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Exploring ecocriticism in Chimeka Garricks *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* (2010) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010)

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Abstract

Ecocriticism as a literary theory explores the relationship between literary imaginative works and the biological science with the aim of creating awareness on the devastation of the physical environment and its effects on people's lives. This thematic concern is the focus in Chimeka Garricks *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. Through a plot and character analysis of these novels, the point is established that when humans degrade the physical environment, they lose their humanity and destroy themselves.

Keywords: ecocriticism, humanity, imaginative literature, physical environment, thematic concerns

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Public Interest Statement

Ecocriticism as a literary theory explores the relationship between literary imaginative works and the biological science with the aim of creating awareness on the devastation of the physical environment and its effects on people's lives.



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Introduction

Ecocriticism was coined and further expounded as a major field of literary study in the late 1970s. The theory emerged from American and European scholarship however it has a wide scope and covers for African and world literature in general because of the environmental issues it seeks to address. Environmental degradation is a global problem that require urgent attention in order to avert global humanitarian crises. Human greed and selfishness are the primary motivation for the devastation of the natural environment. It is not the absence of legislation and sanctions that are often ignored, it is not only ignorance. In the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria for example, international oil companies, who are responsible for the outrage against the environment are aware of laws regulating the exploration of oil. The devastating impact on lives and properties are clearly seen and felt yet the atrocities committed are on the increase. All Eco-critics affirm that, “Science based knowledge of looming ecological disaster is not enough.” (Abrams, 2005. p.75). The knowledge must be impelled by the imagination. That is what is lacking, Achebe in “The Truth of Fiction” describes it as man’s “imaginative power to get under the skin of another human being and see the world through eyes other than his own” (2007, p. 112). This is one basic function of literature that is why Nixon, an Ecocritic suggests that “literature departments are likely to remain influential players in the important role of greening the humanities”. Stories of people living under ecologically devastated conditions can stimulate the imaginative faculty of readers and stimulate the impulse to act on what is imagined and what is right.

Proponents of the theory like Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, define Eco criticism as the “Study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996, p.xviii). Abrams views Ecocriticism as “critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities...” (p.71). Basic issues addressed in eco-critical interpretation of literary texts are in form of questions which are:

How is the physical setting depicted in the novels?

How does the physical environment influence the characters?

Who are the ecoactivists involved and how significant are their roles?

What symbols can be interpreted as land or nature metaphors?

Studies in African literature show that attention given to Ecocriticism is sparse. Although Olaniyan et al opine that Ecocriticism in African literature is “potentially one of the most vibrant areas of critical discourse” (2007, p. 681). William Slaymaker laments on this condition stating that, “Books that deal with black African literary criticism and literary theory rarely take up environmental ecological topics” (p. 689). However, the theory has found application in the poetry of Niyi Osundare whom Slaymaker describes as “an avowed Eco activist and a writer on a wide range of environmental problems... Osundare is the best example of a black African writer, critic, and academic whose creative energy is focused on environmental and ecological issues” (p.686). Osundare’s excellence in imaginatively engaging the environment in his writings is also recognised by Sule Egya who finds in Osundare’s works the connection between the devastation of the physical environment and the survival of the human race. In Sule’s observation,

Osundare's ecocritical sensitivity is anchored on eco-human engagement; that is, the fate of nature and that of people, for him, are inextricably tied together. His outcry against the undue exploration of nature is also against the denial of the humans who have, from the beginning of things, relied on nature for subsistence. There is a sense of existentialism to it; earth offers humans existence and the continuation of life and to injure earth in any form is to endanger the existence of humans. (2017. p,124)

More than the writings of Osundare, the activism and writings of Ken Saro Wiwa and Wangari Maathai have drawn the attention of the world to the devastation of the African Environment. Wangari Maathai was arrested and persecuted for leading a protest against "rampant deforestation" in Kenya while Ken Saro Wiwa became as Rob Nixon observes "Africa's most visible environmental Martyr" (p.715). As new literary writings emerge from Nigeria, it is important that attention is given to critical analysis of the subject matter that addresses environmental and human exploitation.

