

Full Length Research

Nationhood and Environment in Ebi Yeibo's *the Forbidden Tongue* and Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood*

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Abstract

This study focuses on the dialectics of nationhood and environment in the poetry of Ebi Yeibo and Nnimmo Bassey. By focusing on the artistic features and the poets' desire to change their society and environment, the study evaluates the elements of nationhood such as thematic preoccupations, poetic idioms, imagery, as well as the constituents of environmental despoliation in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Our analyses also explore the metaphors and images of environmental despoliation and their deployment in the poetics of the selected poets, highlighting the aesthetic engagement adopted by them. The examination of the predominance of images of environment degradation as well as the relationship between humans and the environment adumbrates the metaphor of change and the reversal of environmental and societal ills to a state of hope and freedom. The work concentrates on the poetry of Ebi Yeibo and Nnimmo Bassey because their work best exemplify the dialectics of nationhood and environment which this essay sets out to investigate. The paper exposes the fact that many studies on contemporary Nigerian poetry often address the thematic content of such poetry with little attention to the utility or functionality of the environment and how it articulates the question of nationhood and by extension how poetry versifies the politics of growth and national development. The study adopts the subaltern strand of the postcolonial approach to literature which entails the field of intellectual enquiry that explores and interrogates the situation of colonized peoples both during and after colonization. The postcolonial theory is well supported by the eco-critical approach to literary criticism. This is done in order to have an accurate grasp of the artistic nuances that constitute the fulcrum of the selected poetry, especially with regards to their aesthetic leaning to the environment. The paper concludes that the two authors in their poetry recognize and reaffirm the roles of Nigerian literature as an ideological and confrontational tool in achieving the social mandate of the people.

Keywords: Ebi Yeibo: the Forbidden Tongue, Nnimmo Bassey: We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood

INTRODUCTION

This essay examines the dialectics of nationhood and environment in Ebi Yeibo's *The Forbidden Tongue* and Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood*. By focusing on the artistic features and the poets' desire to

change their society and environment, the essay evaluates the elements of nationhood such as thematic preoccupations, poetic idioms, imagery, as well as the constituents of environmental despoliation in the Niger Delta

Region of Nigeria. The concept of nationhood has several connotations depending on the context of its use. Nationhood is derived from two key words - 'nation' and 'hood'. Benedict Anderson explains the concept of a nation as "an imagined political community that is inherently limited and sovereign" (2). Moreover, Timothy Brennan defines nation as an "imaginary construct that depends on their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role" (12). Gauging from these definitions, the concept of a nation can be said to be invented. A nation exists in the mind of the citizens who agree to its existence. This means that the belief in a nation is tied to the creation of the people inhabiting the geographical location that they claim to be theirs. Secondly, the existence of a nation is also attached to imaginative literature that creates ideology that citizens of the imaginary construct believe to exist as they read in their literature. Margaret Apine confirms this assertion when she explains that a nation is a group or groups of people knit together by a common ideal and propelled by a common sense of destiny inhabiting a well-define territory organized as a legal entity, known as the State, and possessing sovereignty which they confer in trust on the government of their choice (5).

This implies that a nation combines both the geographical location and the people to exist as a sovereign state.

Describing the idea of nationhood, Apine also opines that nationhood suggests that "the citizens have surrendered their individual sovereignty to the state through a social contract that guarantees the provision of public goods" (5). Apine's idea is that though there is a dichotomy between the individual citizen (private) in a nation and the state (public), there is uniformity when the vision of both are coalesced. This is the design of nationhood.

Rogers Brubakar adumbrates this when he sees nationhood as "an institutionalized form comprised of a pervasive system of social classification, an organizing "principle of vision and division" of the social world a standardized scheme of social accounting, a legitimate form for public and private identities (7). Thus the idea of nationhood is tantamount to an agreement between the state and the people. The people surrender their sovereignty to the State. In return, the state is to guarantee the provision of the basic amenities that the citizens required for their wellbeing.

