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Poetic Language in the Service of Ecological Commitment in Ebi Yeibo's *The Forbidden Tongue*

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Abstract

This article examines indices of environmentalism as reflected in the language deployed in Ebi Yeibo's collection of poems entitled The Forbidden Tongue. Given the ravaging effects of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, a good number of Niger Delta poets have explored and continue to explore themes that border on environmental despoliation. Ebi Yeibo is one of the most committed poets in the exploration of ecological experiences in the oil-rich Delta. Existing studies on Yeibo's poetry have examined the politics of dispossession and oil exploration as experienced in the Niger Delta region. This article examines Yeibo's eco-social vision to complement existing foci by highlighting the poet's commitment to redeem the pillaged environment of the Niger Delta. For this purpose, the essay undertakes a close reading of the language and inherent poetic images in poems of The Forbidden Tongue. This focus of analysis is privileged because the language of deployment and its resources (such as images, figurative potentials) constitute the conveyors of Yeibo's exploration of environmental devastation engendered by the politics of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region. Selected poems in the collection are subjected to critical analysis. Aspect of Ecocriticism that deals with the relationship between literature and environment is adopted as a theoretical framework in this article.

Keywords: Commitment, Ecological, Despoliation, Niger Delta.

Introduction

The interplay between literature and environment became prominent during the Romantic Period, precisely the 18th and 19th Centuries. Who said this and where? Romanticism, as a literary movement, was celebratory of the natural environment and all that reside in it. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge launched the Romantic Movement by using poetry to create environmental consciousness. The preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* is the official testament of the romantic poets, which announces the nature theme that characterized their artistic consciousness. The industrial revolution and urbanization of the 18th and 19th centuries led to the destruction of the natural vegetation. In essence, the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* is the official testament of the Romantic Movement.

The origin of literature and environment as subject of scholarly discussion is traced to the ground-breaking works of Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Glotfelty defines ecocriticism "as the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). Similarly, Lawrence Buell regards ecocriticism as "a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis" (430). Also, Simon Estok observes that "Ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to

the natural world as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections (16-17).

Literature and environment show the interface between literary study and ecological issues. The institution of reputable journals like *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*, which became a quarterly journal since 2009, and others, has validated the synergy between literature studies and environmental sciences. Different scholars have worked on the symbiotic relationship which literature and environment now share for healthy human ecology.

Mishra observes that in contemporary studies, literature has been conveniently deployed to highlight the various mishaps which are elicited by the misuse of the natural environment. The study explores the ecocritical perspectives in selected world literature as well as Indian writings in English. Mishra believes that an environmentally oriented study of literature brings about an ecological literacy among literary enthusiasts, who in the process become conscious, thereby taking good care of Mother Nature.

Other studies offer very insightful ideas about the relationship between literature and environment. The text, *Contemporary Contemplations on Ecoliterature*, edited by Suresh examines current topicalities on ecological literature, otherwise, known as ecoliterature. The book covers a wide range of essays by scholars from India, Australia and USA, who investigate ecological issues in literary texts. Gerard Greg's *Ecocriticism* offers refreshing introduction to the discipline of literary ecological criticism. This book, since its emergence, has remained a resourceful handbook in the field of literature and environment. It has been acclaimed as one of the first texts that offer introductory guides to the field of literary ecological analysis. In another study Mishra carries out ecocriticism in children's literature, focusing on Amit Garg's *Two Tales*. Shivam examines the significance of ecocriticism, highlighting the relevance of healthy environment in the overall human's relationship.

In the Nigerian academic landscape, the origin of literature and environment is traced to the 20th Century but it became a well-developed discipline in the 21st Century. Besides the environmental theme in the earliest works of J. P. Clark, Gabriel Okara and Tanure Ojaide, contemporary Nigerian writers have been well committed in exploration of ecological experiences, especially, as it affects the Niger Delta of bounteous oil mineral.

