

Women's representation and environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta: A critique of two Nigerian novels

Charles Tolulope Akinsete¹

Abstract

*This article examines the discourse of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region with a focus on the representation of women and their roles in environmental renaissance and sustainability in the Niger Delta. Women have traditionally been portrayed as victims of environmental degradation in contemporary Nigerian fiction. The objective of this article is to deconstruct the perception of female victimology by investigating the roles women in environmental sustainability, ecological regeneration and the development of African societies, especially in the Niger Delta. This article therefore attempts to foreground firm resolutions of women characters in May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil cemetery* and Vincent Egbuson's *Love my planet* in relation to human and environmental regeneration. This study employs eco-feminism, an aspect of Eco-criticism, to critique issues of women and environmental sustainability arising in the Niger Delta environment, their awareness of and responses to the ecological damage in the region.*

Keywords: Ecofeminism, environmental sustainability, Niger Delta, Nigerian novels, Women representation

¹ Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, E-mail: tolu304@gmail.com

Introduction

The representation of women in African literature has been largely pessimistic and disparaging. Such representation is prevalent in several African novels. For example, Nawal El Saadawi's (1975) *Woman at point zero*, Buchi Emecheta's (1979) *The joys of motherhood*, Mariama Bâ's (1979) *So long a letter*, and Chimamanda Adichie's (2004) *Purple hibiscus* are some of the works of fiction in which women are negatively represented. In these texts, women characters are usually portrayed as victims of social injustice, oppression, violence, sexual abuse and environmental degradation. Such representation of women must be interpreted against the continued marginalisation of women in Africa. For instance, despite increasing gender parity in contemporary times, women are still represented as victims of discrimination, inequality and ill-treatment such as human trafficking, sexual harassment, verbal assault, physical violence, and intimidation (Griffin-Wolff, 1972; Odinye, 2018). This article examines the representation of women within the context of environmental degradation in modern day Nigerian society, but goes beyond the portrayal of women as mere victims by exploring their roles in environmental renaissance and sustainability. The paper focuses on May Ifeoma Nwoye's (2015) *Oil cemetery* and Vincent Egbuson's (2008) *Love my planet*.

Several studies have examined the connection between African women and climate change (Nhanenge, 2011; Ogege 2011; Amadi 2013; Steady 2014). Amadi (2013) posits that the Niger Delta women are among the most susceptible to the negative effects of climate change. He further states that as yields from healthy ecosystems decline, women become more susceptible to negative socioeconomic pressures. Steady (2014, p. 313) also avers that climate change and global warming have impacted women disproportionately. For example, in Africa, the majority of women live off land resources, and as such, they are adversely affected by climate related problems such as famine and pollution, which lead to other problems. A case in point is the Niger Delta, where years of reckless exploitation of oil resources and the resultant pollution of the environment have affected many communities in the region. The extraction of oil is the main cause of (environmental) degradation in the Niger delta (Ogege 2011; Anele & Omoro 2012).

Previous research, particularly in the social sciences, has shown that women are the first respondents to and primary victims of man-made environmental disasters in the Niger Delta (Uchendu, 1995; Onoge, 2002; Okon, 2002; Amadi, 2013; Amadi, Ogbanga & Agena, 2015). Therefore, this article is a continuation of the investigation of the role of women in environmental regeneration in the Niger Delta from a literary perspective. Thus, the article advances research on the examination of women characters in May Ifeoma Nwoye's (2015) *Oil cemetery* and Vincent Egbuson's (2008) *Love my planet* and advances a conversation on environment degradation and regeneration by focusing on women protagonists and their roles in environmental regeneration and sustainability. Traditionally, women are expected to keep silent when important matters were considered, as silence is regarded as feminine virtue (Coates, 2004). Nwoye and Egbuson's novels deconstruct this view. An exploration of characters in the literature of Niger Delta (and in the novels selected for this article) and their role in environmental resuscitation and sustainability will show that far from being passive, women are at the centre of environmental activism and have a critical role to play in the resuscitation and sustainability of the Niger Delta. Thus, the article attempts to answer the following questions: are women mere victims of environmental degeneration? Do women have a voice regarding environmental de/regeneration or are they passive observers? To what extent do women respond to or participate in environmental advocacy? To answer these questions, the article examines the representation of women and their roles in environmental degradation, regeneration, and sustainability in the Niger Delta, using purposively selected literary works

set in the Niger Delta. It employs Eco-feminism as its theoretical framework in its interrogation of the role of women in environmental advocacy in the Niger Delta.