Environment as used in this paper refers to the totality of images and metaphors that writers use to address the general denigration of

the environment by man. It involves the interplay and interconnectedness the human and non-human world especially as it affects the flora and fauna in the natural environment. Thus in this study, we shall examine the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and how are deployed by poets to effectively communicate their message to the audience. Therefore, this study adopts the term nationhood to signify the state of being of the nation where the poet is an active citizen. Nationhood and environment as used in this work entails the manner and ways Nigerian modern poets have addressed the state of being of their country in their poetry as well as the relationship between human and the non-human world. As such, the contributions of these poets to the ongoing literary discourse on the state of the nation and environment and how they are portrayed in the selected works of the poets under study adumbrate the major preoccupation of this research.

Nigeria's march towards the attainment of nationhood is not without the burden of some history. Just like every nation has its history, the literature of every nation is largely connected with the historical antecedents because literature does not occur in a vacuum. Every art reflects in its totality the social conditions of the time when it is created. Conversely, the environment both physical and metaphysical have engaged the works of modern Nigerian poets much of whom sympathize with the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria whose oil and gas resources have sustained the Nigerian economy since independence. Environmental despoliation as a means of survival by a superior personality against an inferior one is a familiar theme in the politics of marginalization by the oil multinationals and the Federal Government of Nigeria. The armed struggle in the Niger Delta that almost destroyed Nigeria's economy between 2008 and 2009 was the result. The environmental nuances that imbue many of the selected works are responses to the social and political realities of the Nigerian state. This essay will highlight and examine the notion of nationhood as well as environmental despoliation that are deployed in the selected works of Ebi Yeibo and Nnimmo Bassey from a postcolonial perspective.

The Poetry of Ebi Yeibo and Nnimmo Bassey and the Dialectics of Nationhood

The quest to use poetry as a tool for nation building constitutes the main thrust of the

poetry of Yeibo and Basse. This is given the fact that the socio-political experiences that informed the writers' imaginations were excruciating and disheartening. From colonial to post-independence, the Nigerian masses have experienced different socio-political upheavals that impact negatively on their psyches. As a result, the people need urgent solutions out of the stern quagmires. This became the vision of the poet, who deploys as a viable instrument for social redemption. There is inextricably no dichotomy between literature and socio-political issues which are tied up with the question of exploitation and dissent. The African writer does not see his art as existing for its sake. He recreates events in his art to achieve an end. This is in tandem with Omafume Onoge (1985), declaration that modern African literature was born in a hostile milieu. A milieu of colonial conquest where a virulent capitalism *on the march* had begun to deform, in fundamental ways, pre-colonial African social relationships and values associated with the 'village mode of production'. Following closely on the heels of the slave trade, colonialism completed the alienation of the African in ways much graver than that endured by the European proletariat. We were reduced, as Fanon was to sum up this experience, to *The Wretched of the Earth* (22).

Besides the aesthetic significance of a literary work, it plays a robust social function—it is a weapon of social control and reformation. In other words, either explicitly or implicitly, the African poet uses his work to engage certain socio-political and cultural issues of his society as well as record them in a manner that the audience would want to react, either positively or negatively, to the issues raised. This why Sunny Awhefeada asserts that: "The writer should be seen as actively involved in the unfolding experiences of his society, not only as a recorder but also as a participant trying to shape events" (12). This is the social vision of the two poets under investigation. They use their works as tools to express displeasure to the various abnormally in the society so as to direct the steps of the society to the path of progress. It is against this backdrop that G.G. Darah declares that "...all classical traditions of world literature are fostered by environments where there are intensive struggles against great evils for the restoration of human dignity" (100).

The two writers under investigation, like their predecessors such as J.P. Clark, Tanure Ojaide, Ochia Ofeimun believe that the worth of the work of art should be measured by its ability to criticize any established order that goes against the tenets of fair play, even in the face of

intense censorship and political persecutions. These writers' works are aimed at offering practical solutions by way of specific measures either for consensual reform or powerful revolution against existing socio-political order. They therefore address their works against the backdrop of failure of leadership, political instability, corruption, insensitivity of the Nigerian government against the affairs of the Niger Delta people as well as the despoliation of the environment by the activities of the oil multi-nationals.

