

Women and Nature in the Movie, *Black November*

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Abstract

Issues about people's natural environment have undeniably become an integral part of human existence. In this regard, a lot of literary scholars and social critics have unrelentingly written on how to curtail or end the numerous environmental degradations. Despite many studies conducted on environmental concerns in Nigerian literature, only little attention has been given to how Nollywood movies contribute to this cause. Using Jeta Amata's film, *Black November*—an outstanding film with environmental underpinnings—this paper argues that there is a gender trajectory to the environmental issues in Nigerian literature. Specifically, in *Black November*. We find that women possess an innate ingenious heroism, which upstages the notion that the Niger Delta struggle was carried out by men alone. Drawing on an ecofeminist theoretical approach, this essay further explores the affinity between man's domination of nature and the patriarchal domination of women. Considering the various resilient attributes of women in the movie towards a sustainable environment, the study concludes that women could contribute immensely towards curbing environmental issues if patriarchal authorities would give them more latitude to do so.

Keywords: *Nature, Ecofeminism, Nollywood, Black November*

Introduction

In Nigerian literature, the issue of environmental degradation, according to Abalogu and Ezechi, has become "one of the most momentous occupations of the Nigerian novel of the 21st century" (127). In fact, they posit that "some Nigerian critics consider the Niger Delta crisis as the biggest event available to Nigerian literature as a subject matter" (127). This is because the Niger

Delta oil crisis, according to Nwahunanya, "has lasted longer and the impact has been more devastating in a permanent way" (xiii).

It is important to state that just as the Niger Delta has tremendous economic contribution to the Nigerian economy, it has also greatly sustained a tradition of the Nigerian literary space through various contributions of literary poets like Ebinyo Ogbowei (2009), Ibiwari Ikiriko (2000), Ebi Yeibo (2003), etc., whose poems register displeasure of the environmental issues plaguing their environment. In the same vein, considering

the affinity existing "between women and nature by virtue of the way they have historically been oppressed" (19), according to Brisson, the Nigerian movie industry has been depicting women's contributions in ensuring the environment is safe from degradation. Thus, this essay will analyse women's involvement in combating environmental degradation by drawing on ecofeminism as a critical tool for the analysis of the movie, *Black November*.

Literature Review

Environment is defined by Jargran Josh as "the sum total of conditions in which an organism has to survive or maintain its life process" (1). On this premise, literary scholars who are interested in environmental issues are driven by deep regard for nature's beauty, the strong connection of humans to the environment, their needs and sustenance.

In view of the foregoing, environmental literature becomes a way through which literary scholars invariably express their concerns about the environment. Environmental literature thus concentrates on man's surroundings and the relationship between man and nature. It seeks to examine the causes of environmental degradation, the importance of ecological sustainability and the impact of human activities on the environment.

One of the pioneer writers of environmental literature is Rachael Carson, a prolific nature writer who, in 1962, used her book, *Silent Spring*, to propel an environmental movement. At a time when it was the norm for some European companies to produce pesticides for the control of insects, Carson condemned the usage of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) pesticide because of its dangers and health implications. This is highlighted in the foreword to *Silent Spring* where she lamented that the pesticide "was causing wholesale

destruction of wildlife and its habitat and clearly endangering human life." (ii). Her uproar on the need for environmental sustainability inspired a lot of literary scholars whose further research on environmentalism birthed the literary theoretical framework, ecocriticism—a literary movement that was conceived to ensure conservation of the environment from man's detrimental activities. Major proponents of ecocriticism include Cheryll Glotfelty, William Rueckert, and Lawrence Buell. While Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as that which "seeks to question how the environment is represented in literary works" (xix), Rueckert views the term as "an application of ecological concepts to the study of literature" (107). Also, Lawrence Buell notes that ecocriticism is "a study of the relationship between literature and the environment" (430).

