTA TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE CITY: THE NIGERIA CASE IN *OIL AT MY BACKYARD*

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ABSTRACT

This article examined the environmental management of oil exploration in the Niger Delta in order to ensure sustainable city with particular reference to Nigeria as extrapolated in the Nigerian novel, *Oil at my Backyard*. This research is informed by the generation of waste and pollution by the multi-national oil companies, the improper management of the wastes and the horrific consequences of the indecorous management. The theoretical framework of the research is Ecocriticism, a literary theory which applies ecological phenomena to the study of literature by examining the effects of human activities on the environment. The aim of this article was to investigate the portrayal of various forms of environmental mismanagement in the Niger Delta by Ejike in his novel, *Oil at my Backyard*. It is a case study that the detailed analysis was based on the novel, other critical works and available literature on oil exploration in the Niger Delta. As a case study, it examined the various spheres and manifestations of waste, its economic, social and health implication on the people and the city. The significance of the investigation lies in additional corpus of information on the discourse of human rights abuse by the multi-dollar oil companies in terms of negligence of corporate social responsibility on the host communities. The author discovered the insensitive disposition of the oil companies with regard to waste management which has resulted in attacks on the oil companies and their staff, destruction of aquatic life and emergence of militancy with its attendant effects on the city and other social and economic imbalances. The author recommended, among others, the development of sustainable mechanism towards waste management in collaboration with the host communities.

Keywords: environmental management, waste generation, pollution, environmental degradation, ecocriticism, sustainable city.

1 INTRODUCTION

The discovery of oil at Oloiri in the Niger Delta of Nigeria was greeted with pomp and pageantry, little did the inhabitants ever conceive that they were about to sit on a keg of gun powder. From the prospect of the oil to the eventual drilling in commercial quantity, it has been for the people a juxta positioning of booming prosperity and unfortunate dooming annihilation of their livelihood. Thus, the Niger Deltans especially the tripartite states of Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta, have had mouthful of the sweet bitter taste of oil exploration.

The Niger Delta embody ecosystems of mangrove swamps, large wetland, rain forest and fresh water swamps. According to Onyema [1], “the area comprises about 37 million spread in about 1,600 communities that harbour various tributaries...”. Ken Saro-Wiwa, a bonafide indigene of Ogoni in Rivers State describes Niger Delta as:

... one of the world’s greatest ecosystem; Africa’s largest and the world’s third largest mangrove forest; the most expensive fresh water swamp in Western and Central Africa and Nigeria’s major forest concentration of high biodiversity and the center of endemism [2].



This autochthonous tributary defines the Niger Delta being the home of quantum oil and gas deposit. In fact, the massive and substantial deposits of oil and gas in “the Niger Delta contributes to about 98 percent of Nigeria’s income and positions her as the sixth largest exporter of oil in the world” (Onyema [1]). Here, our search light is on the three states of Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa.

It is vital to note that Inno Ejike’s *Oil at my Backyard* is not alone in the literary creation of oil exploration and its consequences on the Niger Deltans. Nnedi Okoroafor Mbachu’s *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2007); Chika Unigwe’s *The Phonix* (2007); Iheanyi Izuka’s *The Travails of the Black Gold* (2001); Elechi Amadi’s *The Great Pond* (1969); Amarie Majoro’s *Suspended Destiny* (2007); Ojaide’s *The Activist* (2006); Okpi Kalu’s *The Oil Conspiracy* (1988); Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *The Poisoner’s J-eps* and a host of others adumbrate the “ironic contradictions of the consequences of ... exploitation by multinational companies” (Nwahunanya [3]). Eco literature of the Niger Delta is not literature for its sake but the ones that make substantially categorical statement on the socio-economic, political, environmental and other fundamental quandaries that do not only debase the region’s flora and fauna but more importantly infringes on the host communities’ inalienable right of livelihood. The degrading deprivation is eco-rooted in environmental mismanagement.