Ecofeminism and the Niger Delta

Coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, eco-feminism is an expression of women's conscious efforts towards preserving the natural world. Ecofeminism, alongside environmental ethics, deep ecology and social ecology, is a sub-field of eco-criticism, which examines the causes of environmental degradation. Glotfelty (1996: xxiv) defines ecofeminism as a "hybrid label to describe a theoretical discourse whose theme is the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature". Therefore, the theory serves as an interface between feminism and 'environmental advocacy'. Eaton (2005, p.11) describes ecofeminism as "a convergence of ecological and feminist analyses and movements".

Buckingham (2004, p. 147), in the article "Ecofeminism in the twenty-first century", foregrounds issues concerning gender inequality and the environment, where a connection is made between 'men, women and the environment'. For example, from the perspective of eco-feminism, it may be argued that the Niger Delta women are among the most vulnerable victims of environmental degradation across the globe whose experiences, individual or collective, have hitherto been silenced, with devastating effects. They suffer from double oppression: firstly, as victims of male oppression exerted through traditional socio-cultural practices and secondly, as immediate victims of environmental pollution because their livelihoods as farmers and fisherwomen mean that they wholly depend on the land, which is itself under threat from sustained pollution and degradation. The book, *Feminist ecocriticism* (Vakoch, 2012), foregrounds the focus of ecocriticism, which discusses the trope of double deprivation; that is environmental degeneration and the subordination of women. Amadi, Ogbanga & Agena (2015, p. 362) aver that "the feminist environmental debate argues that there is need for the removal of environmental obstacles and domination which undermine women's equality". These obstacles are hydra headed; they could be human-made environmental disasters such as land or sea pollution; they also emanate in the form of chauvinist cultural practices which sustain women's oppression and victimisation.

Feminism advocates the rights of women. Eco-feminism pushes the boundary of feminist discourse and advocates for the rights of women in relation to their environment. The women of the Niger Delta experience similar fate in terms of advocacy for basic human rights. However, just like their counterparts in the Western world, Niger Delta women choose not to resign to similar fate of being victims of chauvinism. Agitations about women's emancipation and environmental rejuvenation are now found in the Niger Delta women's literature. Ecofeminists argue that all forms of women's oppression related to the environment must be addressed. That is why contemporary Nigerian scholars in contemporary times have shifted attention to eco-critical and eco-feminist studies, given the thematic peculiarities of the Niger Delta region. This article therefore examines the tripod relationship between man, woman, and environment, foregrounding a paradigm shift from the past whereby women had no voice or position. There is an attempt to portray unique roles women play in tilting the balance, not just towards self-emancipation but to set conscious and consistent agenda for environmental renaissance.

Literature and the Niger Delta: A review

The environmental disaster in the Niger Delta has been the subject of much research during the latter part of the twentieth century. Sociologists, geologists, political scientists,

environmentalists, creative writers and literary critics have studied the region, covering various topics such as oil exploitation and spillage. In fact, creative writers have not only been at the forefront of the struggle for the Niger Delta's environmental resuscitation; they have become victims of an extremely oppressive government. A leading personality in this struggle was Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Saro-Wiwa led a peaceful movement for the environmental and human rights of the Ogoni people, who live in many of the adversely affected areas in the Niger Delta. His famous novel, *Sozaboy: A novel in rotten English*, published in 1985, revolves around the story of an African boy who tries to cope with the aftermaths of colonialism during the Nigerian Civil War. In most of his works, Saro-Wiwa speaks against the decimation of the environment. However, in one of his last literary works, entitled "*Africa kills her sun*", the poet cum playwright ominously predicts his death in the short story. Adebayo (1995) states that, "a writer is considered relevant if there is a close relationship between his [sic] writing and his world." Hence, literature is the ultimate metaphor that depicts diverse experiences of (wo)man as a pivot character in the narrative of his/her immediate environment. Saro-Wiwa did not only write for his world; he paid the ultimate price for that world, his land, and his ethnic group, the Ogoni.