The writer as a nation builder and not a conformist is realizable only when he sings songs that "denounce and indict without prevarication" and tells stories that places the art as a "weapon in the revolutionary struggle". Among the writers in this class are Ochia Ofenum, Tanure Ojaide, Harry Garuba, Kofi Anyidoho, Ossie Eneke, Syl Cheney-Coker, Ebi Yeibo, Nnimmo Bassey and others. These writers have demonstrated that they have "an overwhelming desire to communicate, to present their vision for sharing by others. For them, social issue is not an aside, a parenthesis, or a footnote; it is the very heart of creative consciousness. They write not only to entertain and please, but to change the world in the process" (30). At the end, despite the challenges of illiteracy, obnoxious labour policies, the harsh economic situation and the problems of publishing, the modern writer must continue the struggle to be committed. Osundare avows:

...commitment is not mere abstract aesthetics, but a single minded dedication to the battle for change. And only when a writer is positively committed, only when he is prepared to back up the theory of commitment with its practical, and often harrowing demands, only then can the writer be on the way to being a fighter"

While the theoretical postulations of Osundare are enlightening, their relevance to this review touches on the reasons for nationhood. Also, the idea of rejuvenation is rooted in selected poets' vision of commitment.

The environment has also been interrogated by the literary works of modern Nigerian writers. In many of their works, the environment is addressed with human images and devastating metaphors. The writers believe that the environment must be protected and preserved for the overall good of society. It is in this light that Ifejirika tells us that the modern Nigerian writer's duty is the "point out that the natural world is a living and sacred thing in which each individual feels intimately bonded to a particular physical place where human beings

live in interdependence and reciprocity with other living things" (55).

It is against this background that Awhefeada informs us that the "poetry coming out of the Niger Delta since the publication of Tanure Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Delta* in 1986 reveals the engendering of a different type of poetic tradition which contrasts radically with the verse offering of the preceding decades" (98). According to him, this "poetry does engage the environment, but not from a romanticized perspective" (98). His view is conditioned on the fact that the poems from many of the writers, especially Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofiemun, Ibiwari Ikoriko, Ebi Yeibo, Ogaga Ifowodo, Nnimmo Bassey, and others, are "laced with lamentations sometimes angrily and at other times with tear glazed eyes bemoaning the environmental carnage wrought by the exploration and exploitation of crude oil in the region" (98). Writing about Nnimmo Bassey, Awhefeada tells us that his poetry collection, *We Thought it was oil but it was blood* bears a frightening title that pointedly "asserts that the end result of the insensitivity of the activities of the oil multinationals is not oil, but blood arising from the preventable deaths and other gory occurrences occasioned by environmental degradation" (108). As shall be shown later in this essay, Bassey and Yeibo not only provide a frightening exploration of the tragedy wrought by the oil exploitation in his homeland, but demonstrate with alluring images and metaphors the displacement of persons in their Niger Delta homeland.

In his study of Ebi Yeibo's poetry, Stephen Kekeghe informs us that Yeibo, like other modern Nigerian poets, "finds himself in an apparent dilemma – the quest to save himself, his immediate environment and region; and of course, the Nigerian nation which harbours multifaceted ills and quandaries" (66). He goes further to tell us that "Yeibo's poetic vision reveals his patriotism to his community, region and country" (67). As someone whose Niger Delta region is constantly degraded and despoiled by the activities of oil companies in the region, Yeibo uses his poetry as a committed writer, to give voice to the environment. In an interview with Stephen Kekeghe, Yeibo expresses his artistic vision thus:

The world I write about is full of intractable problems, disasters and tragedies; there is simply nothing to smile about. The issues I highlight, particularly in the Niger Delta which is my primary focus are very serious. They call for soberness and even sadness.

Therefore, the tone or rhythm of the poems is reflective of the magnitude of the issues at stake (Kekeghe 2014, 68).

The two poets that this essay examines deploy their works to interrogate the socio-political issues that affect the common man in the society. Their poetry serves as an alternative media that examines the environmental challenges and anxieties of the dispossessed people of the Niger Delta. Their poems bemoan the ecological devastation and the lip service of the government as well as the exploitation and expropriation of the resources and the people which are engendered by greed.