2 MANIFESTATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL FUMBLE

Oil at my Backyard [4] is principally an abundant testament of multinational oil company’s negligence of not only corporate social responsibility but flagrant abuse of environmental management. The prototypal Onyenga Oil Company, Eluala Oil Company and Ricco International USA are hosted by Umuibe, Rumuma, Oduala and Ruga communities of Niger Delta. Prior to the oil prospection, the settlement of the oil companies and eventual permanent drilling of oil, these communities were archetypally peaceful with fertile agricultural farmland, fresh sea water and other naturally endowed biodiversities. Even their cultural festival such as Oghu Festival (p. 9) and other cultural etiquettes were intact and observed with concerted commitment and obeisance. The advent of oil exploration decimated their ecosystems and agrarian lifestyle. The recollection of Mr Onwuka, the village head of Oduala is quite informative of the impending predicaments his people is to face on sighting Mr Obidi in his Toyota four wheeled jeep:

Onwuka remembered what happened to his in-law when oil was discovered in their village. Initially they had thought that God had answered their prayers by providing them with the liquid gold. No sooner had the oil companies started exploration than the devastation of their farmland commenced (p. 9).

True to the prophetic suspicion, under the pretence of already paid compensation and with the casual labour from the youths, “a large expanse of land which included some cassava farms” are cleared. The clearing of the peoples’ cassava farms without prior notification depicts the company’s insensitivity to the peoples’ source of livelihood. The damage done to the cassava farms infuriated the women that their representative, Ada, emphatically states amidst heavy tears, “My husbands. Oh our cassava, our cassava farm was ravaged. Are we going to starve to death because we have oil at our backyard?” (p. 43). Even with the purported compensation paid, perhaps to the wrong hand which “did not get to the people for whom it was intended” (p. 42), the mindless destruction of the economic crop of people wallowing in abject poverty, women living in “a very swampy village with little or no motorable roads”, a place with “no development or Federal Government presence” (p. 14) is provokingly unwarranted. A more responsible approach would have been to notify the people



with a deadline to harvest their cassava. Mr Obidi's pledge to pay insignificant sum of twenty thousand naira as compensation for the entire damaged cassava is an insult to their sensibilities as well as a ridicule of their social status. The women's demand for "one hundred thousand naira" (p. 43) is certainly not enough for their "cassava ... our land and our oil" (p. 43) yet they cannot but accept it because they "do not want to starve before the next planting season", hence they "have many mouths to feed" (p. 43). Unfortunately and regrettably, Mr Obidi accepted and paid the ridiculous sixty thousand naira. The preposterous amount gravely bit the imagination of the women so much that "they felt like shedding tears ..." (p. 45) as "the compensation was far below the cost of damage to their cassava farms", hence "the oil company also felled many palm trees and raffia trees" (p. 46) which serve as their major source of wine for refreshment and raffia used to make thatched roof for their houses (p. 46).

The insensitivity, indifference and environmental indecorousness of the oil company is further evident in gas flaring. The oil companies' reason to flare gas is because "they had no facility to re-inject it into the soil" even though "they would spend extra resources to flare the gas" (p. 79). The implication is that they are more concerned with their expenses than the peoples' lives and livelihood. Their wrong and poor value culture is frantically inhuman-oriented. Their infamous orientation amounts to savagery and barbarism. Not really that they do not know and understand the ravaging consequences of gas flaring on the people and its attendant environmental degradation but simply choose the part of cruelty. Thus, instead of seeking a public-spirited and meaningful solution, "they intensified gas flaring" (p. 79). The evidence of gas flaring is everywhere after the first rain so much that even the most illiterate villagers cannot but

Noticed the unusual occurrence within their surroundings. The rain water was no longer drinkable. It was mixed with heavy carbon deposit. Those that went to the farm noticed that their clothes were painted black. There were traces of carbon monoxide in the atmosphere (p. 79).

The panacea, at least in the interim, would have been immediate and quick provision of portable pipe borne water to assuage the water needs of the people since their local source of water has been polluted. This would have been the remote measure to environmental management. But, of course, in their business-minded orientation, they would think of its cost effectiveness. Ayandale [5] points out that "environmental degradation from gas flaring, dredging of larger rivers, oil spillage and reclamation of land due to oil and gas extraction across the Niger Delta region cost about US\$758 million every year". Yet, the exorbitant cost cannot exchange human life and equate the destruction of ecosystems, aquatic lives and other sundry consequences. To spend the money, and even more, to reclaim a land and preserve life defines a reasonable approach to environmental management.