Other Nigerian writers continue to responsively engage environmental problems in the Niger Delta. In fact, their works revolve around the themes and experiences of the Niger Delta people, and this has led to the emergence of a form of Nigerian literature known as the Niger Delta literature, a term coined by Ojaide (2015), one of Nigeria's literary icons. To date, he is one of Nigeria's prodigious creative writers who, through his words, 'speaks' against the harsh realities of the people of the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta literature includes the works of both the indigenous people of the Niger Delta as well as the non-indigenous people whose thematic preoccupations ranges from the reactionary expressions of creative writers about the experiences of the people of the Niger Delta. For more than half a century, Ojaide's works continue to sensitize readers about the emancipation of the Niger Delta. Thus, he is one of the main contributors to the growing body of literature on the Niger Delta.

Ibiwari Ikiriko, Nnimmo Bassey, Ebi Yeibo and Ogaga Ifowodo are among the contemporary voices that have nurtured and sustained the anti-colonial voice concerning the repression of the people of the Niger Delta. Their voices are expressed in verse and narratives on the Niger Delta. These writers are predominantly poets indigenous to the Niger Delta or otherwise connected to it (Gomba, 2016:137). These writers are today's vanguards in unrelenting criticism of land despoliation in the Niger Delta. For example, Ikiriko (2000) rose to the limelight with his collection of poetry entitled *Oily tears of the Delta*. Bie (2017: 529) noted that Ikiriko's vision in *Oily tears of the Delta* is protestant like other Niger Delta poets. Bassey's (2002) *We thought it was oil but it was blood* and Yeibo's (2003) *A song for tomorrow and other poems* metaphorically depict the veracity of the oil encounter. These are collections of poems that engage socio-political and environmental activism as intellectual arsenals of change. Ifowodo's (2005) *Oil lamp* exemplifies the deplorable reality of the Niger Delta and the truth about the insincerity and lack of concern for positive change by the government in power. It also criticises chauvinism and celebrates the heroism of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the other eight martyrs of the Ogoniland. Some of the poems in Ifowodo's collection include "Cesspit of the Niger Delta" and "Hurry them into the grave".

Poetry indeed has become a significant avenue for literary expression as far as the Niger Delta literature is concerned. However, in recent times, prose writers have also engaged the

themes that focus on the Niger Delta's oil exploration/exploitation history. This research focuses on the subversive narratives of the Niger Delta women and foregrounds their voices and experiences in the literary world of the Niger Delta.

Metaphoric representations of the Niger Delta

Metaphors are symbolic representations of diverse human experiences from different perspectives. These experiences are usually by-products of a given environment. The Niger Delta region, located in the southern part of Nigeria, has been described as a naturally endowed region, with fertile land saturated with large oil and gas deposits. It also has vast fertile lands, forests, and freshwater tributaries which could potentially translate into a vibrant industrial region (Duru, 1999; Ogege, 2011). Today, however, the region is nothing but a wasteland. Literature set in this region metaphorically captures experiences of people in relation to deforestation, land and water pollution, violence, and oppression, and critiques the problems by confronting the realities of the society in the delta. Consequently, this section highlights metaphoric representations of the Niger Delta in the two selected texts.

May Ifeoma (2015) *Oil cemetery* and Vincent Egbuson's (2008) *Love my planet* are the two literary texts purposively selected for this study. Both novels are set in the Niger Delta and respond to the issue of environmental degradation and its effects on the resident communities. The story in *Oil cemetery* begins in Ubolu, a town in the southern part of the Niger Delta. It is a settlement which is unadulterated by modernisation and colonialism; "the people of Ubolu are happy with their life, living as they choose to, and resisting intrusions with all the force they can muster" (Nwoye, 2015, p. 2). Nwoye's introduction of Ubolu and its community's strict principles of holding "fast to their old ways of life: farming, fishing, trading and their traditional culture" (Nwoye, 2015, p. 1) is a form of resistance to the advances of Western civilisation as progress for African communities. In fact, for the Niger Delta people, colonisation has brought about economic enslavement and environmental degradation. Ojaide's (1998) collection of poems entitled *Delta blues and home songs*, versifies the metaphoric reconstruction of the Niger Delta as an autonomous region before the advent of oil exploration. The discovery of oil in the region was expected to bring modern developments into the region, but the opposite happened. Ojaide questions the rationality behind human development and modernity given the ironic state of devastation and disillusionment in the region.