Garrick's Tomorrow Died Yesterday

There are five narrators and each tells his story in *Garrick's Tomorrow Died Yesterday*. With the exception of Deola who features in their adult life to help Amaibi in prison and encourage Kaniye rediscover faith in God. The stories are linked by the shared experiences of Tubo, Doye, Kaniye and Amaibi; experiences they all share as children, growing up in Asiamama. The land is a significant aspect of their lives as Tubo reminisces, "Everything was linked to Asiamama Island. Our lives were shaped by major events and tragedies that happened there. We were also influenced by the intangibles: the history of the island, the spirit of the place, and the secrets of the waters" (p.73).

Growing up in Asiamama means they have to witness the devastation wrought on their physical environment by oil companies. As children, they associate previous knowledge with a strange observable feature of gas flaring. Tubo insists that it is a pipe that leads straight down to hell and if not for the fire coming out, one can go down and see the devil himself. Amaibi who is better informed explains that it is not hell fire but that "imperial oil makes a very, very, very deep hole in the ground to get oil. Somehow, the process of getting oil produces this fire which we see." (p.97). Rationally, Amaibi's explanation is acceptable but Tubo's childlike conviction is sensible when one considers the rate of devastation gas flares causes to the environment. Hell is loosed upon their earth and for a long time they will have to live with its unfortunate consequences.

Asiamama beach is a playground for the boys. They called the beach Maracana after Patrick tells them of the Maracana Stadium in Rio Janeiro, Brazil. A once pristine beach is being taken over by the fishermen because Ofirima Island where the fishermen had operated, is sold to imperial oil as a base camp.

Shortly after the displacement, Doye and the people of Asiamama woke up one morning to see oil, thick and black floating on top of the brown water of the river. The river became sluggish in its flow, as the oil gradually choked its life away. After school, I sat on the banks and watched dead fish, turned on their sides, slowly drift by. The river stank. Papa called it an oil spill (p.119).

Having been denied their source of livelihood, poverty reigned in Asiam. Twenty-one year old Soboye willingly joins Afonya and a group that are involved in oil bunkering in order to escape the deprivation and impoverishment in the community. That leads to militancy, violence and insecurity. Shortly after, a fire outbreak occurred during a bunkering activity. According to Doye, Soboye's brother, Papa returns home and calls him out to join in the search. At the scene of the fire outbreak they witness:

A roaring fire, about ten feet high... there were deep-roasted corpses which littered the shore. The corpses were contorted into violently grotesque positions in death. Death, from the pipeline explosion, had been immediate. We smelled the heady aroma of burnt flesh (p.122).

Papa's paternal lamentation to the wind and to the night is pitiful "Oh, Soboye... my first son... Soboye, talk to your father" (122-123). Six days after, they returned to the scene. They take some blackened and charred corpses hoping it could be Soboye to bury in the family Mausoleum (p.123).

As a result of the suffering experienced due to the devastation of the environment, key characters emerge as ecoactivists. Amaibi stands out as a hero that attracts the sympathy of most readers. He remains courageous and honest despite the persecution he experienced. Amaibi has a PhD in Petroleum Geosciences from Imperial College London. Through his lectures, interviews, writings and addresses, he confronts the oil companies, exposes their outdated operating methods that are responsible for the environmental degradation and faults the government for their incompetence and corruption. Through his testimonies in court, Amaibi is said to have "rubbished the testimony of the opposing experts in the process and got a huge compensation verdict" (p.15). The oil companies fear him and see him as a more dangerous threat than Doughboy who employs violence as a means to address the ecological crises.

