

REIMAGINING THE NIGER-DELTA ENVIRONMENT IN ALBERT OTTO'S LETTERS FROM THE EARTH

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Abstract

Environmental despoliation in the Niger-Delta has been extensively engaged by writers from the region to expose the wanton depredation and destruction that characterise the region. Scholars and creatives have both engaged artistic strategies to promote environmental sustainability. This study investigates reimagination as a strategy to counter the marginalisation of the Niger-Delta environment in Albert Otto's *Letters from the Earth*. The paper explores how the poet reimagines the Niger-Delta environment, contrasting its dire realities. Grounded in an eco-critical theoretical framework, this research employs qualitative content analysis to interpret nine selected poems from the collection. The poems are purposively selected as they depict the images of a reimagined Niger-Delta environment. The study found that Otto's reimagination of the Niger-Delta environment embodies an environmental renaissance, where sustainability and justice prevail. Ultimately, the reimagined environment serves as a catalyst for environmental justice, inspiring hope for the people and equipping the fight against ecological exploitation with tangible possibilities.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Environment, Ecological exploitation, Niger-Delta, Reimagination

Introduction

Literature, and by implication poetry, do not grow or develop in vacuum; social, political, and economic forces in a particular society gives literature impetus, shape, and even area of concern (Ngugi xv). Fortress Isaiah and Abiodun Eugenie states that "poetry is used to encode and communicate certain nature related ideologies" (4). In contextualising ecopoetry, Isaiah and Eugenie explore the intersection of environmental degradation and socio-economic landscapes, highlighting the consequences of the Nigerian state's neglect of the natural environment, driven by political interest which is often reflected in environmental literature (2). Chidi Amuta equally exemplifies the strategic positioning of a writer in tackling social issues, as he espouses that "the writer is not only influenced by society; he influences it" (46). In view of literary efficacy in environmental struggle, Egya Sule asserts that "poetry from the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria is arguably the most committed to the plight of humans in/and their environments" (1).

In tackling social imbroglio, creative writers from the Niger-Delta region often engage strategies such as contrasting the boisterous memories of the past to the dire realities of the present, or/and highlighting the eco-culture of the region prior to the invasion by oil plunderers, who truncated the indigenous environmental ethics. Older Niger-Delta poets namely; Tanure Ojaide, Gabriel Okara, Ofeimun Odia, John Pepper Clark Bekederemo, amongst others, having experienced the time of environmental fecundity, artistically relive their past in their literary works to tackle the deplorable concerns of the present. However, younger poets like Albert Otto who did not experience the era of environmental viability, embrace artistic imagination to reimagine a rebirth of a fecund and sustainable Niger-Delta environment. This strategy by Otto foregrounds hope in the struggle for environmental justice.

Artistic imagination is often engaged as means of escape from reality and to transit to the world of possibilities. It is an artistic strategy to regenerate hope for the society. An instance is Makak's travail in Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, imbued with mental picture of his homeland—Africa, which avails the character with his true identity, other than the slavish reality he experiences from British hegemonic power. Additionally, imagination can be used to model other people's thoughts (Currie and Ravenscroft).

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From this premise, this study investigates how Otto's reimagination of the Niger-Delta environment serves as catalyst to ensuring environmental justice in the on-going ecological war. To achieve the reimagination of the Niger-Delta environment, the study is set to: establish the premise for reimagining by depicting the deteriorating conditions of the Niger-Delta environment, examine the images of hope as portrayed in the selected poems, and investigate how the images of hope are deployed as tools for the possibility of a renewed Niger-Delta environment.