The pipeline explosion at Rumuma brings to fore more aspect of indiscreet attitude of oil companies towards environmental management and the plight of the host communities and their inhabitants. The youths' grievances have degenerated into violence confrontations and attacks on oil facilities and installations. In its usual misplacement of its expected corporate responsibility it opted to building storage tank. Its option ended up exposing Eluala Oil Company's selfish and capitalist idiosyncrasy. The explosion resulting from excess pressure tragically consumes unquantifiable lives and properties. Unfortunately, an internationally multi-dollar oil company does not have adequate health facilities in its premises let alone for the host community. Ridiculously, "what the company had in its premises was a first aid post with only a nurse on duty" (p. 131). Sadly too,



The nearest health care center was at the local government headquarters and was yet to be upgraded to a general hospital. There were no doctors on duty when the first batch of victims were brought in.... Many died before adequate medicare could reach them.... The hospital was inadequately funded. Most drugs were out of stock (p. 131).

Immediately after this catastrophically fatal incident, Eluala Oil Company “intensified their drilling efforts and were able to complete five additional wells” (p. 132) with no attention and plan whatsoever to pay compensation on the lost lives and properties as well as remedy environmental hazards caused by the explosion. Clearly, its basic “interest was drilling the oil and making profit with little concern for ecological consequences to the environment of the oil producing area” (p. 164).

The more worrisome dimension of the imprudent management of the environment is the lackadaisical attitude of the government. The lacklustre disposition of the government exacerbates the plight of the host communities of the oil companies. Government’s betrayal manifests in the paltry compensation and payment of same through insincere and unpatriotic government officials. There is no systematic machinery to monitor the appropriation of the compensation. It is non-negotiable fact that oil companies actually paid compensation to the people for their farm land via the Mineral Development Agency. Mr Obi, Eluala Oil Company’s representative states unequivocally that “compensation was dully paid after the survey for the cash crops...” (p. 42). The company is embarrassed on discovery that compensation never got to the people. Regrettably, instead of the government to track the misappropriation of the compensation, it rather send “some soldiers to protect the men sent to do the survey.... The did not bother to discuss with the villagers at the grassroots level...” (p. 42). All efforts the company made to get government accountable is futile. Consequent upon the report of Mr Obidi on the disruption of oil exploration and recommendation of “social amenities to calm the villagers’ justified anger against neglect by the government” (p. 83); the Chairman, Eluala Oil Company laments, “we are looking forward to receiving our exploration grant from the government. Since we put our men and machinery to site, the government has not paid our fees..., we need government support to start the project at Oduala” (p. 83). Vindal [6] points out categorically that

Since the inception of the oil industry in Nigeria, more than fifty years ago, there has been no concerned and effective effort on the part of the government, let alone the oil operators, to control environmental problems associated with the industry.

The futility and the peoples’ despondent predicament is climaxed by the government’s utopic and endless promises of the provision of basic amenities of good road, health care and pipe borne water and the blame game by the oil company. Mr Obidi rejects complete responsibility, “we are aware of your plight. The fault is not that of Eluala Oil Company. The delay is due to government red tape, and the snail speed at which the government carries out its programs” (p. 96). The fact here is that both the oil companies and the government lack the utmost sincerity, political will and commitment to ensuring environmental management. The evasion of their statutory responsibilities by government and oil companies is not, of course, without resultant effects.

3 THE CONSEQUENCES OF TRASHY ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

The discovery and exploration of oil in the Niger Delta is, in fact, oxymoronically palpable. We see manifestation of good and bad, boom and doom, wealth and impoverishment and all other obvious contradictions. Nwahunanya [7] states succinctly that “the region is the symbol of the ironic contradictions of the consequences of capitalist exploitation by multinational economic interests teaming up with the local comprador bourgeois class”. The graver reality in the case of Niger Delta of Nigeria is complete jettison and neglect of the “geese that laid the golden eggs” (p. 146). In fact, “what they have thought was a blessing had turned to be a curse” (p. 131). The overall aftermath of the abandonment ranges from economic downtroddenness, psychological disillusionment, environmental degradation, perennial health challenges and emerging activism with its attendant quandaries.