Doye Koko is another university graduate with a Second Class Upper Degree in Petroleum Engineering. Unable to secure a job due to ethnic marginalisation meted on minority groups in the country, Doye opts for violence to meet his needs and redress the injustice in his community. The decision comes after he is flogged mercilessly by soldiers who come to Asiam on a revenge mission over the killing of one of their partners. The soldiers killed Mpaka, Doye's father; killed many others and raped the women. A man is even compelled to eat his excrement. Doye is angry over the fact that everyone is milking the oil; the government has sold the oil that will be drilled in the next decades. Politicians and military boys share the oil blocks among themselves. The oil companies use cheap and outdated drilling methods which pollute the environment. The refineries are not working because it is profitable for some people to import petroleum products. The marketers cause artificial scarcity so they can make outrageous profits. The whole scenario is "a never-ending gang rape of the impoverished masses" (p.235). On the case of land ownership, the law states that all land and oil belong to the federal government. Doye sees that as part of the injustice. He says,

All Mr. President does is shit and drill oil from my river. Does he eat the rotten fish from Asiam River? Does his wife drink the contaminated water? Do his grandchildren play next to gas flares and pipelines? So how the hell can he own my river? (p.235).

Though a violent ecoactivist, Doye appreciates the harmony and peace in the natural environment. The reader learns about Juju Island from him. Rumors have it that “Witch doctors used the place to commune with spirits, perfect their craft, and cast spells. As a result, many people were still in awe of the place, and crossed themselves when their boats went by...” (p.31). African writers often reflect a mutual coexistence between humans and their natural environment. An Ecocritic, Aliyu Salisu Barau, Asserts that Africans:

assign and recognize the sacredness of nature, and thus live by its dictates until the coming of the colonial powers who introduce new lifestyles that have in the long run destabilize the pristine setting and done away with the original tradition of man nature harmony (2009, p. 93).

The traditional world view which has been described as superstitious has worked in favour of the environment. Nature is to be revered, to be protected and to be utilized for the good of all. It is for that reason that Wordsworth in “The World is too much with us”, declares that he will “rather be a pagan Suckled in a creed outworn...” (p.174), than overlook the importance of the natural environment. Personally, Doye’s view of the island is both naturalistic and romantic. Giving his own assessment of the environment he says that:

The mangrove trees looked thicker, foreboding. The forest sounded more alive, eerier. The sticky swamp smell was more pungent. But, apart from the mosquitoes, periwinkles, crabs, alligators, there was nothing else on the island no spirits, no witch doctors. I returned frequently over the years to meditate, to hide things, to hide myself. Now I saw Juju Island as my own, my private haven (p,31).

The island is a safe hide-out from the government security agents and it is the setting where Doye meets Amaibi to collect the ransom for the kidnap of Manning. It is significant that Doye repeatedly refers to Manning’s corpse as “the thing”. When Kaniye is called to identify Doye’s body at the mortuary, Wali asks whether Kaniye can “please identify that thing?” (p.395). The leitmotif or reoccurrence of the dead bodies in the novel, treated with utter contempt for life is a potent ecocritical message that humans are part of their natural environment and activities that harm the natural environment are equally harmful to humans.

Unfortunately, despite Doye’s appreciation of nature and how it works, he still chooses to violate nature by using violence and immoral means to address the crisis in the society. There is no moral justification for the atrocities he commits, especially that which leads to the arrest and torture of his friend Amaibi. His ecophilosophical view is that since the country is now the land of the vultures, there is no future for the next generation, their tomorrow died yesterday. Everyone is partaking in the spoils from the ongoing plunder of the land and he is leading by example. In this sense there seems to be no difference between Doye and the oil explorers with their government collaborators. This is because they are all exploiters, benefiting from the devastation of the natural environment and the suffering of others. His death stirs a feeling of ambivalence putting him in the category of an anti-hero.

Dise is Kaniye’s sister and Amaibi’s wife. She uses her work experience as a junior international correspondent at BBC to wage a media war against the oil companies and the Nigerian government for the atrocities committed against the people of Asiana and the environment.