Just like literature, movies are beginning to underscore the importance of social development, environmental sustainability and conflict management. According to Hopkinson, "it is a tool for national mobilisation towards national building" (1). Also, as a means of communicating, informing, enlightening and educating the populace, the Nigerian movie industry has continued to maximise local viewership to address the socio-economic and environmental problems that have posed a serious challenge to the Niger Delta region. This is because movies produced in Nigeria, according to Agatha Ukata, "adhere to Nigerian standard by continually recreating the everyday lives of Nigerians within the context of their space and time." (5). Again, as one of the most popular mediums of expression in Nigeria, Akin Adesokan notes that "Nollywood films circulate as part of a welter images in a stream of global flows, aided by the intense relationships between media and cultural maginaries." (99). To further emphasise the importance of the

Nigerian movie industry as a powerful avenue for the portrayal of contemporary issues in Nigeria, Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome pointedly note "that in Nigeria, video production has been absorbed into the realm of popular culture." (106). As a result, films like *Oloibiri* (2015) and *Blood and Oil* (2010) have been used to achieve this aim of addressing environmental problems in the region. However, to achieve the interest of this essay, *Black November* (2012) will be used to demonstrate the affinity between women and nature and its importance in ensuring an ecosystem free from degradations. More so, the choice of ecofeminism is a result of the fact that it is best suited to the data that will be analysed subsequently.

Ecofeminism

The word ecofeminism is made up of two terminologies, namely "ecology" and "feminism." It is a literary theory that examines not just feminine issues but also ecological issues. Just like all other branches of feminism, it focuses on women's liberation movements but slightly differs from other branches in the way it "challenges the groundless domination of nonhuman nature as an essential feminist issue" (6), according to Salman.

The term 'ecofeminism' was coined by Francoise D'Eaubonne, a French writer, who used her book, *Feminism or Death (Le Feminisme ou La Mort)* (1974), to encourage and instill in women the need to save the earth from every form of devastation. To D'Eaubonne, "environmental issues are as a result of the societal patriarchal cultures which are obviously aimed at subjugating both women and the environment" (2). Other proponents of ecofeminism like Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm define it as a "theoretical discourse whose theme is the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature" (xxiv). While Rosemary Ruether (2) believes that

ecofeminism "explores how male domination of women and domination of nature are interconnected, both in cultural ideology and in social structures," Garrad explains that "ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate any other oppressed group will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature" (1).

Furthermore, the ecofeminist movement against environmental degradation includes the fight against unjustifiable domination and exploitation of all plants, animals, and the ecosystem. In view of the above, it is safe to say that ecofeminism is simply interested in anything that propagates the continuation of life on earth without any abrupt interruption. In this regard, Warren maintains that "Nature is a feminist issue" (1). Citing examples of women who have stood up in defence of the environment, Merchant, an ecofeminist philosopher, lists them to include:

the Kenyan women of the Green Belt movement who plant millions of trees in arid degraded lands, the Indian women who came up with a movement that helps them preserve fuel for their communities [...] the Canadian women who attempt to obtain signatures opposing uranium processing near their towns and the American women when they organize local support to clean up hazardous waste sites. (193)

Though much has been written about the issues of degradation in the Niger Delta region, very few researchers have taken a sustained interest in analysing feminists' contributions to assuage these environmental issues, especially from the perspective of the Nigerian movie industry. Thus, this paper hopes to draw on the ecofeminist critical lens to analyse the movie, *Black November* (2012). In the subsequent lines, this essay will first establish an understanding of the affinity

between women and nature, with the intent of accounting for the role of women in ensuring a stable ecosystem.

Women and Nature

Metaphorically, women are associated with anything related to nature, and to corroborate this, Sherry Ortner believes that "the woman seems to be closer to nature due to her physiology, as opposed to a man's own" (73). When people describe such things connected to nature that have not been tampered with, they refer to it as 'virgin'. A good example is the usage of this term in describing a yet-to-be-explored forest. This is because, just like a woman who is yet to be touched by any man, the forest is still presumed to be in its original state. Therefore, just as it is unthinkable to mutilate the body of a virgin, it is morally unethical to degrade the natural environment or commit any sort of violence against the earth.