Literature Review

Anthony Oha in his review of Albert Otto's collection, *Letters from the Earth*, describes it as both "a revelation of our tomorrow and a documentation of our trauma". This appropriates the anthology as a collection of the current ruins in the Niger-Delta region vis-a-viz the portrayal of hope and possibilities of environmental justice. In same vein, Alex Chinda submits that "*Letters from the Earth* distils the mood of the earth, imbued with despair and hope in one breath" (review). Aliyu and Omotehinwa's study on "Environmental poetics in Otto's *Letter's from the Earth* and Bassey's *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood*" investigates the representational and resistance poetics inherent in both collections. With the application of Arran Stibbe's ecolinguistic keys such as; identity and reframing to the analysis of the collections, the study reveals that the poetics enables accurate description of the Niger-Delta environmental despoliation, and also contends that the Niger-Delta problem should be reframed as global issue and not as a local environmental problem. They conclude that "through their environmental poetics, both poets aim to raise awareness about the precarious state of the ecosystem in the region and challenge the persistent marginalization of the region's environment" (141).

Akpore Ogheneruemu and Okagbare E.V in "Environmental activism in Niger Delta: A Study of Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* and Albert Otto's *Letters from the Earth*" engage the utilitarian aspect of literature in exposing the environmental condition of the Niger Delta region and simultaneously advocate for the restoration of the dignity of the environment. They conclude that "Literature plays a vital role as a weapon for liberation of the environment..." (48).

Using Eco-feminism, Esamagu Ochuko in "Nature-Woman Relationship in Albert Otto's *Letters from the Earth*" explores the similitude between the marginalization of women and that of the Niger-Delta environment. Her study rebukes the system that places man at the centre of all things and objectifies nature-woman, and subsequently calls for a restructuring and general overhauling (85). The study demystifies the elevation of man over nature and calls for the acknowledgement of the interdependency between man and nature.

Through its inherent aesthetics, poetry is often weaponise to combat social aberrations. This is evident in Prince Ohwavorhua and Mathias Orhero's study on "Eco-Activism in Nnimmo Bassey's *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* and Albert Otto's *Letters from the Earth*" as they investigate the radicalisation and the mobilisation of all social forces in the agitation for the protection and preservation of the natural environment (299).

As a departure from existing critical works on Otto's *Letters from the Earth*, this study investigates how the poet utilises images of a reimagined Niger-Delta environment as strategy deployed to strengthen the fight against environmental degradation and envision the possibility of a renewed-Niger Delta environment.

Theoretical Framework

Due to the alarming environmental challenges bedevilling the world, environmental writings gained currency in both critical and creative literary spheres. This caused the development of parameters to read environmental texts, referred to as Ecocriticism. The critical and ideological concerns for the environment became heightened in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the United State of America and the United Kingdom respectively. The increasing enlightened environmental consciousness led to the emergence of the theory. Eco-critical theory attempts to find a meeting point between literature and environment. It is located within the framework of ecocriticism (Barry 249). Retracing its etymology, Abrams and Harpham assert that:

Ecocriticism was a term coined in the late 1970s by combining "criticism" with a shortened form of "ecology"- the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats. "Ecocriticism" (or by alternative names, environmental criticism and green studies) designates the critical writings which explore the relations between

literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities (96).

Cheryll Glotfelty defined ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment” (xix). Similarly, Storic Storic points out that “ecocriticism is the study of explicitly environmental texts from a scholarly approach or conversely the human-nature relationship in any text, even texts that seem at first glance oblivious of the non-human world” (160-162). Also, Lawrence Buell, defined ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in spirit of environmental praxis” (n.p). Thomas K. Dean captures it “as a response to the need for humanistic understanding of our relationships with the natural world in an age of environmental degradation” (n.p).