Nwoye's description of Ubolu in *Oil cemetery* is a metaphor for an ideal Niger Delta. With the involvement of Western civilisation and despotic leadership, the story of the Niger Delta's past is replaced with a putrid, desecrated future. The call for environmental emancipation of the Niger Delta is implied in the text through heroic acts of female characters as well as the agency of revolutionists against institutional oppression. Characters in the novel are constructed via metaphoric representations. For example, Izundu, the father of the female protagonist, Rita, symbolises the old, naive Niger Deltans who accommodated the intrusion of the Western civilisation and blindly depended on the 'promise' of a bright future. Izundu worked diligently at the Zebulon Oil Company as a clerk. In the end, he was laid off and the assurance that his two children, Joseph and Rita would be taken care of, proved to be an empty promise. Izundu symbolises the casualties of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. Throughout the novel, he remains financially and psychological handicapped as foretold in his dream:

Izundu sprung up from sleep, startled. Sweat covered his whole body. He'd had a nightmare, and this worried him. In his dream, somebody or something chopped off his two hands and two legs. He jumped out of

his bed, as if the object of destruction were still hanging over the bed.
It was a terrible dream (Nwoye, 2015, p. 3).

Izundu's nightmare is a metaphor for the reality of the Niger Delta communities. In the dream, "something or somebody chopped off his hands" (p. 3). The chopping off of his hands and feet connotes complete physical, economic, and psychological disempowerment of the Niger Delta people. The unknown entity in the dream is suggestive of mysterious problems associated with the region, which also seem insoluble. As a result of the oil spillage, many communities are scarred for life, with little hope of redemption. Izundu never recovers from his helpless condition, and his eventual dependence on his heroic daughter, Rita, foregrounds the importance of women in the resuscitation of the degraded environment and in the promise of a better future. The Zebulon Oil Company symbolises oil exploitation, spillage, environmental pollution, bribery, victimization of workers and assassinations. The company also symbolises western desecration and exploitation of the land, as well as the oppression of the people of the Niger Delta. Zebulon, led by the chairman of the board, Mr Jefferson, is depicted as an instrument of colonisation. He, alongside his team members, constitutes the antagonists in the novel. It is the female characters who eventually bring forth liberation and justice in the land through leadership, mentorship, and fearless determination in the face of powerful oppressive colonial structures.

Female characters and role representations in *Oil cemetery* and *Love my planet*

Female characters in the selected texts play significant roles in the plot of the stories. Two of the characters, Rita and Toundi, are the main female figures in *Oil cemetery* and *Love my planet* respectively. More significantly, they represent feminist leaders who advocate for the emancipation of their respective communities. These female characters exist in a world that does not provide opportunities for women to thrive. Rather, their respective worlds are saturated with condescension, controlled by male characters who render the societies physically and psychologically unstable. However, these female characters bravely rise to the occasion by consistently voicing the message of change; their responses towards liberation go beyond themselves and further extend towards the regeneration of their physical environments which are characterised by violence, oppression, and environmental pollution. They recognise the connection between their own oppression and the damage to the environment and speak for need for ecological change; as such they seize scarce opportunities available to confront and challenge the status quo. They bravely work towards their own liberation as women and the liberation of their environment.

In *Oil cemetery*, we are introduced to the young protagonist, Rita, who is initially portrayed as a victim of the oil exploration. Her father is among the hundreds of workers unceremoniously laid-off by the oil company. As a result of poverty and disillusionment, her family collapses and disintegrates. Throughout the story, little is known of her brother's whereabouts. She is sent to live in the house of Comrade Stephen Dada, the tough union leader of United Oil Workers Association (UOWA), the umbrella body that fights for the rights of the workers in Zebulon Oil Company. It is from this background that Rita's interest in her immediate environment grows. From the union meetings and several speeches of Uncle Stephen, she becomes conscious of her ability and future role as an advocate for justice.

For a long time, Rita did not understand the importance of the meetings; she just knew how much she enjoyed hearing Uncle Stephen speak. Nonetheless, these meetings made her develop an interest in the activities of the oil workers union her Uncle Stephen led [...] she began

to read every union document she touched. She was determined [...] (Nwoye, 2015, p. 49).

The factors that led to Rita's evolution as a woman leader are her determination and hard work and her ability to use her immediate environment to her benefit. While living with her mentor Comrade Steve, she learns a lot from her mentor by listening to conversations among Comrade Steve's compatriots on the need for revolution. Rita's intelligence is further enhanced by her educational achievements, a fact that underpins the important role of education in women's attainment of liberty and self-determination in the twenty-first century. Her literary prowess indeed sets the pace for her future goals and achievements. In addition, Rita's sensitivity is emphasised in the story. This is shown when she naturally takes up the mantle of leadership after Comrade Steve's death, both at home and among the co-workers in Zebulon company. Even Angela, Comrade Steve's difficult wife had to rely solely on her on matters concerning the family.