In some parts of the world, rituals are usually carried out as a way of showing reverence for and appeasing the gods of certain environments before any mining activity takes place there. Judy Plant (1) submits that such miners "believe that minerals and metals ripen in the uterus of the earth; they compare mines to mother earth's vagina, and metallurgy itself as an abortion of the metal's natural growth cycle." So, to pacify the gods before embarking on any exploration, "rituals are carried out by miners, offerings to the gods of the soil and the subterranean world, ceremonial sacrifices, sexual abstinence and fasting are conducted and observed before violating what is considered to be the sacred earth..." (1). In view of the foregoing, Plant categorically establishes that "once we understand the historical connections between women, nature and their subsequent oppression, we cannot help but take a stand on the war against nature" (2). She goes further to argue that achieving this can only be possible "by participating in

environmental stand-offs against those who are assuming the right to control the natural world" (2). By implication, this means that the devaluation of women and nature, which is constantly reflected in the attitude of humans, will come to an end the moment there is a renewed understanding of the undisputed connection between the two parties.

In the light of the above, it is therefore important to enumerate some similarities between women and nature, as this will help in establishing a deeper understanding of why women are relevant in matters that relate to the environment. Some of such qualities that nature and women share are traits of being gentle, beautiful, domestic, kind, reproductive, etc. This is also adequately represented in Wordsworth's poem, "Descriptive Sketches":

But doubly pitying nature loves to show'r
Soft on his wounded heart her healing
power
Who plods o'er hills and vales on his road
forlorn (Wordsworth lines 13-15)

Again, just as women, especially in Africa, are considered to have been enshrouded in the African patriarchal society, nature is seen to have been subjected to a patriarchal society that consistently tries to subdue her. Discussing how women are considered to be subjects in a typical patriarchal society, Laura Mulvey (586) opines that they are "bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command." She further explains that they impose on them "the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (586).

Another affinity that nature and women share is fertility and reproduction. Exemplifying this in his poem *Paradise Lost*, Book 4, John Milton writes:

So on her fares, and to the border comes
 Of Eden, where delicious paradise
 Now nearer, crowns with her enclosure
 green
 Of goodliest trees laden with fairest fruit
 Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue
 (lines 131-133, 147-148).

Just as women reproduce their kind, nature also does the same. This is indicated by nature's change of season, which is also applicable to the life cycle of humans. As women have the responsibility of ensuring that life cycle continues through fertility and reproduction, nature operates a cycle of seasons that ensures continuity.

Another reason is that they are most affected adversely because of their high commitment to peasant farming. At the local level, these women are known to possess various unique knowledge and experience about how climate change affects nature. This is also because they mainly engage in peasant farming and can rightly tell when their crops are adversely affected by the emissions of carbon dioxide. It is therefore safe to say that including women in decision-making about climate change and the natural environment can sustainably increase agricultural production and food security. The idea is that when more women are encouraged to be more creative with their peasant farming, the pressure to deforest more lands reduces, and the environment will be protected.

Black November: Struggle for the Niger Delta

Black November is a creative replication of the crisis that plagues the Niger Delta region. It is set in the United States of America, where the militants went to protest the activities of the multinational oil companies in their region, and a community in the Niger Delta region characterised by oil spillage that has rendered their farmlands and creeks

completely deplorable. As a result of this appalling situation, nature, which primarily should be a provider, is distorted, and this usually results in making the life of everyone miserable. Amata clearly illustrates this at the beginning of the movie, when Dede was seen paddling his canoe on a contaminated river with dead fish and other lifeless aquatic bodies. Through the thematic preoccupations which include environmental degradation, injustice and neglect, Amata recreated real-life experiences that some female characters in the movie that exhibited ecofeminist attributes tried to forestall. These experiences centre on the major cause of the Niger Delta environmental crisis, how the Nigerian government addressed the issue, the involvement of the international community and what the possible way out will require. It is important to note at this point that in line with D'Eaubonne's submission about ecofeminism, which opines that "environmental issues are as a result of the societal patriarchal cultures which are obviously aimed at subjugating both women and the environment" (2), the major female characters who exhibited ecofeminist attributes were seen at various intervals in the movie resisting the domination of women and nature in a patriarchal community.

