

**An African Literary Environmentalist Reading of Yerima's
*Hard Ground, Little Drops and Ipomu***

Salihu-Abdulakeem Sarat Adenike

Abstract

The Niger Delta region has been a fertile ground for literary outpours. Writers like Clark, Ojaide, Onwueme, and Yerima have explored the various issues abound in the region. Critics have examined Yerima's dramaturgy based on history, socio-political consciousness, culture and religion and his trilogy on the Niger Delta, *Hard Ground, Little Drops* and *Ipomu* in particular, from the perspective of violence, militancy and youth restiveness. This is seen in the works of Adeoti (2007, 2021) and Julius-Adeoye (2013). The critics overview is informed by the Delta region social issues that abound in the works. The environmental consciousness of the works has thus been overlooked. The objective of this study was to examine the environmental issues in Yerima's Delta trilogy by applying the analytical tools of the culturally based African ecocriticism known as the African literary Environmentalism through a descriptive analytical method. Findings revealed that the selected texts explore environmental aesthetics by identifying their cultural and economic importance to man. The playwrights also portray that human actions and inactions are causative factors of environmental decay. The study, therefore, concludes that the selected texts are amenable to environmental discourse and the African literary environmentalism is a suitable tool for the evaluation of such texts.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, African Literary Environmentalism, Ahmed Yerima

Introduction

The natural environment has been a major focus for writers and critics over the years. This is basically because of the global call to environmental awareness. This global call

officially began in the 1990s with the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) and Lawrence Buell's *Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (1996). The global call is centred on the need to improve various human practices and encourage general environmental well-being in relation to human's survival thus raising an environmentally conscious society. In respect of this global view, the African writer is also a major voice in environmental consciousness.

African writers, particularly Nigerian writers, have always employed environmental tropes for both aesthetic and sociological functions. According to Bodunde (2002), many African writers have employed Africa's "existing topographical and architectural features [to] serve the purpose of signifying shifts in culture, history and human experience in general" (p.116). Works by Osundare, Ojaide and Clark-Bekederemo can be classified under the rubrics of environmental literature. Beyond this, and in more recent times, from the 1990s, more writers have explored environmental ideals to create environmental awareness, and thus, contribute to the corpus of Nigerian literary works tagged Environmental literature.

Yerima's Dramatic Oeuvre

Ahmed Yerima Parker is one of the leading voices in Nigerian Drama. He is described as a third generation playwright along with the ilk of Onwueme, Ukala, and Oyedepo because of their ideological commitment and dramatic style, (Julius Adeoye 2013). Yerima's works espouse the various issues in the Nigerian society and his dramaturgy cuts across social, political, religious and cultural dynamics of the Nigerian society. Adeoti (2007, p. 2) notes that Yerima's

dramaturgy is “a composite of theatrical paradigms guided by experimentations and innovations”. These innovations are expressed in their thematic and aesthetic concerns which Adeoti (2007) categorises into contemporary politics, religion, history and myth, adaptation and comedy. Similarly, Julius-Adeoye (2013) describes Yerima as a socio-conscious playwright whose plays explore various political, historical, religious and cultural paradigms. He submits that Yerima is “a socio-political realist playwright, as evidenced by the socio-political realism that is visible in all of his dramatic representations” (1). He classifies Yerima’s dramaturgy into “historical realist plays, religious realist plays and socio-political realist plays” (9).

Critical essays on his works have particularly defined his works from the context of history, socio-political, religious and cultural parameters. Yerima is a playwright conscious of his immediate environment and he reflects this in his plays. His environmental consciousness is particularly significant in the Delta trilogy as the plays focus on a particular community, the Niger Delta community.

Generally, most critics of the plays emphasise the socio-political and personal identity crisis predominant in the plays. Most of the critics examine the danger of violence on the people of the Niger Delta as exemplified in the texts without exploring their environmental concerns.