Also, the instinct of motherhood plays a fundamental role in positioning her as an ambassador for peace and environmental regeneration. She fuels her desire with a positive passion for change. Rita is metaphorically depicted as a mother who puts her children's welfare first. She reminds herself of "her father's exit from Zebulon [...] the more she observed these (destitute) men, the stronger the empathy she felt for her father and what he must have suffered at the hands of the oil company" (Nwoye, 2015, p. 48). She presses home her resolution and determination towards the emancipation of the suffering union workers.

The connection of women to the environment is entrenched in the novel. First, the character of Mama Ukwu is a metaphor for leadership and social integration. At the family level, she "... was the string that held the family together" (Nwoye, 2015, p.51). Though she is not able to have children, other wives and children in the home respect her. Even the husband Onwuzuluike regards her as his companion, and he consults her when making decisions that concern the family. As far as her community is concerned, she is the custodian of her people's customs and values. Also, other women's role in relation to the natural environment is further foregrounded in the novel. For example, the women of Ubolu have important roles that are tied to the traditions of the land such as the annual harvest celebrations. This custom is such that all women come together to prepare a festival of thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest every November. This points to the fact that agriculture-related occupations are the domains of women and the community's belief system is tied to the land, and women are at the heart of the preservation of these traditions, and by extension, of the land. During this period, the women "[are] all in high spirits, singing and dancing as they moved about in preparation for the festival" (Nwoye, 2015, p. 50). But these high spirits are short-lived. According to the story, the once-fertile farmlands and thriving rivers are heavily polluted by oil spills and toxic waste. Oil pollution leads to the death of the land, of livestock and of fish.

However, the role of women as contributors to environmental regeneration is often challenged. For example, Rocheleau et al. (2013, p. 352) argue that women and nature are subject to "conceptual structures of domination". In other words, women are often considered weak and unproductive; and are confined to the homestead in their traditional functions as wives and mothers. At sacred/important meetings or gatherings concerning the welfare of the community, they are expected to be silent. This suggests that because of the confinement to domesticity, women may not have significant influence on positive change. But Rita in *Oil Cemetery*, with a strong voice, rebels against this female subordination and speaks out against human oppression and environmental degradation caused by the Zebulon oil company. At first,

she is condemned for speaking up. ‘Others called out, “it’s a woman! What does she know?’ (Nwoye, 2015, p. 62). However, Rita remains resolute.

Like Rita, the women of Ubolu, in their bravery and commitment, also subvert the ideology of female silence; for example, in a meeting held on how to tackle social and environmental issues by Zebulon Oil Company, “...a woman’s voice was heard: ‘I would like to say something!’” (Nwoye, 2015, p. 152). All eyes turn on her. It is the mother of the late Jude, who lost his life during the conflict. This passage suggests that while women are usually portrayed as victims and passive victims of patriarchal oppression, they can and do speak up against oppression and demand to be counted. The determination of Ubolu women is significant: “we are here to figure out a plan of action to handle our situation. We are all involved” (Nwoye, 2015, p. 153).

Rita understands that the fight against environmental degradation and women’s oppression is not a fight against men. It is a fight for the rights of women and the community at large. While radical feminism underscores the feminist revolution against all forms of patriarchy, Rita’s position as an eco-feminist harnesses positive energy towards achieving the goal of liberation and environmental regeneration. She receives support from different advocacy groups and, with her intervention, the women of Ubolu become victorious in their struggle for compensation and reform in their land. Even the men join in the excitement and praise the efforts of the women. “Our gallant women have something to say to us [...]. The women have succeeded where we have failed” (Nwoye, 2015, p. 213). Rita affirms that the issues of women emancipation and environment regeneration remain a collective responsibility:

It is our sacred duty to protect that which God has given us. It is your duty and mine to see that this great and sacred purpose is fulfilled. Our land has been given out without our consent for oil exploration. No one cared how we felt; no one sought our opinion. That alone constitutes a great injustice to our people’ (Nwoye, 2015, p.143).