In Ebi Yeibo's *The Forbidden Tongue* for instance, one constantly encounters the images of protest against the recurrent debasement and dehumanization of the downtrodden. This, he does in his cravings for a world where the rich and the poor would have almost an equal access to the social and political facilities of the country. His resort to dissent motif in his poetry is therefore a call for social justice. In this collection, Yeibo sensitizes the masses that they have the power to redeem the land from the hands of the tyrant poachers. Since the politicians are insensitive to their plight and thus cannot be trusted, the people must fashion a collective and a dissenting means to fight for their rights. In the opening poem entitled "Song" the poet compares the rage of angry poet to that of a drunkard and a mad man. He therefore calls on the people to come together to fight the thieving politicians who have held the nation on her knees.

Let us
Make canorous music
From the deep croaks
Of drunk frogs

Moisten calcified farmlands
With scathing manure

Cleanse cringing creeks
Cadavers and maelstroms
With searing song

Let us
Stoke the sagging sun
With the resilience
Of our tongue. (*The Forbidden...19*)

In other words, the power to restructure society lies significantly within the masses. Everybody must look inward and be strengthened by his/her will power to sing the desired song for the change that everyone craves for. To the poet, the enemy of the people are the heartless, insensitive politicians and

tyrant kings who take pleasure in pauperising the people. However, as the voice of the voiceless, Yeibo takes the side of the downtrodden and lambasts the insatiable appetite of the bourgeoisies, who plunder the collective patrimony of the people. In the poem "Dawn Song" for instance, the poet warn the insensitive leaders, who plunder and banter away the nation's fortunes with foreign profiteers to be weary of the people's anger. He says:

Let the town crier hear this:

A cloud is a cloud

Whether dark, or a cumulus

That makes us consummate serfs

On our own shores (*The Forbidden...22*).

The poetic import of the above lines becomes redolent when one considers how successive governments in Nigeria have succeeded in trading away national assets for personal gains and aggrandizement. In Nigeria, the crude oil resources that accounts for over ninety percent of the country's gross earnings is traded with foreign countries in a manner that is fraught with greed and corruption. All national assets like the Nigerian Power Holding Company, Steel Companies, refineries, telecommunication companies are traded away to personal companies or to friends against the collective interest of the country. Therein lays the angst of the poet. He tells us that the politicians:

Milk the famished breasts

Weaning failing children (*The Forbidden...23*).

In other words, when the people finally summon the courage to ask for their rights, the tyrants will be overthrown and would become worthless in the scheme of things. He therefore calls on the people to be ready to take their destinies into their own hands by displacing the insensitive politicians and their cronies from the seat of power.

Let sprawling seas

Disgorge the swelling sewage

That gaily farts on us.

O let sprawling seas

Stem the surge

Of sententious saints

Stabbing our sun

With serrated sermons.

Let sprawling seas

Mop up trumped-up mornings

That hide the titillating treasures

Of dawn (*The Forbidden...23*).

The image of the "sprawling seas" becomes a convincing metaphor for the revolutionary praxis to constitute the entire collection. The above revolutionary tendency is

also evident in the poem "Drowsy Dreams" where the poet not only protests against the dichotomy between the rich and the poor in society, but also confronts various indices of greed, corruption, and bad leadership. He therefore warns the corrupt politicians to be careful hence they would be taken unaware.

O let those who barricade

The sun's path with polished clouds

Remember the sour fate

Of ash throwers(*The Forbidden...25*)

To this end, he calls on the people to organise themselves and agitate for their rights and the progress of the nation.

Let silent sighs

Of catatonic compatriots

Find voice in impregnable echoes

Of boundless seas

O let manoeuvring masters

Like vintage monkeys on loyal trees

Surge slavewards

With ever bountiful barns (*The Forbidden...25*).

Essentially, Yeibo's themes expose society to the harsh reality of the things that have gone wrong in her; especially as it affects the masses. His angst is against tyrants who enact tyrannical laws that suppress the will of the people. To him, therefore, the people must come together, hand-in-hand to confront their collective enemy. These themes are well foregrounded in the poem "Rage of a River".

Dwellers of the delta

Wax wild on the wings of the wreckage

Who wouldn't whose paradise

Becomes a prostitute's rag

...

O the slaughter of the white eagle

Leaves the animal kingdom

In sackcloth

When a hawk swoops on chicks

The mother goes wild (*The Forbidden...25*).

