

**ARTS, HUMANITY AND ECOLOGY:
ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN ISIDORE OKPEWHO'S
*TIDES***

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Abstract

In this study, "Environmental Degradation in Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*," the researchers set out to portray how the writer criticised the events in his society, and how the story serves as a reflection of the problems of the masses and the downtrodden in our society. The novelist made use of the literary medium to satirise the leaders in Africa and their styles of exercising reins of power which, instead of ameliorating the problems of the people and bringing in even development, only succeed in creating more suffering, pain and disappointment. Isidore Okpewho shows the humiliation, oppression, insensitivity, waste of lives, exploitation, cruelty of the ruling class, especially the military, on the citizens, as a result of greed and capitalist tendencies, which impoverish the citizens further. The researchers used both primary and secondary sources in the analysis of data. The findings showed that the citizens of the Niger-Delta experience betrayal, oppression, deprivation, and environmental degradation as a result of oil exploration. Unfortunately, their leaders do not care much about their problems as they are only interested in selfish acquisition of wealth to the detriment of the people.

Keywords: Corruption, Gullibility, Power Mongering, Bribery, Leadership Problems, Degradation, Environment

Introduction

There is the optimistic belief that no individual can survive the perils of life without constant help of either the group, class, society or environment which he belongs to. Ethics of profession or occupation has many roles to play in an individual's life. So it is with any writer, whether in science, arts or any other field of human endeavour. Notably, the author chosen for this study, Isidore Okpewho, has shown considerably in his novel that the environment in which one finds oneself has a lot to do with one's writing. The main purpose of literature is to help us understand ourselves and the world around us. Literature begins when a writer imagines things and writes or says them. It provides us with hypothetical answers to the most important questions we have to ask: Why are we here? What is our relationship, expectation or obligation to the world around us? In that sense, the writer, Okpewho, through his novel, *Tides*, has exposed some of the different modes through which literature is related to his Niger-Delta environment.

The study of literature and the influence of the environment on literature could be termed "ecocriticism." The use of the word *ecocriticism* dates back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay on "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-Criticism." His intent was to focus on the application of ecology and ecological concepts on the study of literature. Ecocriticism apparently lay dormant in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association Meeting in Coeur D'Alene, when Cheryll Glotfelty, a graduate student of Cornell and later Assistant Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno, revived not only the term but also urged its adoption to refer to the diffuse critical field that hitherto had been known as "The Study of Nature Writing." Ecocriticism well applies to the study of literature in the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria, which is the part of Nigeria the author specified in his novel. The discovery of oil in commercial quantity in Olobiri on January 15, 1956, in the Niger-Delta of Nigeria placed Nigeria among the rank of oil-producing countries from 1958. The above vibrant economic discovery in Niger-Delta necessitated a momentous means of revenue generation for the Nigerian government. The activities of multinationals as well as the exploitative trends of economic consideration and environmental degradation have fuelled critics, tensions and varied flow of responses as a result of exploitation and corruption that now dominate the literature of Nigeria's Niger-Delta.

To the Niger-Deltans, the war is also carried through and experienced in the literary lines as major writers interrogate and explicate these excruciating pains they feel in their minds. Niger-Delta region has advocated social equality and environmental justice which had long

eluded the region since the menace of oil extraction began to rampage the whole of Niger-Delta environment. Writers from Niger-Delta have joined in the collaborative effort of bringing about environmental justice against the collaborative despoliation of the environment perpetrated by the government and oil companies.

The virtual destruction of the Niger-Delta and its attendant effects on the people have created an increasing feeling of insecurity, estrangement from their means of sustenance, hardship, unemployment, corruption and environmental degradation. Successive governments of Nigeria have exploited the resources of the region with reckless abandon. This exploitation and recklessness have stirred the impulses of creative ingenuity of writers within and outside the region. There is a tone of severity and submission occasioned by circumstances which now reflect in their literature. Nwahunanya posits that “as the land bleeds oil, so the people’s tears in their abject poverty and real blood as they fare under the constant assault of government agents meant to silence their protests” (16).

The writers have, through creative literature, increased their pressure on sensitive minds in their calls for a dispassionate reconsideration of the environmental and human rights issues which have repeatedly constituted their thematic focus. Niger-Delta is a region bedevilled with ecological problems. The discovery of oil in the region has affected agriculture, fishing, as well as the living conditions of the people, resulting in hardship for the people. Land, streams, creeks, etc. have been polluted. Apart from these ecological problems, the Niger-Delta region lacks basic social amenities like portable drinking water, electricity, roads, hospitals, schools and job opportunities to enable the people earn their living and become self-reliant. Yet, the region is the proverbial goose that lays the golden egg that feeds the entire nation. “It was against this backdrop of economic, social and political deprivation that Ken Saro Wiwa died for. Saro Wiwa viewed the exploitation of oil by multinationals as anti-people exploitation. In an insightful interview, Saro Wiwa affirmed that his people live in the middle of death. What Saro Wiwa advocated for is the right of the people to use the resources for their own development.