In *Love my planet*, Toundi, the young female character, also plays a crucial role as a resident in the city of Daglobe, a metaphor for the Nigerian society in general. Although allusions are made to the socio-political realities that negatively besieged the Nigerian state, references are also made to the Niger Delta region as the principal victim of extortion and exploitation. Right from the beginning, the story reflects the harsh reality of Niger Delta’s suffering because of (and in spite of) its vast resources. In the novel, a group called Moral Daglobe tries to distort reality by publicly canvassing for the federal government in the national newspaper called *The Nation*. The group, contrary to public opinion, states that “the government had almost eradicated corruption, armed robbery and other forms of crime and social evil and made Nigeria the safest place on the African continent”, adding that this statement “sounds utopian but it is already a reality” (Egbuson, 2008, p. 63). But the citizens suffer from insecurity, violence, and the suppression of the rights of the people of the Niger Delta. The enduring motif is that of rape, insecurity, bribery and extortion, violence, physical and psychological incarceration, sexual harassment and domestic oppression of women.

The title of the novel, *Love my planet*, a desperate call to save the fast-dying world in the novel. The setting of the novel, Daglobe, is a double metaphor which, on the one hand, is a representation of the corruption-ridden Nigeria. On the other hand, the author plays with the word ‘Daglobe’, which is also a metaphor for a world that is fraught with violence and insecurity. The author seems to suggest that the death of our planet is human made. In a reaction

to the brutal killing of a female bank manager by robbers, Toundi, the central character in the novel, alongside her companion, asks a rhetorical question, “Why has human life lost its sacredness in Daglobe?” (Egbuson, 2008, p.6). Another character, the principal of Daglobe Royal Girls Secondary School, having seen it all, openly declares: “It is an evil world” (Egbuson, 2008, p.73).

There is also a consistent report of neglect of infrastructural development because of bad leadership. Everything about the land and nation is decaying. The society, and the world at large, has lost its peace, protection, and progress. The imagery of the jungle in which no one is safe despondently represents the reality of a people who are stuck in a place with no hope, and where “Daglobe is a prison...” (Egbuson, 2008, p. 23). The story revolves around Toundi and other characters who are disillusioned and disenfranchised in a poverty-stricken and crime-ridden society. The novel is a politically charged narrative and focuses on the suppression of the rights of the Niger Delta region and its citizenry. The author reflects on the problems associated with militancy and insurrection in the Niger Delta. Through the character Mr Wilberforce, the reader is exposed to the efforts of Mrs Alaere Alaibe, the founder of an NGO entitled ‘Family Reorientation, Education and Empowerment’. She runs a project geared towards educating the illiterate, providing useful skills to villagers who are victims of environmental degradation. For her determination and efforts towards human emancipation and contribution to life, she is called “a star in God’s universe” (Egbuson 2008, p. 76). Despite the unforgiving violent-stricken environment as well as unfavourable environment, the female characters in the novel, such as Toundi and Mrs Alaibe choose to fight for their rights to live in a crime-free state. They recognise the fact that “the globe needed healing. Daglobe needed social healing” (Egbuson, 2008, p. 359), and a desperate search for justice, equity, fairness and responsibility on the part of all and sundry.

The heroine, Toundi, comes alive, and her bravery and intelligence can easily be seen at the beginning of the novel, where she and her friends are victims of a brutal attack. She becomes the protector (an example of gender role reversal in a society where the role of protector is masculine). But for her efforts, Araba (the victim) would have lost his life at the hands of a trigger-happy robber. The incident reconceptualises the role of women in Nigeria. It depicts women as strong and capable of protecting their communities. Toundi also feels responsible for other oppressed women; she reacts to the plight of rape victims by providing counselling and physical assistance. Anabella, the young housemaid molested and jailed by her master, Mr Amadi, and Aloe Vera, a victim of rape by armed robbers, all benefit from her assistance. Unfortunately, Aloe Vera later takes her own life.

Kaur (2012, p.190) says that ecofeminism focuses on the “connections between the domination and oppression of women and domination and exploitation of nature by masculinist methods and attitudes”. Aloe Vera and Anabella are victims of Daglobe’s unsafe and prejudiced society. Although Aloe Vera suffers till her end, Anabella, is ‘rescued’, physically and financially, by the same culprits on whose account she is jailed in the first instance. Toundi is also a victim, and she affirms that “the present stage of my life is my own prison” (Egbuson, 2008, p. 23). She is disillusioned by her own rich father who assumes that ‘female education was a waste of resources’ (Egbuson, 2008, p. 23). Toundi’s father’s ‘masculinist methods’ are not only offensive, but negatively affect the role of women as partners in progress. At home, he terrorises and silences Toundi’s mother to the point that Toundi must stand up for her.