Adeoti (2007) posits that *Hard Ground* is a “work on contemporary politics...which presents the anger, alienation, despair and desperation of militant youths” (24). Adeoti’s evaluation of other Yerima’s titles along with *Hard Ground* limits his interpretation of the play. His analysis overlooks the cultural impetus of the work. This cultural impetus sets the tone for an environmental implication. Atanda’s (2021) focus on personal identity in *Hard Ground* limits the analysis of the

play to various characters' personal identity crisis as entrenched in the confusion and contradiction from the basis of religious beliefs exemplified in Mama and Reverend Kingsley. In the words of Atanda, "the problem in the Niger Delta is an identity problem" (Atanda 2021, p136). He sees the personal identity problem as defined by "historical, cultural, socio-political and economic realities of the Niger Delta in postcolonial years" (p. 132) and identifies *Hardground* as a reflection of the violence, deprivation and exploitation of the Niger Delta.

Critics of Yerima's Niger Delta trilogy anchor their critical evaluation on the concept of power relations, resource control and youth restiveness and focus on the human characters and their actions as presented in the plays. Thus, overlook or at best, skirts the margin of Yerimah's treatment of the environment and related issues in the trilogy. The three plays treatment of the environment and related issues in this regard requires examination. The playwright's treatment of these environmental traits are the primary focus of this paper and the most suited theory is the African literary environmentalism.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Aliyu's (2015) African literary environmentalism. This theory is a model of analysis derived from ecocriticism, a literary theory which accommodates the nuances of environmental literature. Therefore, the goal of the African environmental writer and critic is "to make African literature...relevant to environmentalism by helping (to) think and rethink the meanings of environment and environmental degradation, as well as their relationships with humans and human history" (Caminero-Santangelo 2007, p. 704). This

paper thus adopts the African Literary Environmentalism as a theoretical model.

African Literary Environmentalism as a Theoretical Focus

The need to espouse the African environmental sensibilities from a cultural perspective, in the selected texts, informs the choice of the African literary environmentalism. This theoretical model was proposed by Aliyu (2015) as one of the ecocritical models which emphasises the symbiotic relationship between man and the environment as it focuses on the African environmental perspective. African literary environmentalism is derived from the African cultural beliefs and practices. It advances its analytical perspectives from the African cultural environmental purview. The African literary environmentalism enables an analytical focus which captures the environmental and humanist ideals germane to African literary foci. It evaluates the functionality of various environmental elements to the African culture in relation to the actions and inactions of man on the environment. The African literary environmentalism is premised on the need to “ensure and maintain environmental sustainability in which the components of the environment are not depleted and/or totally eroded; the implications of environmentally debilitating practices on humans; and the socio-political and economic challenges which affect sustainable relationships between man and the environment” (Aliyu 2015, p. 87). The analytical components of the African literary environmentalism as espoused by Aliyu are itemised and briefly explained as follows:

- **Environmental Concerns:** The African literary environmentalism establish the need to identify and discuss various environmental related issues. These

range from the identification of environmental elements useful to man, the importance of such environmental elements, man's actions and inactions on the environment and the overall sustainability of the environmental elements.

- **Humanitarian Concerns:** In an African literary environmentalist study, humanitarian concerns deal with the symbiotic relationship between the environment and man. It identifies how various activities of man on the environment affects man, while the environmental section focuses on man's interaction with the environment, the humanitarian category focuses on man. This is to establish the African's dependence on the environment around him.
- **Social Consciousness Concerns:** This analytical component emphasises the different socio-political, and economic concerns which influence man's actions and endanger the environment and man. It seeks to establish the societal forces behind man's actions and inactions.

In essence, African literary environmentalism is an ecocritical model which captures the African writer's commitment to the "protection and preservation of the environment" (Aliyu 2015, p.80) This commitment can therefore be either positive or negative depending on various modalities as it exists in various societies.

This paper will thus explore various environmental concerns, African cultural environmental belief, human interaction, espouse its effects on man and examine the causative factors of humans' actions and inactions on the environment as presented in Yerima's Delta trilogy from the purview of African literary Environmentalism.

Synopsis of the Selected Texts.