Tubo gives a vivid explanation of Dise's role in the struggle for a better environment,

I could almost see Dise plotting strategy behind the scenes. They had understood early enough that war with international oil companies like imperial oil can only be properly waged through reputable international media coverage (p.357).

Dise is the most representative of the eco-feminist theme of the novel. Her character reflects the ecofeminist principle that the deepest manifestation of nature hating can be found in the maltreatment of women. She also represents the premise that the hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. This is demonstrated when the soldiers that came on a revenge mission to Asiana take turns to violate her body, overlooking the obvious sign and Amaibi's plea that she is in her early stage of pregnancy. These are sadomasochistic soldiers who see women as "objects to be subdued, humiliated, and raped" (King 2005, p.471). It is not enough that they had gratified their lust, the last soldier, kicks and stomps her. He uses his gun to poke viciously inside her to make her scream. Amaibi watches the brutality that drove him away from faith in God and renders him impotent for many years: "The air was thick with the sweet smell of blood. Dise's blood. My unborn son's blood" (p.389). Doye's description of the never ending gang rape of the land is metaphorically represented by the violation of Dise and the women of Asiana. She however comes out of the tragedy as a hero despite the marital challenges afterwards. She takes the risk of going to interview Doye in his hide out. The record of that interview, the pictures of Wali and Kaniye she takes, the advice she gives Kaniye to carry along a concealed recorder as he goes to see Wali all contribute to the eventual acquittal of Amaibi. She stands by him in the hospital and shows him her willingness to support him throughout the process of his surgery.

Kaniye is less idealistic than Amaibi in the quest for social justice and ecological preservation. His love for cooking, especially traditional food, portrays him as one who is in tune with his natural environment. He is also a lawyer. Tubo describes him to McCulloch as a cunning and ruthless lawyer. The legal perspective from which Amaibi and Dise fight for their natural environment is represented by Kaniye. He supports and represents them as a lawyer to get the compensation expected for their people after oil spillages but unlike Amaibi he refuses to go beyond that to ensure that oil companies act according to professional standards. This caused a rift between him and Amaibi but Kaniye proves to be a loyal friend by supporting Amaibi in prison and defending him in court.

Generally, Garricks *Tommorow Died Yesterday* is a novel that advocates the need for humanity to protect the physical environment. The title of the novel is a paradox that reveals a deeper truth about the natural environment; suggesting that to harm the natural environment is to destroy the future because the environment is part of our future. Its destruction will halt the continuity and destiny of humanity.

Ecocritical Examination of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is set in the riverine area of the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria where crude oil exploration is conducted for national and international purposes. The novelist employs the motif of a sea voyage that is reminiscent of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to show the depravity of the human heart, how this affects the environment and the "others"- victims of postcolonial disillusionment. The narrator is a young reporter traveling with Zaq an older reporter to interview

the militants that kidnapped a white woman, Isabella Floode to get evidence that she is still alive before a ransom is paid for her release. In the course of this voyage, they come across several communities and villages that are victims of industrial pollution. The entire atmosphere and hydrosphere is contaminated. Life is difficult because it is almost impossible to engage in agricultural activities. What is worse is the loss of sanctity for human life. The communities “had borne the brunt of the oil wars, caught between the militants and the military” (p34).

The narrator recalls a time in the past when as a boy, and with his sister, they hunt crabs and live in harmony with their natural environment. The sea was outside their door, constantly bringing surprises, suggesting a certain possibility to their lives. When the crabs are caught, they sell to the market women or to restaurants in Port Harcourt, with the money they pay their school fees. But now “-No crabs here now. The water is not good” (p.26). The future for the next generation is truncated. That justifies Tamuno’s resolve to give up his son Michael to a stranger, Zaq or the narrator. His request is for either of them to take the boy to Port Harcourt where he can get a life. Tamuno is convinced that the boy, “He no get good future here... -But see, wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants, and I no wan that” (p.36).