Recent studies have shifted focus from a human-centred worldview (anthropocentrism) to a nature-centred perspective (ecocentrism). Bryon Caminero-Santangelo in his defining text on ecocriticism shifts the paradigm from an anthropocentric literary focus to the ecocentric, towards achieving an all-encompassing environmental discourse (699). Glen Love, quoting the duo of Michael Benneth and David Teague highlighted the reach of the theory as they opined that “it explores urban, social justice, and minority concerns...without being exclusively anthropocentric” (29). Drawing from Lawrence Buell’s second-wave ecocriticism, the two scholars affirmed the interconnectedness of both humans and the environment, and the need for nature to be the lens through which human issues may be deliberated upon (Onwudingo 507). William Cronon argues that “mainstream environmental study is inclusive. It understands the plight of nature and the poor who are also victims of environmental destruction” (24). To Ejabe Oghenerukvwe and Faborode Omowunmi, literature enables the convergence of the humanists and the naturalists purposely for the sustainability of the ecosystem (1). This convergence of the humanists and the naturalists offers a glimmer of hope for the environment, which is the central focus of this study.

A common thread among various definitions is literature’s power to represent and reimagine reality. By depicting images of hope, literature highlights the potential for a thriving, sustainable environment. This theory not only mediates between humans and their environment but also enables a re-envisioning of the environment through creative expression, paving the way for a transformative path toward sustainability.

The Depletion of the Niger-Delta Environment

The need for a reimagined Niger-Delta environment is premised on the current and perpetual despoliation of the environment. Albert Otto’s collection of poems portrays the continuous depletion of the Niger-Delta environment from the activities of crude oil exploration. This portrayal engages visual imageries that record the end of the region’s once-thriving ecosystem. The operations of various oil companies have led to the degradation of both biotic and abiotic elements, making environmental sustainability a distant dream. Six decades of eco-exploitation have turned environmental devastation into a grim reality.

The depletion of the Niger-Delta environment is hinged on its boundless exploitation and marginalisation by both the state actors and oil capitalists in the region. Scholars and Critics alike, have often engaged in critiquing the dire environmental realities in the region. One of such is, Nnimmo Bassey, a prominent voice against environmental injustice in the Niger-Delta region, and also the founder of Environmental Rights Action in Nigeria, who contends that Africa is:

where everybody goes to extract resources. Our land is being grabbed, torn into plantation, torn into agrofuel farms, torn into where people would plant trees and claim carbon credits. Africa is being taken as the backyard where resources are extracted at the least cost and at a maximum profit. When we look at the impacts of global warming, climate change, Africa is directly at the frontline being hit by global warming. And we all know that Africa is the least contributor to the store of carbon in the atmosphere. Africa has little space for development. (80)

Mikaela Loach, a climate justice activist, made waves online after confronting Shell’s CEO at the company’s annual General meeting over alleged oil spills and gas flaring in the Niger-Delta. According to Loach, Shell’s activities have had devastating effects on the region. She reveals that:

Several reputable studies have established that methane, carbon dioxide and other chemicals from flared gas, poison people with cancer, respiratory illnesses, birth defects and diseases of the skin. When it rains, the poisonous chemicals in the atmosphere returned to further pollute the soil and rivers, reducing farm fertility and killing fishes. Several scientific reports, including those from the United Nations' Environment Program, have been published, all of them indicting Multinational Companies such as Shell, for massive pollution and poisoning. They have confirmed that their activities have led directly to major health risks and livelihood losses. However, not even United Nation has made a decisive policy to stop the destructive activities of Shell and others in the Niger-Delta region. (www.westafricaweekly.com)

Otto's poem "The Conflagration" resonates with the concerns raised by Loach above, as she highlights how oil companies' activities in the region have led to severe health hazards for the local population, including increased cancer rates, respiratory issues, and birth defects due to pollution and gas flaring. The Niger-Delta has become one of the most polluted places on earth, while life expectancy drastically reduced to between 41 and 46 years (Al Jazeera). Furthermore, Loach emphasizes that Shell's actions have poisoned millions, devastated livelihoods, and violated the right to health and clean environment (westafricaweekly.com). Consequently, Otto's field knowledge as a Geotechnical worker in the Niger-Delta exposes him to these dire realities, which are captured in the grim images used in his poems:

On this stillborn dusk-patched dawn
I see cancerous smoke and smog, a couple
Voyaging across the mosaic clouds.
Conflagration crackles and shrieks indignantly
Then, haggles with the high, high galaxies
Fire begets fire; upon blasting crude missiles
They vomit dark dollops of deleterious soot
And beat a disdainful tattoo; fair Delta burns
At the bottom of old Niger ("The Conflagration," 21)

Philip Aghaghovwa references the cartographical marginalisation of the region, a sentiment is also shared by Otto, as he declares in the poem "The Conflagration" that: "...fair Delta burns/At the bottom of old Niger" (8-9). These lines portray an outright marginalisation of the Niger-Delta region.