Yerima's Delta trilogy are drama texts which focus on and portray the issues that abound in the Niger Delta region. The dominant setting of the plays is the Niger Delta region. In *Hard Ground*, the setting is Lagos but there is a constant reference to the Niger Delta region. *Little Drops*, is set on a riverbank with swampy forest as its environ, suggesting a south-south locale while *Ipomu* is set in a palace located in the south-south region.

Hard Ground, *Little Drops* and *Ipomu* explore the human issues in relation to environmental factors. The playwright explores and presents environmental issues in the texts by identifying the environmental sensibilities of the fictional settings in focus which is an indirect representation of the Niger Delta region.

Environmental Consciousness in Yerima's Delta Trilogy

One of the most important features of many literary works on the environment is the identification of the environmental elements embedded in the work. Yerima explores various environmental elements from both the African cultural dimension and the general worldview. Environmental elements explored in this context are crude oil, plants, animals, water bodies and the human. In various ways, these elements perform various functions which are significant to the development of the plot in the three plays.

In many literary works on the Niger Delta, there is a constant allusion to the exploration of oil and its subsequent effects on the Niger Delta people and environment. Exploration of oil in the region is described as a harbinger of boom and doom. This shows the multiple importance of the environment to man. It is imbued with so many benefits which are beneficial to man's total existence.

The trilogy alludes to the presence of oil in the region and its blessings and antecedent woes. The plays describe a general feeling of discontent as many of the characters in the trilogy and allude to the unequal distribution of the oil wealth. They trace the ongoing war between the military and the militant youth to the presence of oil in the region and the struggle for dominance and control. In *Hard Ground*, Nimi notes that “nothing is free, unless you ask for it and when they refuse to give you, you grab it, and that is what we are doing...asking for our rights” (13). These rights are non-other than resource control which is important in the Niger Delta struggle. Nimi notes this further when he says “...the need for us all to come together and have one voice, and the best formula for the resource control of the revenue generated from our oil” (37) In *Little Drops*, the military is engaged in a war with the militants who blew up a refinery and kidnapped a white man. Azua, one of the characters tells both Mukume and Memekezie, “I hear they are after a gang of boys who blew up an oil refinery (77). In *Ipomu*, the unequal distribution of the oil wealth and its resulting negative effect is also expressed by Ebiere when she notes that “if only more money could leave the hands of the individuals, and be used to develop...the villages of the inner creeks more. We would be a lot happier. Then we can stop the fightings” (129).

Thus, oil, an element from the environment, is both a blessing and a curse to the people. According to the plays, oil has generated wealth for people like Chief Tomfort in *Hard Ground*, a “middleman who enriched himself” (35). It has also helped in the construction of “buildings everywhere. Bridges on the roads, new houses...and cars...almost everyone has a car now” (*Ipomu* 128). Through its mismanagement, it has also created disastrous scenarios, like the ongoing war and destruction of the environment described by Yerima,

Another environmental element in the Delta trilogy is water. Water in the texts is imbued with different qualities. It is seen as the habitat of the gods who help in guiding and protecting the people. Mama encapsulates the essence of the water belief when she says “some people say, I am a fallen angel of the sea goddess, and I must have wronged her, and she tried to strangle me..(32). The water in *Hard Ground* is imbued with supernatural qualities. It has the power to influence and change the lives of the people. It also has cultural implications. Mama also notes further that “...sometimes I can feel my skin dry, and my lips cake, like scales, and my waist is all very painful, until I go to the river to bathe. Then and only then do I become born again with the skin of a baby...supple like the day I was born. Not a worry in the whole wide world. My mind free like the wind. And my lungs like gills, breathe freely....maybe I am really a fish, walking this puddle. (32).

Nimi also pays obeisance to the gods of the land, first to Tamuno and then Olokun by pouring a little of his drink on the floor while saying“...To Tamuno...our great protector...and to Olokun the sea goddess who keeps our path steady. May they never leave us”. (37). Most of the communities in the delta are water locked, so the means of movement is by boat. The implication of this from Nimi’s toast is that the water is imbued with the supernatural power as represented by the goddess to protect the sailors and the people. The river goddess also has the power to give life. This is implied when Mama says “I thank Olokun, the giver of children” (42).