Ejike’s *Oil at my Backyard* provides copious critique of a people with economic lowliness, a society impoverished by devastating oil exploration. The indigenes of Niger Delta are fundamentally agrarian whose economic lives essentially depend on land and water. The region is naturally endowed with mangrove forest, fertile and arable land as well as surface and underground water. The mangrove forests are their major source of wood and a variety of raffia palm species for subsistence farm practices. Fish farming is the peoples’ primary and greatest occupation. Their raffia that grows freely along the swamps is their major sources of wine for refreshment while the raffia leaves are used to make thatched roof for their houses (p. 46). Unfortunately, the discovery and exploration of oil marks their historic economic downturn. The prospection of oil heralds the ravaging of their cassava plantation. It is economically debasing for them to see “their young cassava shoots levelled to the ground, and their leaves withered by the scorching afternoon sun” (p. 45). “The oil company had also felled many palm trees and raffia trees” (p. 46). The “drilling activities... polluted streams and the creeks. Our fishermen are coming back with empty baskets, as the fishes are being destroyed by pollution...” (p. 152). Also, “some sea birds, turtles and fishes were washed ashore floating on their backs. They have died of pollution to their environment. The fishermen were temporarily put out of business...” (p. 171). All these cannot but “impoverish our people.... They do not have working capital, and inflation has devastated their business...” (p. 151). Nwahunanya [7] captures the gravity of the economic deprivation and suffering of the people of the region, “as the land is exploited, so also are the people. As the land bleeds oil, so the people bleed tears in their abject poverty....” In the like manner, Onyema [1] bemoans the economic condition of the people, “... the people of the Niger Delta, who are fishermen and farmers, have been suffering from act of bioterrorism, oil pollution of land and waters, ... hunger, diseases and poverty, as a result of the general destruction of their aquatic and terrestrial reserves”.

Environmental degradation, besides the above economic catastrophe, results in perennial health challenges. The gas flaring and oil spills on the environment have devastating health implications. The gas flaring increases deposit of carbon monoxide in the atmosphere which makes their rain water undrinkable. The acid rain pollutes the land and makes their crops unconsumable. The consumption of polluted water and poisonous food translates into respiratory diseases and heart congestion (p. 167), miscarriages among women folk and impotence among men (p. 79) as well as spread of cancer (p. 199). Nwahunanya [3] notes other consequences of gas flaring and oil exploration such as “widespread scorching of vegetation... disappearance of foliage and overexposure of soil cover to harsh weather conditions, death of aquatic life and a destabilization of the ecosystem..., dietary short falls ... and emission of large amounts of methane and carbon dioxide”.



The loss of mangrove forest; the rivers that provide water for drinking, bathing, cleaning and fishing for both the dinner table and trading to make profit; drastic change of ecosystem and the entire biodiversity generate in the people psychological disillusionment. The reality of their hopelessness is dawn on them. Their consciousness is awakened to the point of seeking solutions to their problems through legitimate and illegitimate means. The emerging activism, grouping and regrouping into movements such as Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP); Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND); Niger Delta People's Volunteer Front (NDPVF); Niger Delta Liberation Front (NDLF) (Ibeanu [8] p. 9); Niger Delta Avengers (NDA); Adaka Boro Avengers (ABA); Niger Delta Greenland Justice Mandate (NDGJM), etc; hostage taking of company workers; capture and seizure of companies' barges, tugboats and fast boats; vandalization of companies' pipelines and other facilities (p. 187); militancy and oil thievery (bunkering) (p. 168, p. 172) become direct and indirect attack on the oil companies. All these are not without attendant perplexities and problems. The aftermaths range from military incursion, arrest and detention of purported culprits including innocent citizens (p. 186), reprisal attacks on military cantonment by angry youths and mobs, loss of lives and properties through explosions of adulterated kerosene and petrol (p. 192), social unrest and displacement, and massive death resulting from inferno from punctured oil pipes (p. 167).

4 CONCLUSION

It is quite unpropitious that discovery of oil and its exploration in commercial quantity turned calamitous owing to environmental mismanagement by multi-dollar and multi-national oil companies as well as government's indifference to the plight of the host communities. Although some insignificant efforts have been made by the oil companies in favour of the host communities such as building unequipped health centres, sinking of boreholes at Rumuma (p. 196) and provision of casual employment to the youths and other indigenes (p. 24, p. 77). On the part of the government, seemingly worthwhile strategic efforts have been made such as establishment of parastatals, commissions, committees and so on to manage the Niger Delta challenges but with little or no achievements. For instance, far back 1952, before independence, the government established Willink Commission to look into the problem of minorities which was a product of recommendation by Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB). Others were Niger Delta River Basin Authority (NDRBA) in 1967; Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992 which existed to 1999; Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES) in 1995; Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000 which exists till date; Niger Delta Peace Conference (NDPC) in 2007 and Niger Delta Technical Committee (NDTC) in 2008. In terms of maintaining security, there was Special Security Committee on Oil Producing Area (SSCOPA) in 2001 and Joint Task Force (JTF) in 2008.