Saro Wiwa’s fight for social justice and minority rights made him a man of the people. That he was able to mobilise and draw attention, locally and internationally, to the plight of his people marked him out as one of the greatest activists of our time. Ken Saro Wiwa’s works tackle the issue of environmental degradation, exploitation, hardship and unemployment as a result of oil spillage and the complacency of the Nigerian government that benefits solely from the proceeds of the petroleum. Thus, he asserts:

Today, the Ogoni people are involved in two grim wars. The first is the 35-year-old ecological war waged by multinational oil companies: Shell and

Chevron. In this most sophisticated and unconventional war, no bones are broken, no blood is spilled and no one is maimed. Yet man, woman and children die, flora and fauna perish, the air and water are poisoned and finally the land dies. The second war is tyranny, oppression and greed, designed to dispossess the Ogoni people of their wealth and subject them to abject poverty, slavery, dehumanisation and extinction (12).

It is necessary to add that though Niger-Delta houses massive oil and gas deposits, the majority of the people that live in the region wallow in abject poverty due to administrative neglect, crumbling infrastructure and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, filth, squalor and economic conflict. With the ascending of oil in the Niger-Delta, the region has been steeped in serious environmental challenges and crises engendered by oil exploration and resource extraction. The research seeks to solve the problems of Niger-Delta and its environment treated in Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*. Theories depend on what the scholars under each school of thought feel literature should be, and be used for. Various critics and scholars decide to evaluate or approach or criticise literature from their various perspectives. These various perspectives are also referred to as approaches of literature, hence the words *theories* and *approaches* are synonymously used. A pre-knowledge of the theory adopted for the critical analysis of the text will be highly essential to our understanding.

We adopted ecocriticism for this study. Ecocriticism is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. As a separate movement or school of literary criticism, ecocriticism started developing in the 1990s. There is a close relation between ecocriticism and literature. It is an interdisciplinary study of ecology and literary criticism which is unusual as a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. By analogy, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. The word ecocriticism is a semi-neologism. *Eco* is short for *ecology*, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with the environment. The relationship between man and nature is not just interdependent; it is also interrelated. By analogy, ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. The term ecocriticism has a broad domain and has been expressed through many literary genres. It is not only the application of ecology and ecological principles but also the study of literature and theoretical approach to the interrelations of nature, culture and, sometimes, supernatural elements in nature. It attempts to explore the expressions of

environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse. It is also a study of language through which literature is expressed.

Environmental Degradation in Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*

Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* is adjudged by critics as a success. His first novel, *The Victims* (1970) is a story of conflicts in a polygamous household and centres around the tensions created between the man, his two wives and children. *Tides*, like most novels from novelists in the Niger-Delta, centres on environmental degradation, marginalisation, unemployment, incessant retirement of government officials, lack of social amenities and social decadence allowed and enhanced by political leaders, of which Nwachukwu-Agbada asserts in *Obika* (2009), that in this novel of the Niger-Delta,

. . . the artist leaves the comfort of his home in search of the solution to the problem of the wider setting. In the case of the novel in question, the problem is the devastation of an environment which, although it bakes the "national cake", is left un-rehabilitated, which, although it accounts for much of the national budget is deforested, pillaged and rendered hollow (2).

Tides by Isidore Okpewho seems to be more of fraction than fiction. It is more action oriented and tells the real situation, the truth and nothing but the truth, as it affects the people. It is a sense of correspondence between two friends or former professional colleagues, in which nothing is hidden as they open up without fear or favour to each other. This epistolary novel reveals the actual situation in a developing country with the attendant problems in its domestic, social, economic and political sectors. The novel is divided into three parts—ripple, billion and flood—though it is in a letter form like Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. While the former is between two male friends and colleagues who face forceful retirement from their work, the latter is between two female friends who face inhuman treatment meted out to them by their husbands. It opens with two protagonists who suffer some of the indignities of the people. They are from the minority section of the country. Tonwe and Piriye are prematurely retired. While Tonwe Brisibe comes home to the village to settle, his friend and former colleague, Mr Piriye Dukumo, remains in Lagos to practise freelance journalism.