Chief Ibiram’s narration of how life was lived in the past and how life is lived at present also buttresses the loss and total alienation that the villagers suffer due to the devastation of their natural environment. In the past, their land was a paradise, they lacked nothing and they were organized as families. They knew of the gas flares and the changes that are happening in the neighbouring communities but they are determined to preserve their traditional ways. Officials of the oil companies with collaborators from the government used deception and several forms of cruel gimmicks to force the community out of their ancestral homes. Their leader, Chief Malabo, is a contrast of the selfish archetypal chiefs presented in Niger-Delta novels like the Amannanaowei and Admiral in Agary’s *Yellow Yellow*, Chief Zuokumor in Okpewho’s *Tides*, and Chief Amankwa in Garricks *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*. He is presented as a hero. He dies a martyr, resisting the exploiters. After Chief Malabo’s death, Chief Ibiram tells of how the oil companies forcefully come in and before long, “The rigs went up, and the gas flares, and the workers came and set up camps in our midst, we saw our village change, right before our eyes” (p.41). The villagers are displaced, forced to wander around in search of another settlement.

At Irikefe, the people are religious. They appreciate and respect nature. Legend has it that in the past there was war and many died and blood contaminated the waters so much that many fishes died. Different priests came together and formed a cult with the aim of preventing wars and bloodshed and also ensure the conservation of their environment. Despite the harassment they faced from the militants and the soldiers, the people of Irikefe refused to give up. They rebuilt their shrines and continued to live in harmonious coexistence with nature. Zaq tells the narrator that he hopes to find religion at Irikefe because the weather is good. It has the potential for healing and for consolation to the mind. The villager’s attitude at Irikefe towards the dead is that of reverence. They bury their dead and consider it a taboo for anyone to violate a grave. Zaq and the narrator are made to see that they have committed a grave offence by unearthing a grave even though there was nobody in it. This contrasts with the dead bodies that litter the land and waters in other communities. In Agbuiki village where some militants were ambushed by soldiers, a horrific picture of bodies, “in a bush, bloody broken and twisted” (p.72) is presented. There is no one to bury the bodies, they will decompose and be washed away by the waters; but the pictures taken by the journalists will be shown to the world hoping that it will make a difference in solving

the ecological problems. In presenting Irikefe and its people in the novel, Habila demonstrates an ecophilosophical truth expressed by Nfah-Abbenyi that a land and its people can only heal “when they reclaim and revalue local and traditional knowledge that they must then correlate with imported, modern ways of thinking” (p.713).

Gloria tells the narrator of how in the past, Irikefe used to be a big habitat for bats; now only a few dozen remain because of “Gas flares. They kill them. Not only the bats, other flying creatures as well” (p.120). Travelling on the water was an unpleasant experience. The tone contrasts with Wordsworth’s embellishment of the natural environment in terms like serene, tranquil, soothing, awesome, remarkable and so on. It is rather as Aldous Huxley describes in an essay entitled “Wordsworth in the Tropics”, hostile, malevolent, sinister, diabolic and “inhumanly evil”. The voyage embarked by the reporters is the kind that Huxley suggests would probably have cured Wordsworth of his “too easy and comfortable pantheism” (1973, p.2091). That is the condition of the reporters as they journeyed on the polluted waters. They are faced with “the hot, claustrophobic mangroves and the ominous swamps that seemed to be closing in, bearing down on the boat” (p.70). They are also confronted with repulsive objects that pollute the waters and make the journey frightening and unbearable. The narrator captures such moments in these words,

The foul smell of the swamps replaced the musky, energizing river smell, and at such times we’d become aware of the clear sky above as if for the first time. But the swamps and the mist always returned, and strange objects will float pass us: a piece of cloth, a rolling log, a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly-up with black birds perching on it, their expressionless eyes blinking rapidly, their sharp beaks savagely cutting into the soft decaying flesh. Once we saw a human arm severed at the elbow bobbing away from us, its fingers opening and closing, beckoning (p.34).