Prior to the discovery of oil in the region, the inhabitants enjoyed an environment devoid of any form of degradation. The resources their environment provided effectively sustained them. By this, they survived on mostly agricultural products and aquatic resources which they did not only consume but also sold to neighbouring towns. With the discovery of oil, explorations began and this undoubtedly led to the degradation of the environment, causing the major crisis in the region. Reacting to the incessant environmental issues and how it has negatively affected the Niger Delta inhabitants, Tamuno and his militant friends complain:

Tamuno: My People are dying
2nd Militant: Our lands are devastated
3rd Militant: Our farmlands, livestock, wildlife, all gone.

Though the focus of this research is not on the male gender, it is on this premise that Ebiere's mother displayed her ecofeminist virtue. It is important to reiterate Garrad's position on ecofeminists calling for cessations of all forms of subjugations, whether people or nature, as "no attempt to liberate any oppressed group will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature" (1). As an ecofeminist, Ebiere's mum stood her ground against the patriarchal oppression of police officers who represented the Nigerian government. She had gone in the company of her children to fetch petrol for their various domestic uses when the police van arrived and tried to stop her and other women who were there for the same cause. While challenging the police officers, they had the following discussion:

Inspector: You are all under arrest
Ebiere's Mum: What is our crime?
Inspector: This fuel is the property of the Federal Government of Nigeria.
Ebiere's Mum: So, what would you rather we do? Stand and watch the Federal Government of Nigeria's property spill and spoil our land?
Inspector: It is your duty to report any leakages in the pipeline.
Ebiere's Mum: But we did; last week, no one came here to do anything.
Inspector: I warn you not to continue.
Ebiere's Mum: So, what would you do? Shoot me? Which is worse, watch fuel flow past your house, and yet in three days you cannot get one gallon of what your federal government cannot make available? (she turns to address the members of the community scooping the petrol with

different kegs) Abeg continue, take this fuel, oya, oya...

From the excerpt above discussion between Ebiere's mother and the police inspector, readers get to understand that inhabitants of this Niger Delta environment as represented in the movie are obviously weary of complaining about their environment being polluted. It was for this reason that Ebiere's mother stood against the patriarchal domination of women and nature by the police officers representing the Nigerian government. In the company of other women, they had earlier complained and advocated for an end to the oil spillage in their environment, as indicated above in her conversation with the police inspector. However, the government has been negligent towards addressing the problem. In this regard, they felt it is better to maximise the leaked petrol so as not to lose on both ends. Her interaction with the Inspector validates and gives a broad insight into Ruether's stance that ecofeminism "explores how male domination of women and domination of nature are interconnected, both in cultural ideology and in social structures" (2). Though the scene ends tragically, Amata used the character of Ebiere's mum to display the resilience of an ecofeminist, who would rather die than watch women and nature endure any form of oppression.

Neglect and injustice meted out to the indigenes of the region by the Nigerian government is also included in the issues that ecofeminists in the movie vehemently abhor. This situation was portrayed in a scene where a child was shown defecating into the river while squatting on a canoe, and another woman was seen fetching water from the other end of the river to quench her child's thirst. For a region that generates more than 70 percent of the revenue in the coffers of the Nigerian government, the inhabitants of this region should not lack basic amenities. As a

result of the government's neglect, they live in abject penury with their standard of living so low that most cannot even afford clean water to drink.