This article examines the appropriation of different linguistic and rhetorical markers to foreground the Niger Delta environmental despoliation in Ebi Yeibo's poetry collection, *The Forbidden Tongue*. A close reading of the poems in the collection reveals eco-linguistic images aimed at creating ecological awareness through poetic imagination, with the aim of reviving the endangered environment of the Niger Delta. Yeibo, in this collection of poems, laments experiences that border on oil spillage, gas flaring and general devastation of the Niger Delta environment as a result of the activities of the oil conglomerates.

Yeibo deploys linguistic markers and rhetorical devices to foreground the devastation of the physical environment of the Niger Delta region. The first poem in the collection, “Song”, reveals Yeibo's effort to create ecological awareness. In this poem, Yeibo employs different images in his poetic language to resent the negative effects of oil spillage and gas flaring on the people's lands and waters which are their main means of livelihood:

Let us
Make canorous music
From
The deep croaks
Of drunk frogs
Moisten calcified farmlands
With scathing manure

Cleanse cringing creeks
Cadavers and maelstroms
With searing song

(*The Forbidden Tongue*, 19)

As shown through the images in the excerpt above, Yeibo believes that the effectiveness of poetic language is capable of stimulating environmental activism which will engender ecological wellness in the Niger Delta region. According to Yeibo, the Niger Delta poet is armed with “searing songs” to “make music” that is capable of improving on the bad condition of the Niger Delta environment (“cleanse cringing creeks”). This cleansing ritual transcends the domain of physical laboring of cleaning crude oil from the pillaged lands and waters of the Niger Delta— it underscores a kind of mental enlightenment towards environmental hygiene. The effort of the poet to restore the ravaged creek of the oil rich Niger Delta shows his effort towards resuscitating the people's economic life which has been ruined by crude oil. Obviously, the disturbing experience of oil spillage resonates in the lines above.

In a similar vein, Yeibo reveals the effects of the oil extraction on the people's means of continued existence— lands, for farming; and rivers or streams, for fishing, as evident in the poem, “Dawn Song”. Yeibo notes that the pollution of lands and water bodies offer low yields to farmers and fishermen or women. Yeibo, therefore, raises a kind of entreaty to the god of the land, to bless farmers with bountiful harvests. The texture of language in this poem shows some musicality:

Let solo reapers
Ripen communal farm
That graying labourers

May gather grains

Let the eloquent sun
Sing harvest songs
In the rumbling stomachs
Of sulky saints
That drowsy dreams may awaken
To the dialect of dawn

(*The Forbidden Tongue*, 25).

The import of the natural environment for the economic wellbeing of the people is brought to the fore through the choice of lexical resources deployed in the poetic lines above. For instance, Yeibo's infusion of sound devices like alliteration, consonance, assonance, repetition, refrain, parallelism, and onomatopoeia are not merely meant to entertain his audience but to stimulate them to get a grasp of the vision of life he is portraying. These devices are poetic tools laced with the language to convey his resentment over the despoliation of the physical landscape of the Delta.

As an environmental activist, Yeibo's use of sound devices in his poems helps to convey the pain of devastation caused to the Niger Delta environment and its corresponding effects on the people's vocations. In "Silent Sorrow" for instance, we are made to experiment with the tenor of despondency as he recalls the harrowing experiences of a people whose means of livelihood and continued existence have been destroyed. The negative effects of the oil exploration manifest on lands and waters – while the lands have lost their fertility, fishes have discarded the rivers and streams. The resultant effect is extreme hunger and hopelessness. The implication is that the human environment is very significant in the overall existence as a people. Yeibo laments:

Dawn bristles with drizzling dews
Disfiguring forest of fun
Foiling foliages of fanfare

And even fanciful flowers
On loamy soil
Flaunt petals of patrimony
Here, dawn bristles with
With hollow helmet of hope
Cornering us to closed contours
Crashing us on stoneless soils
Dawn bristles
With a fiery flame of fraud

Burning up blossoming barns
Like brittle forest
In the heart of the harmattan

(Forbidden Tongue, 31)