The poet further chastises the people for their docility. He is obviously angry at the gullibility of the people, who could not decipher the fact that a few cabal has taken over the reins of the country. To the poet, the people's apathy to the appurtenances, in the land is unjustifiable. They must come out to confront the oppressors, who have made them beast of burden in their own land. Hence in his chastisement, Yeibo takes the centre stage and rain curses on all those who have held the nation on her knees.

May long shafts of sunray

Slit the throat

Of their crimson connivance

May the sanctimonious smile
Of a new moon
Haunt the howling horrors

Resonate the silence
Of suppressed sighs

May the sizzling society of scorpions
Be denuded
By the lightning torch of dawn (*The Forbidden...52*).

These themes of greed, corruption, dehumanisation and social disparity also resonate in Nnimmo Bassey's *We thought it was oil but it was blood*. However, an interesting contribution of the collection to the poetics of dispossession and despoliation is Bassey's commitment to salvage the human environment and all that reside in it. The eco-social vision of Bassey, in this collection, is remarkable— to him, the liberation of the human society can only be perfectly realised if the seas, the forest, the animals and human beings are all redeemed from poachers. Here, poet not only transmutes his commitment to the downtrodden of the land but also extends his artistic vision to the earth, forests, seas, insects, and mountains, and pleads for the survival of the earth, especially his Niger Delta region of Nigeria which has been made parlous by the activities of oil companies. Thus, in this collection, the helpless masses, the earth and its elements are intertwined into a vortex of angst that seek a reordering of the Nigerian state and the minority people of the Niger Delta. He tells us in the poem "Oceanic march" that:

I see the march of the sea
I see the crushing blows of the seer
In the midst we are in the python's grasp
Swept off our feet
Our hopes silted
Memories of life once lived
Floats back to us
As we face the spasms of pain (*We thought...20*).

From the above lines, the poet protest against the destruction of the human lives *vis-a-vis* environment is remarkable. Here the sea represents the rulers who deploy everything within their means to crush the helpless masses "in the python's grasp". To the poet, the greedy politicians and the bourgeois capitalists destroy nature with so much arrogance, in the quest to erect business empires and yawning skyscrapers. The people are "Swept off our feet" and their "hopes silted" in the "memories of life once lived". Bassey's commitment to nationhood is well exemplified in the poem "We have one

earth". In this poem, the poet reprimands those who think they own the earth whereas the earth is big enough to accommodate everyone irrespective of tribe and status in life. He asks:
How many days in a decade
How many hopes
How many tears
How much hunger, anger, strife?
A great deal
Of water slips beneath the canal
Right between our fingers even
As anxious heads bob for a deal
Long postponed! (*We thought...25*).

The images in the poem above unfold the different dichotomy between the starving majority and the flamboyant living of the opportunists, to incite the oppressed against the oppressors. This attests to the inhumanity and outright insensitivity of the political class and the bourgeois capitalists— they do not care about the conditions of the poor who live in abject penury. In the quest to create a better life for all peoples of the earth, Bassey opts for the option of a nation where everyone is regarded as important; where the man in the far north of the country can be accepted as a brother in the south while someone from the east can be accepted in the west. This idea of utopia is conveyed in the second stanza of the poem thus:

Now we seek to re-discover
Ourselves – dreamers, chanters, criers
Sealed beneath departed mahoganies long snatched!
We must be ready to face
Taking a stand to keep apace
Outside the rat race
We have one earth; we are all in one place!
The South has come to the North
And I have seen the East kiss the West (*We thought...25*).

His preachment of a united Nigeria is well foregrounded in the above lines. To the poet, Nigeria as a country can develop and move forward if all the political players seizes to use the poor masses as pawn to create ethnic embers that only have its fruition in their personal pockets. The masses must be wise not to always fall prey to the veil machinations of the political elites. They don't have the people at heart. They are only into politics for their selfish gains. It is against this backdrop that he highlights the social disparity that exists between the rich and the poor which must jettisoned by all and sundry in the third stanza.
In a moment of global debates
We overran the questions of consumption
On the scrawny mugs of po-ver-tea

Now we know how
The creaky posturing about empty
Dishes...dishing ladles of grammar
For those who feast deserts those
Who scream for a drop of water, a drop of water
An unpolluted air, a leaf for my pate, a task for
my biceps
Answers don't come for voices long dead...yet
The skulls and fibulas congregate in wilderness
paths, yes
On long forgotten dessert trails (*We
thought...25-26*).