Ecoactivism in *Oil on Water* is portrayed through the character of Dr. Dagogo Mark. He did not limit his responsibility as a doctor to giving medical treatment to sick villagers at the clinic. He embarks on an educational campaign to enlighten the people in churches and schools about their health. However, the people, as expressed by one of the elders, preferred “That fire that burns day and night” (p.144). Unfortunately, two years after, the people got what they asked for, oil is discovered in the community. They feasted and celebrated ignoring the doctor’s warning of the dangers that accompany that quenchless flare, but they wouldn’t listen. And then a year later, when the livestock began to die and the plants began to wither on their stalks, I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab I measured the level of toxin: it was rising, steadily. In one year it had grown to almost twice the safe level (p. 145).

The oil workers are willing to bribe Dr. Dagogo and get him on their pay roll so they can keep him quiet. The government dumped the result of his research in some filing cabinet, Non-Governmental Organizations and international organizations published the research results and urged the government to do something about the flares but nothing was done; so more people fell sick and a lot died (p.145). Dr. Dagogo-Mark’s effort and sacrifices however, help in saving many others including that of The Major, the novel’s villain and agent of ecological destruction.

The nurse, Gloria represents the ecofeminist message of the novel. Irikefe is not a place many nurses will wish to stay. Despite the risk and insecurity; she willingly gives up a relationship with her fiancé, to work with Dr. Dagogo-Mark who has established a clinic to cater for the

villagers at Irikefe. The novelist's choice of a woman to be the subject of the search that will lead to the climax has an ecofeminist slant. Isabel floode, a white upper class woman is brought to the lowest rung of the society, kidnapped and made to go through different forms of dehumanizing conditions. The narrator ponders on what she goes through:

I thought, what could fate possibly want with her on these oil-polluted waters? The forsaken villages, the gas flares, the stumps of pies from exhausted wells with their heads capped and left jutting out of the oil-scorched earth, and the ever-present pipelines crisscrossing the landscape... maybe fate wanted to show her firsthand the carcasses of the fish and crabs and water birds that floated on the deserted beaches of these tiny towns and villages and islands every morning, killed by the oil her husband was helping to produce (p,182).

It is important for Isabel Floode to understand that when women suffer, the natural also suffers and when nature suffers women who are closest to nature suffer more than the men. Women of all classes and race must take responsibility in ensuring the preservation of the natural environment. Ani, leader of the militants, commonly referred to as the "Professor" is the novel's anti-hero. He justifies violence and readily kills even members of his group when he suspects treachery. Solomon describes him thus:

The Professor is a madman. I have seen what he can do. A few days ago, just before we ran away, he shot a man over there. Point-blank. He said the man was giving away information to the soldiers, he screamed at him and called him a traitor, then he took out his gun and, boom! He shot him and said, throw him into the water for the fish to eat. Just like that (p.206).

Such disregard for human life is against nature's ethics but the Professor still loves to talk about his war for the environment. He sees himself as a hero and he is convinced that his good motif justify his actions. After his gang kidnaps and later frees Gloria, he tells the narrator,

Did you think we'd keep her against her wish, rape her, maybe? We are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorize them? I am speaking for myself and my group, of course. . I am aware that, there, are criminal elements looting and killing under the guise of freedom fighting, but we are different. Those kind of rebels, they are our enemies (p.221).

Conclusion

This study underscores some major points that can be deduced from the study of Garrick's *Tomorrow Died yesterday* and Habila's *Oil on Water*. The two novels affirm the fact that there is little or no hope for posterity when a natural environment is destroyed. Doye tells Kaniye, there is no hope for future generation, their tomorrow died yesterday and Tamuno tells Zaq to take Michael to Port Harcourt because there is no future for a child in the riverine villages where the waters are polluted through crude oil exploration. The archetypal portrayal of hero's, antiheroes and villains have emphasized the ecological message that when humans destroy the natural environment, they destroy themselves. Also, the portrayal of women like Dise, Gloria, and Isabel

Floode are land metaphors showing that when women suffer in an environment, the natural environment also suffers.

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