



## **Green Consciousness: G'ebinyo Ogbowei and the Poetry of Environmental Praxis**

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### **Abstract**

It is no news that environmental issues have permeated recent literary writings, just as Postcolonialism and Neo-colonialism did in the later part of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries African and Nigerian literatures. This new bride of artistic consciousness is derived from the need to restore the pristine environment from untoward despoliation, deforestation, and greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, this study considers environmental restoration as the artistic focus of G'Ebinyo Ogbowei's poems against the backdrop of Green consciousness. Consequently, the Green consciousness in the poems of Ogbowei is noted as an aspect of his environmentalism purviews. Environmentalism here refers to the activist role poetry and other genres of literary creations have played in calling for the restoration of the pristine environment - the Niger Delta environment, in the view of this study. Green theory is employed in this study to analyse the environmental praxis of some of the poems. Note that Green theory as a recent critical theory in literature, discusses the prognosis of ecological damage, the primacy of nature; its biological and ecological survival in an era of anthropocentrism. Green Studies is often regarded as the bedrock of Eco-Criticism. It also takes into consideration the political and economic dimensions to environmental protection and survival. These dimensions give rise to what is regarded as Green Political theory and Green Economic theory. However, in this study focus is on Green theory as an ecocritical concept. This work is carried out with particular attention to Ogbowei's poems entitled 'moods of the wounded river' to showcase his activist role in calling for the return of a pristine environment.

**Keywords:** Green studies, Environmentalism, Ecological Damage, Niger Delta literature, Poetry

### **Introduction**

The Niger Delta literature is one of the emerging regional literatures that has focused on the question of environmentalism. Like the African literature and the Nigerian literatures, the Niger Delta literature is often regarded as a protest literature, focused on the immediate problems of the people. The problems of environmental exploitations and degradation, and the struggle for survival in a cauldron of social and political inequalities. This inequality is considered as an artificial creation from the exploitation of the environment. G. G. Darah believes that in the Niger Delta, "the titanic struggle for human dignity and freedom from oppression has been going on...since the mid 1960s" (3). The oppression here referred to by Darah includes both environmental and human oppression. To him, the urge to survive these environmental and human oppressions has been too strong to resist, and so "the nation's and people of the Niger Delta have been engaged in another war; a war of verbal weapons to emancipate their territory and natural resources"(3). The verbal weapon here is the metaphor for the emergent Niger Delta literature. And the people and nation above, refer to the writers who create the literature. This literature is therefore noted for its implications on the problems of ecological damage perpetuated in the Niger Delta region. This damage in the opinion of Darah, is as a result of the politics of dispossession orchestrated by ethnocentric biases. Thus, the theme of politics of dispossession are often entrenched in the literature of the Niger Delta. It defines the question of human and environmental oppressions which readily characterise the artistic thoughts in the Niger Delta literature, because "since the 1950s, the petroleum operations have caused great devastation to the Niger Delta"(Onyema Ugochukwu cited in Trinya, 398), with little or no impact in the "development landscape of the region". Don't forget Trinya's lamentations on this issue of dispossession when he says that "to differing degrees of creative competence, this denial of development of a region whose resources have been used to develop other parts of the nation has constituted the enticing and compelling theme"(399).

The perspective of environmental oppressions constitutes the thrust of this study. Here, the lack of environmental protection policy, and the continuous plundering, rape, exploitation of the region is understood as environmental oppression. And the artistic concern of writers towards the campaign for environmental protection and restoration is regarded as 'green' consciousness or environmentalism. Trinya equally explained that "the harsh environment of the Niger Delta has left diverse imprints on the creative consciousness of divers Niger Delta writers"(400). And that these imprints are "characterised by the theme of lament for an endowed region spoiled by allied greedy strangers"(400). The spoiling of the environment is sadly, a total disregard to the 'being' of nature. This is the concern of the proponents of Green theory. That 'nature' should be considered as an existent being, therefore, human activities and actions should include, without prejudice to man's economic survival, its protection and restoration.