Piriye writes to his colleague and friend, Tonwe, through Priboye, a friend of Piriye. In his letter to his friend, he exposes the economy of the Niger-Delta communities:

I've no way of knowing if you'll be interested in the project. The point simply is this—you know very well how badly the traditional economy of the Delta communities has been faring as a result of two modern industrial projects which purport to enhance the economy of this country. First, there is the Kwarafa Dam, which has severely reduced the volume of water

flowing down the Niger and so curtailed the fishing activities in the Delta—and our people are nothing if not fishermen. Secondly, the spillage of crude petroleum from the oil rigs down here—one of which is in fact located near your own village—has proved an absolute menace to agricultural lives for many farms are practically buried in thick layer of crude, which kills off many fishes and other forms of life (2).

From the word go, Dukumo sees the nature of our country and her people. He asserts that the issue of a national goal is a mirage. After all, their retirement from the profession they cherished so much was on ethnic differences. Personal reasons aside, the situation of things in the Niger-Delta is better imagined than seen. According to Nwachukwu-Agbada, *Obika* says:

The case of the people of the Delta region as presented in *Tides* is not resource control nor is it clamour for their sons and daughters to be employed in the oil companies. Far more than these, they are bothered here by their survival, by the ecological disaster they face, and which the government and the oil companies are not prepared to do anything about (6).

Piriye describes the agony suffered by farmers and fishermen. Although the Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC) is at present taking care of these problems, the Publicity Secretary, Noble Ebika Harrison nicknamed “Bickerbug” is monitored by the Supreme Military Council. Piriye invites Tonwe to join in the project to free his people from this trauma. Though he is disturbed by the noise and pollution posed by the exploration machine, he does not want to resent the call at first, which made Piriye to be dissatisfied with Tonwe’s reply. He abhors the quest for “national unity,” “Beloved country” when the government still retires them untimely from active service.

However, Piriye’s commitment to the project stands firm and he appeals to his friend to reconsider his stand. Something happened that shook him off his complacency. An Aboh man, Opene, was humiliated as he tried to fight for his right by armed soldiers who had collaborated with the oil companies. The elders and some influential men like Councillor Zuokumor had sold their conscience to collect money and shatter the peace and harmony of Beniotu Community. Tonwe emphatically states that ethnicity does not matter to these fishermen like Opene who is not from the vicinity of the fishing community. In Piriye’s reply to Tonwe, he highlights the insensitivity and corruption on the part of government officials. Bickerbug shows the pictures of the devastated dome to the Niger-Delta environment and as he was making a speech, he was arrested. He later mentions how his family life is deteriorating. It is appalling to hear that the Delta area from which money is realised is being overlooked; rather this money is shared among the other states. Commander

Adetunji is not left out of the struggle for national cake. He is in support of the oil company because of the money he gets from them. The CCC meets with the Minister for Petroleum and Power, Dr. John P. Adiele and reaches a consensus which is neither favourable to the government nor the communities involved. Piriye is still uncomfortable with his wife's childlessness. He narrates how Bickerbug was muddled by two men. The couple that tells him the story is shocked to hear that Bickerbug is yet unmarried.

Piriye is mesmerised at the police headquarters as he goes in search of Bickerbug. The dilapidated state of the police cell is shown and how police officers who are supposed to keep law and order, humiliate innocent citizens while questioning them and asking them to make statements. Piriye comes back home to see that his wife has packed her luggage and has left him for good. After that incident, his room is burgled but his big envelope containing Tonwe's letter is intact. Tonwe in turn tells of his trip to Benin and how Mr. Johnson Aniemeka welcomed him. He narrates how Mr. Aniemeka has accepted the doctrine of exploitation and, because of this, does not want anything to disrupt his pleasures. He believes that there is nothing to do about the situation since the government is not that static enough to resolve any matter and look into it. The government you meet today might not be the same government you will meet in the next two months. There is power reshuffle at any given moment it pleases the government in power. Tonwe sees the oil business as trouble. He later meets with Batowei through Aniemeka's description. Batowei still repeats the same thing Aniemeka tells him. Braide is of the opinion that:

It would be a gross omission if one failed to call attention to the role of the petroleum industry in participating in the deplorable state of the environment in the Niger-Delta . . . oil pollution of the marine environment is an inherent consequence of the exploration and exploitation of petroleum resources . . . These areas are constantly in danger of exposure to marine environmental pollution and the resultant deleterious effects that harm our living resources (flora and fauna), cause, hazards to human health and hinder marine economic activities, including fishing and impairing the quality for use of sea water (379)

Piriye narrates how two men in French safari visited him and, later, after much interrogation, disclosed that they were security officers. Fortunately, for him, he is brought to the same cell where Bickerbug is. The indecent and unkempt appearance of Bickerbug and his inmates is something to think of.