Addressing such deplorable situations as seen in the movie and the refusal of the multinational oil company owned by the Westerners in acknowledging the fact they are making the living condition of their hosts unbearable, Ebiere confronts them:

You come here enriching yourselves from the spoils of our land in the process wiping out families and generations, yet you keep the fuel burning. Give the people a rest and they will rely on you.

Unfortunately, the international community that the multinational oil company represents does not seem to want an end to the travails of the region. This is because they were constantly seen trying to bribe their way into silencing the people against the common good.

As a result of the tragedy that occurs towards the end of the interception between Ebiere's mum and the police inspector, there was a protest that was anchored by another ecofeminist, Hosanna, a woman leader who is financially independent. Viewers get to see her matriarchal nature. In her discussion with her husband, her husband's inability to stop her from leading the women's protest against environmental degradation shows her disagreement with the patriarchal domination of women and nature, and this substantiates D'Eaubonne's views that ecofeminists are interested in tackling "environmental issues that are as a result of the patriarchal cultures which are obviously aimed at subjugating both women and the environment" (2). Hosanna is represented as a fierce character who does not accept the rascality of a government that mindlessly burns children and women at the pipeline, an abnormality

the women of the Niger Delta region have consistently complained about. Jeta Amata again used her to demonstrate the qualities and objectives of ecofeminists. Unlike the group of elders who accept to be bribed against the interest of their people, Hosanna's yearning for justice results in her leading women to Abuja to register their displeasure to the government about the despoliation of their environment and the wanton killings going on in their community. Unfortunately, she is recklessly killed by a police officer.

The protagonist's death at the end of the movie is reminiscent of Ken Saro-Wiwa's death. Amata first presents Ebiere as a matriarch and an ecofeminist when the representatives of the multinational oil company come to condole with the families that lost their loved ones. As a society that prioritises men at the helm of decision-making, Ebiere is asked by one of the representatives of the oil firm to summon a male figure to represent her family. To this request, she replies that she wishes the fire had kept them alive. One of the chiefs insists that it would have been better if it was a man representing her family. However, Ebiere does not waste time to remind him that he should consider her as a man if the discussion demands the absence of a female. She refuses to be acknowledged as a spokesperson for the women and a replacement of Hosanna, who died fighting oppression, not because there was anything wrong with being referred to as a spokesperson for the women, but because she uses that as an opportunity to prove that she is simply interested in the welfare of the region's environment and not after any title. To this effect, she replies to the oil company workers, saying that "she is just one of those faces in the region who is being denied a decent living." In comparison with the male characters in the film, of whom some pocketed the money meant for the whole community, Jeta Amata shows Ebiere's resilience. Her disciplined nature and

yearning for the right thing to be done are made obvious when she refuses to collect the bribe that was meant to keep mute and encourage further degradation of the environment by the multinational oil companies. The director of Western Oil, Tom Hudson, was so astonished that he had to ask, "What Nigerian doesn't accept bribe?" This means that though there might be a negative global perception of Nigerians, the ecofeminist character in Ebiere is an indication that there are still individuals who have the interests of the masses and the environment at heart. Again, in a patriarchal society where maleness is highly regarded, Amata used the above ecofeminist characters whose love for nature propelled their actions to celebrate acts of heroism in the female gender.

Conclusion

With the growing impact of Nollywood films globally, Jeta Amata's *Black November* has proven to be a movie filled with intellectual engagements. As stated earlier, the primary assignment of an ecofeminist according to D'Eaubonne is to "instill in women the need to save the earth from every form of devastation" (2), and the study has been able to significantly present Ebiere, her mother, and Hosanna as women who rose and stood for the above cause. As a result of their love for nature, they advocated against what Ruether describes as "patriarchal domination of women and nature" (2). Also, from the analysis of the major causes of crisis in the region which are environmental degradation, injustice and neglect, findings therefore reveal that these characters have been able to debunk notions in the contemporary literary trajectory of the Niger Delta region, which tends to portray that the desire for a safe and habitable environment is solely the concern of men.

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