The Niger Delta is a region of mass wetlands known as the delta of the River Niger with its major and minor tributaries that empty into the Atlantic Ocean. It has a landmass covering about 70,000 square kilometers and it's considered the "3rd largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world". This cartographic Niger Delta is mainly covering states like Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta, but the term Niger Delta was later used to refer to all the coastal areas in the region which include Edo, Akwa Ibom, Cross River. However, in 2003 when former President Olusegun Obasanjo created the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), three states believed to be oil producing states, were added to make it nine. They are Abia, Imo and Ondo. Thus, what we have now are cartographic Niger Delta and Political Niger Delta. The region accounts for 90% of Nigeria's foreign earnings from oil and gas, and about 60% of federally distributed revenue (Kontein Trinya, 398). This is to say that the survival of the Nation Nigeria as well as other regions in the country is largely dependent on the resources from the Niger Delta region. Despite this economic invaluable position of the Niger Delta region, its environment continues to suffer neglect and further degradation. These neglect and degradation are unarguably, the albatross of crisis in the Niger Delta region. It is this crisis that has attracted several attentions including the artistic focus of creative writers referred to above. And Allwell Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu hold that "the crisis in the Niger Delta ... has duly received literary attention, both from writers who are indigenous to the Niger Delta and those that are not"(53). It simply suggests that the Niger Delta literature, like every other regional literature, primarily endures the social, political and ecological experiences of the region. Chidi Amuta had argued on the significance of literature to societal struggles. According to him, "as a refraction of social experience through the prism of human imagination, the ontological essence of literature is to be located in terms of the extent to which it recycles social experience and transforms it into aesthetic proposition"(cited in Onukaogu and Onyerionwu, 53). The aesthetic proposition here is the Niger Delta literature. Just as the African literature and the Nigerian literature are noted for their socialist imperatives, so does the Niger Delta literature, which social imperatives is vehemently ecological.

### Statement of Problem

This work studies the green consciousness in Ogbowei's select poetry. It takes into consideration the growing problems of global ecological damage and the need to revive its original beauty. And in a more specific way, the environmental damage committed by the unilateral and indiscriminate activities of oil multinationals in the Niger Delta region, as well as other agents of environmental destruction who do not necessarily exploit oils but carry out some other environmentally unhealthy acts such as deforestation, indiscriminate dumping of refuge and blocking of drainage systems, bushing burning and the likes. These problems constitute the question of green consciousness. By green consciousness here, we mean, the need to restore the environment to its original beauty.

### Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to examine some selected poems of Ogbowei against the backdrop of Green studies. Specific objectives:

1. In course of this study, attempt shall be made to establish what constitutes green consciousness.
2. This work shall also define Niger Delta literature by establishing its literary prognosis.
3. This work shall establish that Ogbowei's poems are derived from the stance of environmental struggle.

### Scope of Study

This work is centred around the concept of Green theory with particular attention to G'ebinyo Ogbowei's *mood of the wounded river*. It tries to show how Niger Delta poets have, through their poems, engage in the campaign for environmental protection, restoration and socio-economic justice.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is considered from the perspective of Green theory. Green theory is employed to analyse the environmental praxis of some of the poems. Note that Green theory as a recent critical theory in literature, discusses the prognosis of ecological damage, the primacy of nature; its biological and ecological survival in an

era of anthropocentrism. Green Studies is often regarded as the bedrock of Eco-Criticism. It also takes into consideration the political and economic dimensions to environmental protection and survival. These dimensions give rise to what is regarded as Green Political theory and Green Economic theory. However, in this study focus is on Green theory as an ecocritical concept.

Green theory negates the common assumption that 'nature' exists primarily as a term within a cultural discourse, and has no being or meaning of its own. Propounders of this theory rather see 'nature' as an independent being with its intrinsic value. They reject the notion that nature has no intrinsic merit, no value and no rights. Consequently, they believe that the recognition of the meaning and value of 'nature' which is represented by the entire biosphere, is the beginning of ecological survival and protection.

Bill McKibben believes that "Nature's independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us"(cited in Coupe 2). He argues that the non-human worlds such as the mountains, vegetations, seas rivers, the atmosphere should not be subjected to unhealthy subordination by the human world. In other words, the natural environment should be accorded deserving respect and regards by the human world in order for the two worlds to co-exist.

Laurence Coupe thus explains that "green studies does not challenge the notion that human beings make sense of the world through language, but rather the self-serving inference that nature is nothing more than a linguistic construct"(2). The argument against the perception of 'nature' as a mere linguistic construct is further straightened and clearly put by Kate Soper as follows; "it is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer; and the real thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier"(cited in Coupe, 2). Soper seems to say that is is nature that is being depleted by the unnatural behavior of mankind not linguistic apparatus. Therefore, 'nature' should be given its prime regards as a distinct entity.

Green theory tries to establish the primacy of 'nature' as an independent entity, and calls on mankind to acknowledge this by repudiating those acts that brings environmental jeopardy. Rashad Farouk Mohamoud Hamza agrees to this when he says "Green Studies calls for the equal rights of the entire living creature in an unpolluted environment"(cited in Coupe, 2).