Ecocriticism as a theory, enables the reading of environmental text beyond the anthropocentric concerns. Animals, plants and trees are equally at the centre of analysis, as they are also victims of environmental depredation. In "The Malady of Elephant", Otto positions his voice as an advocate for elephants who are victims of the activities of insensitive poachers, killing them for personal gains. He queries the unkind and the brutal killings of the elephant by poachers:

Do they deserve these skin-etching deaths?
The glorious African elephants?
In the sizzling sun, this morning,
I watch raid-and-run poachers, wolves
Snarling among dwarf tufts, with
Barking rifles in hand, carrying plunder
Slay the mountainous elephants for
Their moonish tusks
Like mindless gorillas in a genocidal war
I regret the elephants dying with grief
Their glassy eyes secreting hot tears (22)

Citing Henry Louis Gates, Alabi Adetayo reveals that economic gain was the primary driver of slavery and colonialism (2). This same profit-driven motive is also a key factor in environmental degradation, as capitalists prioritise personal wealth over environmental well-being. The poem highlights a starkly utilitarian relationship between humans and the environment, where nature is valued solely for its economic potential. Similarly, in the poem "A Novel November", Otto traverses the abiotic component of the environment and witnesses the destruction of hills and mountain: "I journey by the crippled hills/And famished deserts of a mountain clime" (1-2). He then points out the reason for this destruction: "...excavating for unsung grey things" (4). Huggan and Tiffin's study on

postcolonial-ecocriticism critiques development models that harm the environment, arguing that such approaches ultimately harm both humanity and the environment, given their interconnectedness (2).

In “Townpeople Wait”, Otto depicts the grim effect of environmental destruction on the livelihood of the people who are mostly agrarian: “Our corn field cracked with loony fire/bursting with fireflies” (1-2). Hence, he conveys the community’s deep lamentation and distress about their environmental predicament: “...only to crash aground and wrecked/ our threshold, sandwiched between/the excrements of oil and gas” (29-31). This perpetual devastation becomes a harsh reality for the people in the region, who suffer at the hands of oil exploiters.

Imagism and the Reimagined Environment

Through vivid symbolism and representational imagery, Albert Otto’s poetry sparks imagination, envisioning a sustainable Niger-Delta environment despite the harsh realities of environmental degradation. This creative expression highlights the potential for a thriving ecosystem, underscoring the region’s possibility of renewal and restoration. In the context of Niger-Delta poetry, this imaginative vision is crucial in exposing ecological injustice, advocating for sustainability and fostering solidarity. By leveraging symbolism and imagery, Otto’s poetry contributes to this eco-critical discourse, inspiring a vision of a healthier, more sustainable Niger-Delta environment. In the poem “Herald”, Otto foregrounds his role as a poet in the ecological war. The poem highlights the utilitarian nature of art as it mediates between man and his environment:

Arise, all the earth, for now
I clutch my eco-friendly pen
A stickler for sanity
A trumpeter for tranquillity
I clutch my saving cannon whenever
Treaties are not treaty,
Ecosystems are not ecosystem
Arise if you love Earth green, now (17)

The above stanza sets the tone for his poetic mission and his eco-vision. The line “Arise if you love Earth green, now” (16), showcases an image of a ‘poet-magician’ who is ready to use his ‘poetic wand’ to restore his environment, as he takes the people through the transformative path, highlighting the collectiveness of the restoration task.

