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**PRAGMATICISING NIGERIAN ECO-LITERATURE: ANTECEDENTS
AND EMERGING REALITIES**

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Abstract

The dynamics in the evolution of literature in Nigeria has been a consequence of various factors, prominent among which are the unique experiences in Nigeria over the years, especially the nature of its environment. Just as other epochal issues have engaged literature, the environment has served as a motif in the different genres of literature in Nigeria. Specifically, the devastation of the environment, which has been the characteristic of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, has constituted a major theme in contemporary literature in Nigeria, called eco-literature. Current trends reveal that eco-literature has contributed immensely to the general consciousness among Nigerians, governments and non-governmental agencies of the need to keep the environment healthy for the corporate good of Nigerians. This paper evaluates the interface of the concept of the ravaged environment and literature as a framework for proposing the nature of Nigerian literature in the coming decades of the twenty-first century. It sets a template for the exploration of new themes that are likely to be devoid of the protest against the cataclysmic status of the environment, which dominates eco-literature. This study evolves an agenda for a pragmatic and impactful literature that will generally appraise the realities of the specific epoch in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian Literature, pragmaticising, emerging realities

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Introduction

“To take part in the African revolution, it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves, and of themselves.” (Touré, Sékou. “The Political Leader as the Representative of a Culture”. Qtd in Fanon 167)

Touré’s assertion above presents a spirit of pragmatism, where a wish is not fantasized, but accorded life and impetus, where an action is not merely stipulated, but actually realized, not necessarily by one person, but by a group as required, and galvanized for specific outcomes within the milieu. The concept of pragmatism as used in this study is considered in the senses of practicality and expediency, and especially in according meaning to a cause. In the context of this paper, giving Nigerian literature relevance within a specific time period is considered an immediate requirement as a way of capturing the essence and value of the people, and also envisioning their future. The chequered lives of the Niger Delta people of Nigeria, which derives from their devastated environment, constitute the concerns of eco-literature that this paper appraises, and then evolves a model for the Nigerian literature of the future.

Throughout the world and over the ages, it has been the responsibility of human beings to protect the environment. In whatever environment a person finds himself/herself, he/she strives to make it as habitable and comfortable as possible. That is a general and natural principle that transcends class, ethnicity, gender, religion, and educational status. The Biblical creation story states that God set up a garden in Eden in which He placed Adam, the man He had created. In the garden, God planted all sorts of beautiful trees that produced delicious fruits. He also required of Adam to tend and care for the Garden (Genesis 2:1-15). God later created Eve, the woman, to be with Adam, but sadly, they disobeyed God by eating the fruit of the tree which God asked them not to. As a result, God cursed the serpent that caused Adam and Eve to disobey Him. He also cursed Adam and Eve as well as the land. He said to the man that throughout life, he (man) will struggle to make a livelihood from the ground, but the ground will be unfavourable for him. And man will always suffer to produce food. (Genesis 3:17-19). To the woman, He declared that she will bear children in intense pain and suffering, and be perpetually subordinate to man (Genesis 3:15-16). In addition to all the curses, God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23).

From the above, it is apparent that human beings are in a continuous struggle to subdue their different environments and dominate them, to surmount or be freed (even in part) from the consequences of the curses. However, several factors work against the realization of these goals, because the environmental problems that human beings encounter are as varied and complex as the environment is in different locations. The nature of the environment and evolving trends within it pose a plethora of problems to different peoples and groups. The problems may be induced by natural or human means, or in combination. Human factors, sometimes, either impede or facilitate some naturally-induced environmental problems. Some of the environmental problems caused by man include pollution, global warming, waste and overuse of water, oils and other natural resources.