Toundi’s heroism can be deduced through her moral and academic inclinations, fuelled by her determination. She does not allow her background to discourage her. Toundi’s repeated

vow to her mother, ‘Mother, I will not bring shame on you. I will not bring shame on you. I will not know man until I am married’ (Egbuson, 2008, p. 26), metaphorically subverts the objectification of women’s bodies as mere sex tools. She says this after her friend engages in premarital sex, and she assures her mother that she is morally on firm ground. Her choices signify her autonomy as a woman who acts out of her own volition and will not be subjected to any obligation to surrender her body to men. Also, the decision to resist the ideology of male superiority in her school foregrounds positive female representation in the novel:

Perhaps women were to blame for allowing men to put them down as inferior. Women too often accept men as superior to them. Like her classmates in the primary school. For two years, only boys took the foremost positions. In Primary 1 and 2, only boys came 1st, 2nd, and 3rd up to the 7th position. The girls would start emerging from the 8th position[...] during the holiday, she [Toundi]determined not to be beaten by the boys anymore and right then started studying seriously. Now, she had a bigger ambition (Egbuson, 2008, p. 56).

Toundi is the brightest student in her secondary school. She is influenced by the American-based Yoruba motivational speaker, Brian Olatunji Wilberforce, whose speech titled ‘The Star of the Universe’ centres on human’s responsibility to the environment. Through the mouth of Wilberforce, the novel draws attention to modern-day issues of climate change, global warming and ozone depletion, and their consequences on the environment, and more importantly, the role of women in environmental conservation and advocacy. This character reveals that unrepentant exploitation and the lack of desire to protect the earth’s protection are some of the highest in the list of the problems in the world. He satirically asks a relevant rhetorical question:

[...]who caused these things? Humans. So, humans had to contend with the consequences[...]. Until humans developed a sense of responsibility for their environment, until they loved their environment and stopped abusing it, the environment would continue to deteriorate and affect them adversely (Egbuson, 2008, p. 75).

Egbuson, through the character Wilberforce, showcases the need for environmental regeneration. It is equally relevant that the audience of Wilberforce’s speech are largely young girls such as include Toundi, who are expected to take the responsibility to look after themselves and their environment.

Conclusion

Niger Delta women are represented as strong women who leads the war against environmental pollution and advocate for positive change towards environmental regeneration This is apparent in the eco-activism role played by the protagonists in the selected novels analysed in this paper. Women’s struggle against environmental injustice cannot be overemphasised and has continued to generate varied discussions. However, women’s roles as eco-activists have not received enough attention. Boserup (1970) argues that the role of women in environmental conservation is significantly undermined. Hence, this article was meant to show that contrary to normative views, women have been and are at the fore on issues of environmental regeneration. It further explores their significant roles in the restoration of their societies.

Rita in *Oil cemetery* and Toundi in *Love my planet* are examples of women who are in the fore front of the fight for planet earth and for their communities. They surmount all

obstacles to advocate for environmental conservation and sustainability, which would in turn ensure the survival of their respective communities. These women have indeed set the pace as participants in environmental regeneration and sustainability. They also have shown that women are able partners in progress in the continuous and constructive transformation of the Niger Delta region and beyond.

Both Nwoye and Egbuson dutifully address the complexities of the relationship between colonialism, multinational corporations, and resource exploitation, and the devastating consequences on the environment and the people of the Niger Delta. Through their literary works, they have successfully depicted the environmental woes of the Niger Delta region, and more importantly, have responded to the reality of women, by portraying them as not just victims, but practical and capable stakeholders in the regeneration and restoration of the Niger Delta. Through positive representations of the protagonists, Rita and Toundi, the authors have constructed the protagonists as strong, able and purposeful partners in environmental sustainability and community development.