The poem “This Earth shall Arise” constitutes Otto’s eco-vision as it is imbued with certainty of the fate of the earth. The poem depicts a renewed earth devoid of ecological challenges. He therefore calls to:

Let this Earth arise a healer,
Here is home for benevolent forests.
Medicine that bestows healing on my head
That I may breathe and fervently frown
At things not eco-friendly to man and nature
So, when the mower’s teeth bite away
The infant buds,
O you lemon grasses
Keep growing!
Here is the home of homes--
The Earth- This Earth is not hell! (18-19)

The poet’s vision is driven by the imagery of renewal, rooted in the poet’s conviction about achieving a sustainable environmental future. Through vivid and empowering imagery, the poet cultivates a sense of hope, certainty, and unity in environmental advocacy. His clear vision for revitalised environment heralds a transformative era for the long-marginalised eco-system. By reimagining the relationship between man and nature, he boldly envisions a brighter future. This is foregrounded in the poem “Hope Lulls the Earth” (38):

I see everything beautiful-
After a long chemical holocaust
Caked our earth and ruined lives-
Crystal-clear streams, animals

Edifices, evergreen forests, and
Well-watered parks...
And hope lulls the Earth (38)

These images of hope ignite a sense of urgency and motivation, propelling the fight for environmental justice forward. They inspire collective action, foster solidarity, and encourage individuals to work together towards a more sustainable future. By envisioning a world where environmental justice prevails, people can mobilise efforts to protect the earth and ensure healthier environment for all.

The disharmony between humans and nature has led to dire environmental consequences. Sustainability hinges on reviving this bond. In the poem “A Monochrome Cricket”, Otto explains the need for the revival: “Is this jewel a colourful cricket?/ I will tame this cricket, my jewel; and/In turn she’ll prune me, as farmers do” (17-19). He subsequently expresses the usefulness of the cricket beyond beauty: “it illuminates my vision/In hues of the rainbow/Like myriads of tiny detergent bubbles” (20-22). The poem envisions a harmonious coexistence between humans and the environment, thus, advocating for eco-culture revitalisation.

With vivid descriptive language, Otto in the poem “My Country’s Edifice”, crafts a powerful portrait of his envisioned land, where eco-justice and sustainability thrive. His bold vision of renewed environment sparks hopes and illuminates the possibility of an eco-centered world where nature and humanity coexist in harmony: “Here cloys my country’s edifice with/Vigour and valour, so ornate, so eco-friendly/With sunshine and shadow napping on it/Wet with the mist of youthful fortune” (1-4).

Findings

- i. Otto employs stark, grim imagery to convey the dire environmental situation, using natural elements as symbols of resistance and resilience.
- ii. The study reveals the interdependency of humans and other environmental elements, amplifying the need for holistic attention to the needs of the environment, as whatever affects one affects the other.
- iii. The reimagination of the Niger-Delta environment is conveyed through images of hope in the selected poems. Hence, it depicts a sense of possibility of achieving environmental justice. The images are equally engaged strategically to arm environmental activists in the war against eco-plunderers.
- iv. The study highlights Otto’s use of poetry as a tool for environmental activism, raising awareness about ecological and social injustices faced by Niger-Delta communities.

Conclusion

The reimagination of the Niger-Delta environment through Albert Otto’s poetry collection brings to the fore the existential power of art in repositioning the marginalised region. The study highlights the significance of eco-poetry in envisioning a sustainable future and promoting environmental awareness. With the infusion of images and symbolism, Otto creates an environment devoid of ruins, despoliation, and depredation. This artistic effort inspires hope and action towards eco-justice and sustainability. By exploring the intricate relationships between humans and the environment, Otto’s work underscores the need for harmonious coexistence and the importance of preserving the environment for future generations. Ultimately, this study demonstrates the impact of envisioning vis -a- viz reimagining in shaping the understanding of environmental issues and fostering the possibility of environmental renaissance.

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