In *Little Drops*, water has a tripartite function; healing, worship and transportation. This function is in line with the general African cultural belief and specifically important for and relevant to the Delta region. The region is surrounded by water, thus it becomes imperative that the people’s lives and

survival are woven around water. Memekezie performs ritual at the riverbank to heal Mukume. She scoops some water in a bowl, chants to the river goddess, Benikurukuru and uses the water to heal Mukume (70). The chant is a form of worship intended to pacify and praise the water Goddess, Benikurukuru for her benevolence. This act of worship shows the cultural belief of the people and their relationship with their immediate environment. It is important to note that Memekezie's water ritual is paramount because it is performed to appease the goddess. There is a war on the land, and the fishes have receded, as a result of oil spillage and subsequent water pollution, and of man's activity on the environment. Thus, it could be that the goddess is angry with the people, and needs to be pacified.

In addition, the characters, except for Memekezie eventually travel to Port Harcourt on a canoe thus, escaping from the chaos around them. Travelling on a canoe contextualises different aspects of the lives of the people. It shows another importance of the water around them other than for fishing and worship, water is a means of transportation. It however, also contextualises their poverty as it becomes the cheapest means of transportation that could be found. It also captures the extent of the war in the play and lack of development in the region. The roads are unpliable thus water is becoming the safest means of transportation. Water is therefore important for worship, healing, and survival and transportation.

Water is also portrayed as significant in *Ipomu*. It has the power to give strength and inspiration to the people (121). Beyond this, water is seen as possessing the ability to also destroy (126). Water is also generally important to the economic survival of the Delta as it provides a means of livelihood to the people. In *Little Drops* Memekezie alludes to

the pre-crude abundance by noting, with nostalgia, that “my family were fishermen/...And I was the best fish seller in this part of the creek” (111). This musing also indicates the occupation of the people and the abundance offered them by the environment. In other words, according to the plays, the environment, before the discovery and exploration of oil provides an economic and financial growth for the people of the region. Thus, this shows that the people had a means of livelihood and thriving businesses and these collapsed because of the oil boom.

Environmental Despoliation

A major concern for most Niger Delta environmental writers is the despoliation and desecration of the environment due to oil exploration and spillage and other unhealthy and illegal human activities. The titles of the three plays in the trilogy are symbolic representations of environmental degradation and despoilation. “Hard ground” symbolically captures the extent of damage to the land in the Delta. Although, Nimi describes the delta floors as “lika”, a soft marshy ground (15), but the extent of damage wrought by oil spill makes the ground hard to cultivate or get anything of benefit. The Delta environment is also described as a “deadly swamp,...murky water.., of little villages separated by salty water [with] ...black oil under ground” (15). This description aptly exposes environmental despoliation which makes daily survival impossible. Thus, the land is a wasteland with impoverished people (13).

The little drops in *Little Drops*, symbolically implies little drops of oil and of blood. The drops of oil endanger the natural environment and all other living organisms while the drops of blood are the effects. Bonuwo also describes the Niger region as an “oil-soiled water region” (93). There is

water pollution due to oil spill and subsequently the death of various water animals (111). Thus, there is an economic and financial loss to the people.

In addition, the recurring gunshots, bomb blast and shelling are other examples of the causes of environmental degradation. They cause both noise pollution and land destruction. Noise pollution is harmful to both human and non-human components of the environment. At intervals, in *Little Drops*, there is a recurring bomb blast heard by the characters which creates fear, agony and anxiety. It also prevents the characters from sleeping. Also, the sound is deafening which is detrimental to the hearing of the people. All of these reduce the life span of the people, lead to hearing loss, stress, sleep loss, high blood pressure and heart diseases. It is also dangerous to non-human, particularly, animals on land and water depending on echolocation for survival. In essence, the plays describe a Niger Delta environment ravaged by war, exploitation, and depletion of its resources because of greed and the struggle for dominance.