The garbage served to these prisoners on dirty plates and the wooden boards they use as bed are typical examples of Nigerian cells. All these notwithstanding, one has to struggle to live on, as Bickerbug puts it. From

now on, you really have to eat what everyone else eats. I eat it myself.
You've got to survive, you've got to live and carry on the struggle (97).

Bickerbug took over from Okpaleke when he could not act against the inhuman treatment meted to the prisoners (or, rather, detainees, as they are not prisoners in the regular sense). The next morning, Piriye's money was stolen in the cell by one of the inmates. Life in the detention camp was hell except for the games introduced by Bickerbug and the "Open Forum" (103). Tonwe feels for his friend and the latter's letter to him shows how happy he is with the news of Lati's pregnancy. This Christmas letter deals more with Lati, her life, work and the happiness of a would-be-father.

Tonwe, on the other hand, narrates how he attended an inaugural meeting of the Task Force on Pollution in the oil-producing areas which was held in Warri. He spent a night before the meeting with his daughter, Enikeye and son-in-law. During the meeting, Dr. Achele reminds the populace and highly placed officers in the meeting that oil is the chief source of wealth and that it was impossible for them to shut the oil producing company for a period of three months, just to sanitise the communities affected. Rather, chemicals would be used to neutralise the oil spillage. Chief Zuokumor was irritated by Tonwe's question on the harm these chemicals would have on their farms and seas, thereby destroying what they were fighting against. Tonwe's question remained unanswered till the end of the meeting. Akpuru-Aja also has this to mention about the chemical that is used: "The overall- oil-led development in the Niger-Delta has certainly damaged the wetland and the environment of the livelihood in oil producing communities" (103).

Bickerbug after being released from cell narrates the trauma he passed through to Piriye. He told him that both the populace and the engineers were not happy about the situation of things in the oil producing areas. Bickerbug, whom Piriye and Tonwe thought was in the fight with them, betrayed them and was rearrested by the police as he tried to escape out of the country in disguise as a Catholic priest on theological conference to Coutonou. Piriye was on the run as Priboye concludes on how the police had been after him for four days. He said that he was just a messenger or mail master and there was nothing he had to say about what was really going on in the oil-producing areas. He advised Piriye to hide until there was peace once more.

There are many instances of environmental degradation in Okpewho's *Tides*. There is oil spillage and there are other destructive effects of the oil operations in the Niger-Delta area. This oil spillage hampers the growth of fishes in the river. These and other pollutions from oil companies make the lives of fishermen unbearable. Ibada is of the view that:

. . . oil spillage was a major cause of the conflicting relationship between the oil companies and the oil producing communities. Due to the attendant devastation of oil spillages on the environment, economy and society, the communities have charged the companies of insensitivity centred on the payment of inadequate compensation, slow response to oil spills in terms of clean up, delay in the assessment of the affected areas, delay in the payment of compensation (29).

This fishing community is worse hit because the portion of land left by water can no longer produce food as a result of chemicals and toxic waste dumped by the oil companies operating in these areas. The fishermen can no longer catch fishes because the activities of the drilling companies drive the fishes far into the high sea. The Kwarafa Dam helps to worsen the problem of the fishermen in these communities. These and other problems are why Dukumo solicits the help of his learned friend to do a book on the problems facing the Niger-Delta. From other angles, a group in Lagos known as Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), with its leader in the person of Noble Ebika Harrison, nicknamed Bickerbug, wants to improve the condition of living of their people, since their youths are not employed to work in oil companies. For a long time, the inhabitants have been complaining without being heard and the rural inhabitants are faced with hunger, abject poverty and all sorts of diseases.

Tonwe is no longer happy in the village because his people suffer humiliation in the hands of the so-called oil men and their security agents, even in their own land. Imagine the type of treatment Opene received for leading a peaceful demonstration to one of the oil rigs. According to Tonwe, he had scarcely finished when the officer slapped him hard across his mouth and sent him crashing across the bows of the canoe, dragging a couple of his men down with him (13).

This treatment to Opene and his people is enough to provoke a civil war. Piriye's mission is to salvage the people from the inhuman policies which corrupt officials like Chief Zuokomor formulate. The community, therefore, loses confidence in them. The government from the other side aggravates the problem by not allowing any publication that will portray Nigeria on the negative side. Security operatives are, therefore, set against people like Dukumo, Tonwe, Bickerbug and even Piriye. While the youths engage in hit and run attacks on the oil companies, the government uses her security agents to hunt them, leaving the natural and more serious approach to addressing such issues. This is perhaps the reason why the confusion is still lingering after all.