In these above lines, the reader experiments the poet's confession of the truth of our being, his anger against those who divide the people around religious and ethnic lines as he dissects the privileges of the rich which are far from the reach of the poor. Here, Bassey resents the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor in the Nigerian society. The poet sensitises the poor about the mentality of the rich, who ride to fame through the hard sweat of the poor. bassey's protest, in the poem above, is meant to charge the exploited poor into taking radical and revolutionary steps so that they can redeem themselves from slavish life. The poet illustrates this point clearly in the last stanza of the poem thus:

If the chattering birds
Must not run out of breath
Men must give nature a break
And for a moment cease the jabber
To allow the weaverbirds chatter songs of life
Long postponed (*We thought...26*).

The foregoing has shown that the poets use their works to advocate not only a united nation that is free from oppression and dispossession, their poetic vision is to give birth to a healthy society which upholds the value of humanity.

It is apt to note that Yeibo's quest to improve the condition of the downtrodden is apparent in his effort to savage the despoiled environment. This burning desire of Yeibo to act as the voice of the voiceless populace and the degraded environment; ranks him in the same stead with poets such as Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide and others who rooted for the dispossessed masses. This is why Kekeghe believes that Yeibo quest "is to perk up the vanishing artistic tradition and troubled ecology of his people; and at the same time demonstrate a peculiar avant-gardism aimed at neutralizing every instrument of oppression deployed by the self-acclaimed Nigerian politicians and desperadoes on the vulnerable masses" (68). Armed with the vision to salvage the society, Yeibo in *The Forbidden Tongue* takes his

wailing to the public domain; but seems to personalise his thoughts with the deployment of adjectives that touches on the oppressors' conscience. In the poem "Silent Sorrow" for instance, the poet laments the destruction of the environment through gas flares by the oil companies.

Dawn bristles
With a fiery flame of fraud
Burning up blossoming barns
Like brittle forests
In the heart of the harmattan (*The
Forbidden...31*).

The realities of social hardship and economic misery that forcefully emblazon the poor masses of the Niger Delta are brought to the fore through the howling tone of shrillness with which the poet makes his reflection.

The pig wails
In the hand of harmless man;
Its teeth ridicule
The riddle of the kernel (*The Forbidden...32*).

With a more confrontational temper, we are ushered into the public space where the wailing apparently unfolds the injustice meted on the natives of the Niger Delta. Their melancholic voice pricks the sensitivity of the public to focus their mind on the poor and neglected people of Nigeria. In the poem "The Poachers" Yeibo bewails:
They are the dragons
And the drought
The hunters and hounds

Who poach our fish ponds
Dry up our farmlands
Kill our dreams

Now the antelope
Confers with the deer
To desert the forest (*The Forbidden...32*).

In the above lines, Yeibo discloses the plight of his people who are under serious attack and exploitation from the oil companies who are in league with successive Nigerian government to defraud the people. Their lands and waterways have been made parlous. Their means of livelihood which farming and fishing have been destroyed through constant pollution of the environment; thus the people's dream of a secured future has been killed.

Furthermore, the perpetual betrayal of public thrust which characterizes politics of dispossession in the Nigeria's situation, the disenchantment and vision of the poet becomes subject of sorrows. The modern Nigerian poet is gravely involved in social criticism of their

troubled environment. In the poem "Tsunami reminds us...", Yeibo adequately unfold the grave situation the populace face in their various communities. The universality of the poem adumbrates the poet's commitment to the salvation of man and the environment. The poet tells us that:

Tsunami reminds us
Of mixed palette
Suckling nature's undying shrubs –

...
Tsunami reminds us
Of the serenity of white clouds
Suddenly overturned
By thunder's deafening cannons –

Tsunami reminds us
We stand in the middle of a maelstrom
Weaving unpredictable waters
To eke out a world – (*The Forbidden...37*).