Most unfortunately, all these exemplification of good intension and concerted effort yielded less qualitative output. The activities of the commissions were (and still are) riddled with corruption, insincerity, nepotism, poor implementation strategy and lack of political will to budget enough money for quality implementation in line with derivation principles. Ako [9] adds that the efforts "lacked sufficient elements of democracy, accountability, equity and active public participation of all stakeholders". Sixty six years (that is 1956) after discovery of oil in Niger Delta, the indigenes cannot boast of good medical health care, good road network, pipe borne water and other basic infrastructural amenities. Thus, the desired peace and infrastructural development have remained elusive.



5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are necessary because if implemented will ensure not only sustainable city but more importantly sustainable communities, lives and sources of livelihood. The demands of the indigenes of the host communities from the government and oil companies are not really unsubstantial and too much: “compensation for everything...” (p. 43), “construction of good roads...” (p. 44), “a permanent employment...” (p. 79) for suitably qualified indigenes and youths (p. 95), “... portable water...” (p. 83), “... scholarship for local and international studies” (p. 87, p. 153) and “electricity and functional primary, secondary and tertiary schools” (p. 128). All these are predicated on the avowed conscious contentions that “the oil is at our backyard It is ours. It is God’s gift to us and nobody should take it away from us” (p. 81) and that “the day that the youths were relegated to the background are over” (p. 96). Their requests are legitimate which require only political will, sincerity of purpose, recruitment of patriotic personnel and strategically functional policy framework to get them qualitatively implemented. The challenges in the Niger Delta region do not require political gimmicks, empty and bogus promises and unnecessary periodical establishment of commissions but a robust conviction to get thing done.

With sturdy conviction, it is imperative to do away with personnel of questionable character; fraudsters in the gab of statesmanship and mediocre but incorporate in the implementation process, selfless, public-spirited and nationalistic indigenes. Involvement of the indigenes is vital because it is only one that wears the shoes that knows where it pinches.

It is not exaggerative to recommend derivative principles, resource control or fiscal federalism (Akintunde and Hile [10]). This is a sure approach to giving the people quality sense of belonging and curbing the menace of illegal oil thievery (bunkering) and youth restiveness. If done, unnecessary pipe leakages and explosions resulting from illegitimate oil burglary would end or at least curbed to the barest minimum. Derivation principle would include employment of suitably qualified indigenes into strategic “managerial and administrative” (p. 97) positions in the companies. Ejike’s *Oil at my Backyard* exemplifies this fact with the emergence of Ngozi, the daughter of the soil, to the political scene, as well as approval of Chris’ study leave-with-pay (p. 129) and his later promotion to director in Eluala Oil Company.

Fundamentally, critical, concerted and patriotic efforts need to be made in the cleaning of the environment of oil spillage. Oil spillage is an ecological terrorism which does not require lip service and establishment of toothless and unfunded commissions. It is no doubt costly to clean up spillage. For instance, Ayandale [5] observed that “the resultant environmental degradation from gas flaring, dredging of larger rivers, oil spillage and reclamation of land due to oil and gas extraction across Niger Delta region cost about US\$758 million every year”. Notable, in “August 2017, Nigeria launched a \$1 billion clean up and restoration program” (UN [11]), and “this will last for 30 years” (Vindal [12]). The whopping cost, however, cannot be equated to the huge loss of ecosystem, biodiversity, aquatic lives, human lives and properties. Consideration of the large cost above human life and environmental fecundity amounts to negligence and diversion of government’s primary and statutory responsibility of protection of lives and properties and that of oil companies’ statutory corporate social responsibility. There should, therefore, be synergy and collaboration between the oil companies and government to urgently achieve it.

Petroleum Industry Act/Bill (PIA/PIB) (RLF [13]) signed into law on 16 August 2021 needs to be implemented immediately. The Act which provides the legal, governance, regulatory and fiscal framework for the Nigerian Petroleum Industry as well as the establishment, and development of host communities and other related matters in the upstream and downstream sectors of petroleum industry has since promulgation in 2021



existed in principle. The repealed extant Petroleum Act (2004) and Associated Gas Reintegration Act (1979) were not broad-based and could not achieve much. It is hopefully optimistic that immediate implementation of PIA would solve most imbroglio experienced in the Niger Delta region.

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