The police cell, offices and detention camps are also terrible. The way the places are neglected makes them very uncomfortable to stay in. People face death in the cell because of lack of quality food. The fear of going to the police to make report/statement about a missing person is what gives the reporter a great concern since one will not know one's fate immediately one steps into that station. Ways of waste disposal in these detention camps is another thing to record.

Onwueme explores the immoral act of the chiefs and leaders of the Niger-Delta who in a bid to enrich themselves, pawn their young relations to the white men working with the multinational oil companies. Government officials who are meant to plan ahead with the money realised from the oil are busy planning their own homes. This is seen from Commander Adetunji's words which reflect his selfish attitude rather than the attitude of the communities he is referring to:

We know these fishermen and their tricks on the oil companies. It's either that the explorers have destroyed the shrine of their god or that their fish traps have been damaged or that the tides have been disturbed and they no longer catch fish when they normally do. Or some other silly complaint. They tell us anything just to get compensation. Compensation, compensation, everybody wants to be paid something. That's the trouble with this country today. Money, money, money (3).

These government officials are not concerned about the lives of people and their complaints. The fishing life in Burutu goes so low because of the death of fishes in large numbers. The activities of the oil companies pose a threat to the people's livelihood since the searchlight on the water disturbs the movement of fishes and makes the fishes to move far into the seas. The chemical used in the treatment of oil waste in the environment is reducing the volume of water, which causes the fishing economy to be bad. Piriye talks about this, thus:

"I'm talking instead about upsetting the ecological balance between the flow of water from the river down the creeks to the sea and the periodic surge of the tides of the sea up the creeks" (149).

Ebika is of the opinion that the chemicals which Frank Segal talks about are more of bullshit. Bickerbug mentions that the angry masses, the engineers, the technicians, the white men, the Israelis and even the Germans are annoyed due to the situation in the country. Meanwhile, the issue of childlessness in the African society is not left out as this brings in confusion between Piriye and his wife, Tonye, of which when Lati announces her pregnancy, Piriye is overjoyed. The family trauma faced by childless women in Africa is not that easy to handle, especially when the husband cannot take it any longer. And he does

not know if the fault is from him or his wife. Nwapa, in focusing her searchlight on the issues of childlessness in marriage, with its attendant implications, says this in *Efuru*:

“What is important is not marriage as such, but children. A marriage is no marriage without children” (10); and *Idu*: “In contemporary Nigeria, a childless marriage is still generally considered a mishap. A childless marriage cannot last in the Nigeria of today” (37).

In conclusion, Piriye, Tonwe and Bickerbug fought so much to salvage the land but they could not. Bickerbug resorted to violence, which caused more harm to the society. Ecological degradation as portrayed by Isidore Okpewho in the Niger-Delta is endemic, that is, unnerving, persistent and intractable actions of wealthy and power-drunk individuals. And, this renders ineffective the efforts by ecoactivists and warriors to rid the place of so much ecological mess.

Conclusion

The effects and incidents in the novel are effectively literary elements used by the novelist to portray ecological degradation, that the novelist to a large extent has fulfilled basic ecocriticism principles with his work. Thematically, the novel focuses on environmental degradation, oil exploitation, pollution and ecological problems in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta region. The novel is more factual than fiction and is in a letter form like Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*. The novel, Isidore Okpewho’s *Tides*, portrays characters and places where people exist devoid of feeling for the life and sufferings of one another, a world where there are forms of pollution, all leading to one form of environmental degradation or another. Human efforts to combat evil only brings about worse evils and nothing really changes, even as the three novels end with no resolution of the crises. Conspiracy of the few beneficiaries of the ecological loot and degradation perpetually sustains the evils, and as long as the rest of the humanity is led and controlled by this group of persons, the hope of ecological sustainability remains blank.

In the novel, characters, incidents and events create consciousness of modern ecological dangers. In *Tides*, Ebika Harrison (a.k.a. Bickerbug), with the able support of Piriye Dukumo and Tonwe Birisibe, performs the major role of creating awareness of the dynamics of degradation to the said environment. Even the fishermen equally played a significant role in alerting people of the dangers in the environment.

Tides showed that the oil companies do not keep to their promises and they do not provide small-scale industries for youths to be employed. The youths brought this awareness to their communities and the neighbouring communities. The novel is a good source material for the Niger-Delta and the countryside since it pinpoints the corrupt

practices by the police force, security officials, administrators and traditional rulers alike.

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