Socio-political Consciousness and Change in the Selected Texts

The social-political issues the playwrights portray in the plays include, unequal distribution of the resources, inequality, injustice, human displacement, kidnapping, resource control, militancy and the destruction of lives and properties. These issues pervade the plays and can be seen as the most dominant discourse in the text. Instances of the occurrences of these issues are narrated by the characters and displayed through various actions.

In *Hard Ground*, Nimi boasts of his activities in the Delta by noting how he plans attacks on oil wells and kidnapping the whitemen (39). Nimi is also accused of killing

twenty people. This is noted in Baba's statement "...twenty people died in the camp, butchered like sacrificial dogs for the gods. And your name, Nimi, was on every set of lips" (12). The boys also engage in bunkering and vandalization as Nimi and the militant boys "organized the breaking up of some pipes" (15). Nimi also recalls and recounts the gory and horrific killing of two men in a shrine for being parrots in their group. This is a desecration and a total disregard for the gods of the land and which earned Nimi and his boys the wrath of the gods (47). To avenge the death of his girlfriend, Pikibo, and unborn child and gain control of the militant group, Nimi in cahoots with his mother kills the Don, the leader of the militant group. He however commits an abominable act of killing his father because in an ironical twist, the Don is actually Baba, Nimi's father. Thus, the struggle for dominance and control becomes a deathly game as Kingsley laments "Jesus! What kind of struggle is this, it is beginning to eat up even our flesh" (52).

The characters in *Little Drops* narrate their ordeals in the hands of their fellow men. Memekezie loses her family, husband and two sons in the Biafra war; Mukume is a victim of rape and inhuman treatment; Azue witnesses the beheading of her husband and also loses her infant child; Bonuwo's school is razed down and her pupils were killed. In narrating their experiences, they bare their minds on the situation on their land. Memekezie notes that the war engaged in by the militants and the military is only "in the interest of a few people" (76). This is further buttressed by Ovievie, thus "...there was no way one could seat on the fence. No. you could not watch the world exploit your people. With so much neglect, you could not turn your face away. We all felt a sense of duty, we had to fight" (100). These acts portray marginalisation and inequality

which serves as basis of the unending war in the region as fictionally portrayed by the playwrights.

In *Little Drops*, the beheading of the king and destruction of the palace show a disregard for the culture and belief of the people. The rape of Mukume, the burning of the school and killing of the school children, are instances of total disregard for human life and properties. This is a horrific and traumatic description which captures the total disregard of life in the struggle for dominance and control of the oil and its wealth as represented in the plays.

In *Ipomu*, the death of Preye's wife and two children on a boat ride are examples of the loss of life. This situation is recalled when Preye, a boatman meets with Ipomu who had been the cause of the death when as a militant, he had a clash with the soldiers while on a boat ride with Igege and other militants (155). The loss of lives, properties and the disregard for the gods of the land are some of the effects of the need to have a control of the oil wealth. Thus, the environment becomes a reason for man's inhumanity.

It appears that the playwright advocate for a culturally induced solution for the Niger Delta crisis. The ritual performances, healing and cleansing rites particularly in *Little Drops* and *Ipomu* are recourse to the African tradition. A recourse to tradition, then help to create an avenue to respect all environmental elements, man, plants, animal and water as they all have their functions in the society. This approach is reflective of the African literary environmentalism which explores the African environmental cultural perspective to resolve the African environmental problems.

Conclusion

The Delta trilogy explore in different ways the Niger Delta environmental crisis. The plays reveal the playwright's concern for the humans and non-humans cohabiting in the Niger Delta society. These concerns are woven into stories and around different characters.

The plays present the pain, suffering, exploitation, survival, and radical revolution of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. They navigate the ideals of African literary environmentalism by identifying, in different ways, the importance of the environment to man, man's activities on the environment, and the cause and effect of such behaviour. They also postulate solutions with a view to positive change. This environmental degradation and destruction subsequently lead to man's total alienation from such environment. It is also noted that the ideals of African literary environmentalism are interwoven such that the rallying point for all, humanitarian and socio-political consciousness is the environment. Thus, the paper concludes that the environmental awareness of African writers is bordered on improved socio-political and economic practices in relation to the African cultural environmental belief.

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