In the modern world, the problems manifest in diverse ways: the rivers and seas are contaminated by wastes produced from factories, soil erosion, landfills and others. The

vegetation is gradually lost. The air is sometimes hazy, laden with toxic gases and other contaminants

Due to the amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases being emitted through technological activities, the planet steadily heats up, causing global warming. This will eventually lead to polar caps melting, depletion of species, sinking of islands and cities, flooding and many more undesirable consequences (“What are some Environmental Hazards and Problems Faced in the Modern World”). The above makes it evident that many environmental problems that are often categorized as natural are actually directly or indirectly caused by human beings and human activities. The realities of modern life have engendered several processes that threaten healthy and credible environment in all parts of the world.

Environmental Challenges in Nigeria

Nigeria’s environmental problems include excessive cultivation, which has resulted in the loss of soil fertility, increased cutting of timber, which has depleted forest resources, oil spills, flooding, the dumping and burning of toxic wastes, air pollution as well as water pollution. Between July and October 2012, flooding in Nigeria pushed rivers over their banks and submerged hundreds of thousands of farmland areas. By mid-October of that year, floods had forced 1.3 million people from their homes and claimed about 431 lives. Besides destroying buildings and lives, the floods ravaged crops and severed transportation routes in many parts of the country (“NASA Earth Observatory”).

Adefemi Olokesusi identifies the characteristics of environmental issues in Nigeria to be classified as two-fold: substantive and procedural. The substantive environmental problems are those that relate to the intrinsic nature of the environmental system, which involves the land forms, land use, intensity of land use, demographic characteristics and socio-economic variables, all of which impact the environment, thereby determining the nature and intensity of environmental degradation. The procedural environment problems include the complexities and defective management strategies often adopted by governments that hardly achieve positive results. Government actions and policies rarely reflect a sound understanding of the problems, or make impact on the problems. Rather, they often produce *ad hoc* coping mechanisms where and when necessary (“Characteristics of Environmental Problems in Nigeria and Management Prospects”).

Evelyn M. Ityavgar and Terunwa T. Tyav argue that as the population of a society increases, individual members of the society exert more pressure on available resources such as land and other natural endowments for survival. They directly or indirectly carry out socio-economic activities that pollute the environment, and further cause harm (degradation) to the environment/society (4). The adverse consequences of these activities have been visible in the lives of many people in different parts of Nigeria.

Agricultural and hunting activities as well as industrial activities constitute the three broad categories in which the environment is conceived in Nigeria. In the North and North-Central regions of Nigeria, extensive livestock farming is practised. This involves heavy grazing of cattle, and the trampling and compaction of the soil, which reduce the soil capacity to hold water and subsequently alter its structure. These combine to cause soil erosion by water and wind. Even though grazing has positive effects on the land as the animals provide wastes which are natural fertilizer, the wastes are sometimes washed into the streams and rivers during rainy seasons. Since the streams and rivers are the major sources of drinking water in the rural areas, human health is obviously threatened. Hunting often involves bush-burning and the use of chemicals in streams, rivers and seas in search of game. The fire oftentimes gets out of control

and destroys lives and properties. While the chemicals pollute the stream, river and sea environments, the smokes from the fire (bush burning) pollute the air, land and water, destroy habitats, and upset the eco-system.

On the other hand, as human societies continue to change from traditionalism to modernism with rapid technological advancement and increasing industrial production to meet the ever rising human needs, new life styles and increased production activities have generated diverse forms of industrial pollution. In several Nigerian cities, industrial activities release air pollutants that deplete the ozone layer. Specifically, the Niger Delta region, which extends over about 70,000 km², and makes up 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass, is inhabited by about 20 million Nigerians in about 2000 communities. The region is endowed with enormous natural resources. It has the world's third largest mangrove forest with the most extensive freshwater swamp forests and tropical rain forests characterized by great biological diversity (Ugokwe).