Images like “drizzling dew”, “disfiguring forest of fun”, “loamy soil”, “stoneless soil” and “the heart of the harmattan” foreground the poet's effort to narrate the physical condition of the Niger Delta environment— its beauties and ugliness. The lines above, no doubts, underscore the wretched experience of the people who have lost their means of continued existence— farming, fishing and hunting, to the intractable oil multinationals. It is evident that Yeibo expresses the sorrow and pains engendered by the activities of oil exploration, exploitation and extraction. He does this by detailing the parameters of such sorrow. Yeibo, according to Kekeghe constantly deploys hissing sounds to metaphorically foreground the psychological pains and anguish, which the people are subjected to.

The destruction of the human environment, as Yeibo laments in this collection, highlights his drive for ecological restoration. In this case, we can attest to Yeibo's quest to remedy the human's ecology, particularly the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Again, in Yeibo's “Sighs”, he reveals that the devastation caused to the Niger Delta environment is as a result of the irresponsiveness of political leaders, who conspire with the oil multinationals to poach the Delta landscape as they greedily search for oil wealth. Through the deployment of alliterative devices, Yeibo laments this impunity:

We who sow drizzling dreams
In the fertile fields of reforms
This season of surplus
Know not the hem of harvest's apron

May the long shaft of sunray
Slit the throat
Of their crimson connivance
May the sanctimonious smile
Of the new moon
Haunt the howling horrors
Resonate the silence
Of suppressed sighs

(Forbidden Tongue, 52-53).

The featuring and personification of environmental features like “fertile fields”, “season of surplus”, “harvest's apron”, “sunray” and “new moon” in the extract

above attest to Yeibo's exaltation of the physical ecology, given its significance in human's existence. The poem both recalls the once fertile and beautiful environment of the Niger Delta, and laments its now pillaged state, occasioned by the activities of the oil conglomerates. Yeibo's environmental consciousness is both exaltative and lamentable— he does not merely glorify the beautiful components of the mangrove Delta, he also unfolds the ugliness which oil spillage and gas flaring have brought upon lands, waters and the air.

In “Rage of the Delta”, Yeibo reveals that the destruction of the Niger Delta region and the people's means of survival has engendered a characteristic rage in the region. The different protest movements and militants' agitations in the Niger Delta region are ways of conveying their resentments about the injustices done to them. Here, the poet uses the resources of repetition to emphatically convey the dissatisfactions of the natives of the oil belt area of the Niger Delta, who have been facing several years of deprivation and dispossession. He intones:

Dwellers of the delta
 Wax wild on the wings of wreckage
 Who wouldn't whose paradise
 Becomes a prostitute's rag
 Whose brooks brim
 With bilious black blood
 Whose dream host rabid jiggers?

...

Whose savoury swamps
 Are cauldrons of chemicals
 Whose patrician pockets
 Hoist Harmattan flag
 Whose hallowed virginity
 Is stolen the wrong way

...

When a hawk swoops on chicks
 The mother goes wild

(*Forbidden Tongue*, 28)

The people are angry that their “savoury swamps” are now made up of “cauldrons of chemicals”, caused by oil spillage. The beautiful landscape of the Delta, according to Yeibo, has become “a prostitute's rag” as a result of persistent plunder by hydro-engineers and geophysicists, in their search for oil. The poet's socialist vision brings to the fore his environmental activism. Angered by the heartless poaching of the people's environment and their means of survival, Yeibo curses in “Dawn Song”:

Let sprawling seas
Disgorge the swelling sewage
That gaily farts on us

O let sprawling seas
Stem the surge
Of sententious saints
Stabbing our sun
With serrated sermons
Let sprawling seas
Mop up trumped-up-mornings
That hides the titillating treasures
Of dawn

(*The Forbidden Tongue*,)

Here, Yeibo tends to energise his people by deploying the rhetoric of hope while at the same time attacking those who contribute to the pathetic condition of the Niger Delta natives, whose oil has been turned into a dooming boom. The ravages done to the people's ecology have a decimating effect on their economic life. This is given the fact that their occupation, of which ever form, is dependent on the environment – lands and water bodies.