Andrew Vincent on the other hand argue that one of the deep attractions of green theory is "its claim to be focused on the very survival of the whole natural ecosystem of the planet"(5). He explains further that green theory also addresses the conditions for our biological continuance as a species. From this 'species' perspective, green theory could be said to be articulating the conditions whereby further meaningful human life is possible with its coexistence with nature (Vincent, 5).

Hugh Dyer on the other hand proposed that green theory emerge out of the growing consciousness that "human actions were significantly changing our global climate and presenting security problems as well as ecological ones"(11). These ecological problems and the need to contain it gave rise to the green theory as a framework developed to explain the interdependence between man and nature and the need to preserve same, through environmental protection praxis. This is because, according to Dyer, "ecological thought addresses the interests of nature itself rather than only the interests of humanity in nature"(11). The insistence on healthy environment, interprets green studies as ecocentric. By ecocentrism, Dyer is of the view that "ecocentrism prioritises healthy ecosystems because they are a prerequisite to human health and wellbeing"(12).

This ecocentric feature of green theory defines it as a major strand of Eco-Criticism. Take note that Eco-Criticism, like green studies, is a recent theoretical invention which examines literature from the perspective of its environmental issues and aesthetics. Kamel argued that "ecocriticism is a movement that has started developing in the 1990s as a reaction to man's attitude to nature, highlighting frequent ecological disasters confronting the globe"(24). He explained further that as an interdisciplinary approach, eco-criticism is enriched by other fields of knowledge such as history, geography, environmental science, political science etc. It focuses on the dynamic relationship between man and nature in literary texts"(24). This relationship between man and his environment in literary text draws another strand of feminist aesthetics, and reflecting on the writer as an environmental activist. According to Lawrence Buell, eco-criticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist's praxis" (cited in Kamel 25). This aspect of 'commitment to environmentalist's praxis' is what defines literature of environmentalism.

Thus, green theory combines the thrust that nature, though a no-human entity, is an independent being which deserves a corresponding attention and care; and the advocacy for a healthy natural environment for the continuous coexistence between man and nature. Writers like Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Ebi Yeibo, and Ebinyo Ogbowei among others are such poets found to be interested in the 'Green Consciousness' through their environmentalist ideologies.

### The Green Consciousness in G'Ebinyo Ogbowei's Select Poems.

Scholars have taken time to discuss the Ogbowei as a poet in different lights. However, variants their opinion may seem, one is uniquely significant. And that is, that G'Ebinyo Ogbowei is an environmentalist poet, whose artistic concern transcends the confines of Niger Delta ecological problems. Still, his poems have taken the course of ecological damage and or environmentalism in the Niger Delta. Kontein Trinya avers that "in the recent history of the Niger Delta of Nigeria, art, especially poetry, has made no 'aesthetic' pretences about the engagement with social issues"(13). And Ogbowei is one of those poets with the artistic vision for social engagement. Humphrey Ogu is of the view that Ogbowei sets out to tackle social challenges by advocating social change in his poetry (Ogu, 205). He goes further to argue that one of the distinguished characteristics of Ogbowei in his poetry is "his social commitment and his apt expression of his disenchantment as well as his desire for change and development of society"(206). This social commitment and the desire for change here, is considered in this study as the preponderant factors for the green consciousness in his works. However, in discussing the nature of Ogbowei's poems, Trinya laments that "one hurdle that tentatively confronts the young, newcomer to Ogbowei's poetry is his characteristic omission of punctuation marks, except the imperative"(9). Other than this, Ogbowei is considered as an affective poet, whose works according to Trinya, possess "the power of art to stir psycho-physiological responses from its audiences"(17), making them to mourn over the despoliation of the Niger Delta environment and the eroding of the green beauty of the environment.

Trinya in analysing poets whose style has more effective implications on the struggle for environmental justice in the Niger Delta exclaimed, "of all the New poets (from the mid 1990's, when protests against the region's exploitations began to be prominent), Gilbert 'Ebinyo Ogbowei has the more compelling and distinct individual style"(408). He goes further to claim that "Ogbowei's images, carved out of the environment of the Niger Delta, are familiar and original..."(408). His analysis here shows that Ogbowei's poetry, without prejudice to other Niger Delta environmentalist poet, has a competent implications on the very issues bothering on the Niger Delta environmental praxis. Perhaps, this is why in his introduction to Ogbowei's *heedless ballot box*, Trinya upholds that "Ogbowei's mature craft is a poetic ocean awaiting the deep-sea divers of pearl" and that "he is not merely an emergent voice in the Niger Delta but probably the most competent of the recent voices coming out of the region" (408/9). These assertions point to the fact that G'Ebinyo Ogbowei's poetry are committed to the Niger Delta environmental issues and the attendant injustices. Injustice on the part of the unequal distribution of wealth from the region for the development of the region, and injustice to the environment herself by the human activities of oil explorations, which characteristically murder the green life of the environment.