Besides the enormous potential for agricultural revolution, the Niger Delta region also has vast reserves of hydrocarbon deposits in oil and gas. Regardless of the dominance in several decades of the hydrocarbon industry, over 80% of the people engage in farming, fishing, trading and forest product gathering as their primary occupations and means of sustenance. Also, multinational oil companies recklessly explore and exploit the crude oil which the Niger Delta region harbours. High numbers of high pressured pipelines are laid on the earth's surface and at close proximity of human habitation. This often results in environmental hazards which include frequent oil spills from corrosive, outdated pipes that are exposed to the sun and other natural agents. The spills usually run into rivers and creeks and poison seafood, fish and other resourceful contents. They also pollute the water bodies which serve as the people's major source of drinking water. Gas flaring and oil spills which have been going on for over fifty years cause pollutions that result in premature births, birth defects, skin diseases, respiratory infections, and deaths. Ugokwe describes these as ecological warfare because "...in this war no guns are shot, no stone thrown but human beings continue to die due to suffocation from noxious gasses, polluted water, poisoned crops and other forms of environmental pollution."

The above appraisal portrays the environmental issues as constituting a category that is similar to the Nigeria Civil War (and other wars), apartheid in South Africa, racism in the Diaspora, and neo-colonialism in East Africa. Like the other concepts, the environment, its nature in Nigeria, and the schisms that it generates among the different peoples, engender diverse consequences and impact on the people, which also cause the people to respond in various ways. In recognition of this background, this study examines the responses by people through literature to the diverse issues that arise from the environment.

The Interface of Reality and Creativity

Since the late twentieth century, a combination of factors the world over has caused researchers and scholars in many areas of study to modify and expand the concerns of their disciplines to include environmental issues. The areas of study include psychology, philosophy, sociology, history, pedagogy, social work, anthropology, linguistics, and literature. The concern of literature with the environment can be traced easily to the early Renaissance and Romantic periods, when the environment aroused the production of a unique type of literature. During those periods, the environment inspired special types of writing because of its tranquil, beautiful and consequently promising nature. Tanure Ojaide asserts that the environment is a necessary aspect of African expectation that informs the literature. (*Contemporary African Literature* 65).

In the Nigerian situation, the environmental realities have given rise to specific modes of creative writings. Described as eco-literature, this category of literature is a form of aesthetics that is concerned with the peculiar relationship between literature and the natural environment.

From Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* (1959) and *The Road* (1965), Cyprian Ekwensi's *Burning Grass* (1962) through Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) to Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) and Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998) and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* (1997), the writers of eco-literature deploy the principles of struggle, resistance and protest as strategies to expose, negate and reconstruct the actualities of the environment as well as environmental degradation in Nigeria, especially the Niger Delta region. The relationship between ecology and literature derives its essence from the reality that the natural environment significantly influences the living organisms that it hosts, and the latter also responds actively to the impulses from their natural environment. This principle is couched within Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, which has now become largely a slogan, that "Everything is connected to everything else, humans and other species are connected with/dependent on a number of other species."

The phenomenon of ecocriticism was first evolved by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in their seminal book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). According to them, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts, language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on lands, and it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman (Glotfelty, "What is Ecocriticism?").

Modern African literature has always been a literature of engagement as writers deploy their artistic resources toward addressing important issues concerning people and the corporate existence of their various societies. There are copious works of fiction, poetry, and drama that address the sociopolitical problems facing Africa. This utilitarian function is often directed toward any pressing problem that the writers want to enlighten the society about, and also seek a possible solution to. Therefore, it is not surprising that Nigerian writers have also taken up environmental, ecological, and related issues as they attempt to sensitise the public about the deteriorating environment in the forms of decreasing biodiversity, environmental pollution, and other forms of degradation or acts of ecocide (Ojaruega 32). In Ogaga Okuyade's view, the representation of the environment in African Literature has taken a new dimension, considering the spate of crises emanating from resource wars, which range from the asymmetrical distribution of resources to the outlandish strategies that governments deploy to silence the civil society when the state society is engaged diplomatically through the resources of the public sphere on pressing ecological issues (xii). These comprise the thrust of the issues that engage several environmental activists that deploy literature as their weapon.