In “Tsunami Reminds Us”, Yeibo cautions against an imminent natural disaster which the over drilling of the Delta will engender. The greedy plunder of the Delta landscape in search for the oil has ushered in greater tragedy to the natives of the Delta. Yeibo admonishes:

Tsunami reminds us
Of the mixed palette
Suckling nature's undying shrubs-

...
Tsunami reminds us
Of the serenity of white clouds
Suddenly overturned
By thunder's deafening cannons-

...
Tsunami reminds us
We stand in the middle of a maelstrom
Weaving unpredictable waters
To eke out a world

(*The Forbidden Tongue*, 37)

There have been series of natural disasters caused by environmental despoliation and Tsunami is one of such. Tsunami is a series of water waves caused by displacement of a body of water. The poet, who foresees a looming danger on the Niger Delta landscape as a result of the excessive drilling of the land in the process of extracting the oil, uses the tragic inundation in Tsunami India to warn our geophysicists and hydro-engineers of such natural calamity in the Niger Delta environment. The poet's rage towards the persistent plundering of the Niger Delta landscape is also encapsulated in "The Poachers":

They are the dragons
And the drought
The hunter and the hound
Who poach our fish ponds
Dry up our farmlands
Kill our dreams

(*The Forbidden Tongue*, 34)

Yeibo sometimes recalls the once beautiful environment of the Niger Delta region. Like the romantic poets, Yeibo often exalts the beautiful greenery and mangrove vegetation in the Niger Delta, lamenting its continued destruction by the oil explorers. This exaltation resonates in the poem, "Hope":

O fresh foliage spring
On mountaintops, visible
Even from valleys afar,
Softening the surrounding air
With perfumed breath
For your bounteous breath
Like fluvial gods
Dips with doddling dews
Irrigating fallow fields

(*The Forbidden Tongue*, 70).

A significant point that can be gleaned from the above is the fact that Yeibo has a great taste for environmental health, and wishes that the ecology of his homeland, the Niger Delta region of rich vocations, be improved. The poet, conscious of the significance of the physical environment to the economic wellbeing of the people, laments its heartless pillaging. Hence, in "Silent Sorrow", Yeibo bemoans the devastation caused to the Delta environment and the people's occupation. He notes

that the Delta is raped dry by the intractable activities of the oil conglomerates, in connivance with the irresponsible manifestations of the greedy Federal Government. He wails:

Dry Delta, dripping Desert
Barren layer, breeding broiler
Let laceration of loose tongue
Banish garish gnarly barricades
From boundless sea

(*The Forbidden Tongue*, 33).

Images such as “Dry Delta”, “dripping desert”, “barren layer” and “breeding boiler”, do not only unfold the unruly and heartless poaching of the Niger Delta region, they also show the injustices done to the land by using its resources to develop other lands. The irony of the oil-rich Delta, being dry, and the poor north, being regarded as a dripping desert, underscores the politics of dispossession of the natives of the oil belt area of the Delta. This unfairness manifests in the way the people and their adorable environment are treated by the oil companies and the Federal Government forces.

Conclusion

The poems discussed in this article highlight environment issues which are explored from the perspective of the pillaged Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The politics of oil exploration and extraction, in the Niger Delta region, continues to denigrate the lands and people of the region, who feel the brunt of the oil boom. Their lands, waters and air are polluted as a result of the oil extraction. Yeibo, who is from the Delta creek, has a firsthand experience of the injustices meted on his land and people. He, therefore, takes to social and environmental activism in this collection, through a language that at one point raw, and at other point exhilarating, with the aim of ushering in succor to his people. Yeibo's use of lexical markers and rhetorical devices to convey the environmental problems of the Niger Delta is a remarkable effort in *The Forbidden Tongue*.

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