Nkem Okoh and Okwudiri Anasiudu proposed that Ogbowei's "*mood of the wounded river* reiterates what may be deemed the dominant leitmotif in Niger Delta poetry, namely the sorrow one feels on beholding...the pervading poverty and degraded environment"(xiii). The concern for the degraded environment here is considered in this study, to have emanated from his consciousness of the green philosophy. This green consciousness is demonstrated in the realization of the ecosphere in his poetry which "semioticises how a region is raped and plundered and laid waste"(Okoh and Anasiudu, xiii). Such commitment to the environment and how it's been indiscriminately exploited, defines the poet's dialectics with nature, which is the core of Green theory.

#### ***Moods of the wounded river: The implications of devastation***

The title *moods of the wounded river* is characteristically derived from the reality of the overbearing environmental devastation suffered by the natural environment in the Niger Delta region. The metaphor 'wounded river' refers to or implies the loss of aquatic life, loss of the green tropical vegetation, loss of drinkable water source among other things. It copiously describes in a figurative mannerism, the sad reality of the industrial injuries inflicted on the natural environment by the oil multinationals. Note that this study considers Ogbowei as an environmentalist poet whose work foregrounds 'Green Consciousness'. And according to green theorists 'Nature' is at the epicenter of man's activities. Such activities should be guided with the consideration to protecting 'nature' as a distinct 'being' not a linguistic construct. In the poem 'moods of the wounded river' the writer captures the violent struggle that follows the exploitation of the Niger Delta environment in other to give meaningful life to indigent fishermen and farmers. The lines below exude with it the activist role environmentalist play in advocating succor and protection for the indigent fishermen and farmers who are shrouded in shock, timidity and inability to speak up for themselves.

prying probing knocking down constrictive walls

to free fisherman and farmer from this penal complex (lines 11&12).

This agitating spirit is best described as 'prying probing...' by the activist-writer. Yet, in the course of this struggle, the politics of divide-and-rule is employed to cause internal wrangling among the ignorant and indigent citizens.

Note that 'my boat goes down' in the first stanza reveals a kind of reminiscence on the early childhood of the persona who was born at the 'blooming port' when the 'roisterous sea' offers its rewards before the unfortunate 'lost' of the green and aquatic lives as a result of the indiscriminate activities of oil exploration and exploitation. The effect of these activities is the reaction of nature found in lines 5,6&7 when 'strong winds' 'high waves' 'retired' and 'requiring a constant eye'. However, the use of 'rumble and roll of thunder' reveals the revolutionary undertones of nature towards man's inactions. The 'startling flashes' 'of of low hanging clouds' further demonstrates the unhappiness of nature to the unholy activities of man towards the environment.

This same feeling of nature's displeasure is equally found in the poem 'moods of the wounded river' where 'dark clouds' gather 'over the riddled river' and 'a rising tide of anxiety', 'a rising tide of resentment' showcases the displeasure of nature towards man's indiscriminate activities.

The poem, "moods of the wounded river" bemoans the implications of the devastation of the environment which grossly deplete nature to a regrettable state such that it seems to react against man. The 'rising tide' suggests high rising of the sea which leads to flooding. Flooding is a consequence of man's abuse of nature. And take note that in 'Green studies', nature is considered as an entity which should be taken care of and not abused. Due to the rape of nature which includes the hydrosphere, atmosphere, and litosphere, the river became wounded, the thunder began to rumble and the tide began to rise.

### Contribution to Knowledge

One gray area in Eco-Criticism or ecological literary studies is Green Studies. This study seeks to contribute to the bevy of studies on environmental literature with a view to enhancing Green theory as concomitant theoretical approach to ecological literary framework.

### Conclusion

The concept of Green consciousness as used in this study is geared towards examining the adverse effect of environmental despoliation as a result of prolonged oil explorations. It also takes into cognizance the fact environmental degradation is not only caused by oil exploration but also other harmful practices towards the environment. Moods of the wounded river as espouse in this work accounts for the many calls for the return of the pristine Niger Delta environment. It showed how deliberate actions devastated a once peaceful and quiet natural environment which feeds the inhabitants. The poem showcased the erstwhile symbiotic relationship between man and nature. How man preserved nature and how nature in turn served man in providing for his basic economic needs like food and other things. Thus, the eventual oil exploitation brought cure rather than blessings and estranged man's relationship with nature - in this case, the Niger Delta environment.

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