References

- Adichie, Chimamanda N. (2004). *Purple hibiscus*. Lagos: Kachifo Limited.
- Adebayo, A. (1995). *Critical essays on the novel in Francophone Africa*. Ibadan AMD Publishers.
- Amadi, L. (2013). Climate change, peasantry and rural food production decline in the Niger Delta region: A case of the 2012 flood disaster. *Journal of Agricultural and Crop Research*, 1(6), 94-103.
- Amadi, L. A., Ogbanga, Mina A. & Akena, J. E. (2015). Climate change and feminist environmentalism in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 9(9), 361-371.
- Anele, K. A., & Omoro, J. (2012). Mobilising the militants in the Niger Delta for national development: Prospects and Challenges. *Journal of International Diversity*, 1, 107-122.
- Bâ, M. (1979). *So long a letter*. Trans. By Modupe Bode-Thomas (1989). London: Heinemann.
- Basse, N. (2002). *We thought it was oil but it was blood*. Ibadan: Kraftgriots.
- Bie, D. (2017). The poet as protester: An analysis of the ecocidal and exploitative portraiture of Niger Delta landscape in Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily tears of the Delta*. *Modern Research Studies: An International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(4), 524-535.
- Boserup, E. (1970). *Women's role in economic development*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Buckingham, S. (2004). Ecofeminism in the twenty-first century. *The Geographical Journal*, 170(2), 146-154.
- Coates, J. (2004). *Women, men and language*. 3rd ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Duru, E. J. (1999). *Oil multinationals and the Niger-Delta crisis*. Owerri: African Scholars Publishing Company.
- Eaton, H. (2005). *Introducing feminist ideologies*. London: Continuum.
- Egbuson, V. (2008). *Love my planet*. Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- El Saadawi, N. (1975). *Woman at point zero*. Trans. by Sherif Hetata (1983). London New York: Zed Books Limited.
- Emecheta, B. (1979). *The joys of motherhood*. London: Allison & Busby.
- Gaard, G. (2011). Ecofeminism revisited: Rejecting essentialism and replacing species in a material feminist environmentalism. *Feminist Formations*, 23(2), 26-53.
- Glotfelty, C. (1996). Literary studies in an age of environmental crisis. In C. Glotfelty, & H. Fromm, (eds.), *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in Literary ecology*. (xv-xxxvii). Athens: University of Georgia Press.

- Gomba, O. (2016). Minority rights and resource-conflict in the poetry of Ibiwari Ikiriko, Nnimmo Bassey and Ogaga Ifowodo. *African Research Review*, 10(5), 137-146.
- Ifowodo, O. (2005). *The oil lamp*. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc.
- Ikiriko, I. (2000). *Oily tears of the Delta*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited.
- Kaur, G. (2012). An exegesis of post-colonial ecofeminism in contemporary literature. *International Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 188-195.
- Nhanenge, J. (2011). *Ecofeminism: Towards integrating the concerns of women, poor people and nature development*. New York: University Press of America.
- Nwoye, M. I. (2015). *Oil cemetery*. Lagos: Parresia Publishers Ltd.
- Odinye, I. E. (2018). "Girl-child": Trafficking and sex slavery in African fiction:- An Analysis of Akachi Adimorah-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*. *Mgbakoigba: Journal of African Studies*. (7), 2. 39-53
- Ogege, S. O. (2011). Amnesty initiative and the dilemma of sustainable development in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. *Journal of Sustainable Development*, 4(4), 249-258.
- Okon E. (2002). Women and the Niger Delta struggle. In R. Aduche Wokocha (ed.), *Development Right Issues in the Niger Delta*. (66-73). Schaleworths: Centre for Democracy and Development.
- Onoge, O. (2002). *Social impact of pollution*. A paper presented at the Annual conference of Association of General and Private Medical Practitioners on March 2002 at Hotel Presidential, Port Harcourt.
- Ojaide, T. (1998). *Delta blues and home songs*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited.
- Ojaide, T. (2015). Defining Niger Delta literature: Preliminary perspective on an emerging literature. In O. Tanure, (ed.), *Indigeneity, globalisation, and African literature- African histories and modernities*. (55-73). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rocheleau, D., Thomas-Slayter, B. & Wangari, E. (2013). *Feminist political ecology: Global issues and local experience*. New York: Routledge.
- Steady, F. C. (2014). Women, climate change and liberation in Africa. *Race, Gender & Class Journal*, 21(1/2), 312-333.
- Uchendu P. (1995). *Education and the changing economic role of Nigerian women*. Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publication.
- Vakoch, D. A. (ed). (2012). *Feminist ecocriticism: Environment, women, literature*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Wolff, C. G. (1972). A mirror for me: Stereotypes of women in literature. *The Massachusetts Review* 13 (1/2) 205-218
- Yeibo, E. (2003). *A song for tomorrow and other poems*. Ibadan: Kraftgriots.