This poem is a warning to all those who treat the environment with levity. From the above poem the plight of the people in regions where the environment is at risk of implosion is made visible by the way the poet recounts the destructive indices of tsunami. Thus while the Niger Delta region of Nigeria serves as the poem's setting, its thematic preoccupation cut across universal boundaries. In "Nothing Surprises us Anymore", Yeibo's polemics on the restoration of the land is graphically conveyed. Many of the images of rejuvenation give us the hope, that no matter how long it may take, the people's quest for a just and classless society is imminent. The people are used to the despoiled environment. They have no other place to go to, hence they must make it work. Nothing new that the oil multinationals and the government will do against them again that will surprise them. They must therefore take their destinies into their own hands. The poet assures thus:
Nothing surprises us anymore
Where clangy cockcrows
Signal yet another night
And cosy constellations
On the sublime sky
Only scorch fledgling flowers (*The Forbidden...64*).

Unlike Yeibo, Nnimmo Bassey's poems bear the frightening title *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood*. The title pointedly asserts that the end result of the insensitivity of the activities of the oil multinationals is not oil, but blood arising from the preventable deaths and other gory occurrences occasioned by environmental degradation. The collection's opening poem of the same title reads in part:
The other day

We danced in the street
Joy in our hearts
We thought we were free
Three young folks fell to our right
Countless more fell to our left
Looking up,
Far from the crowd
We beheld
Red-hot-guns
We thought it was oil
But it was blood (*We thought..., 13*).

The poem opens with the mood of celebration of freedom which is engendered by the return to democratic rule in 1999. However, the new reality does not hold for the oil producing region as it still suffers human loss due to military repression at the instance of the Nigerian state. The refrain "we thought it was oil/but it was blood" runs through the entire poem in order to emphasize the pervasiveness of state sponsored military brutality against the oil producing region. Therefore, instead of oil, blood arising from death becomes a common domination. The poet identifies the victims of these senseless killings as follows:

First it was the Ogonis
Today it is Ijaws
Who will be slain the next day? (*We thought..., 14*).

The Ogoni and Ijaw groups were at the receiving end of military brutality in their just struggles to protect their homeland from the ravages of the oil multinationals. The condition of the homeland is further depicted as:

Dried tear bags
Polluted streams
Things are real
When found in dreams
We see their shells
Behind military shields
Evil, horrible, gallows called oil rigs
Drilling our souls (*We thought..., 14*).

The Nigerian military has been deployed to help perpetuate environmental insecurity in the Niger Delta. The nefarious activities of the oil companies are sustained through the protection guaranteed by military presence. Thus, while the human beings depreciate as the land and streams are burn out, the military secure the region for the oil firms to despoil.

In "When the Earth Bleeds" Bassey provides frightening pictures of the tragedy wrought by oil exploration. The refrain "the oil only flows/when the earth bleeds" foregrounds

The grave ecological devastation to which the earth is subjected. The imagery of the bleeding earth is meant to compare the region's experience to the life-threatening condition of haemorrhage, the earth is thereby presented to be wounded and bleeding to death as a result of "a thousand explosions in the belly of the earth/bleeding rigs, bursting pipes" (16). The poet's lamentation veers into two grids aimed at exposing the evil of oil exploration and also standing up to heal the earth and reclaim it. He urges "we must lift up the light/quench their gas flares.../let's bandage the earth" (16-17). Instead of inaction, the poet proposes that the inhabitants of the Niger Delta should embark on proactive measures to make their homeland inhabitable again. The menace of gas flaring which has negatively affected the region's ecological configuration is what the poem "Gas Flares" explores. The portrayal of the horrendous phenomenon reads:

The earth gassed
 Dynamites rocked the store house
 Of life
 The earth gassed
 A fart delayed
 Belching dragons attack
 Leaping tongues lick
 Roofs, farms (*We thought...*, 48).

The implication of these lines is that the Niger Delta environment has been lost. The acute sense of a lost homeland arising from decades of environmental injustice runs through Bassey's collection. The notion of the region as a vast wasteland is concretized by his deployment of imagery of a landscape that has been set on fire as a result of the quest for crude oil. In some of the poems, he depicts the destruction of the region's ecosystem in the form of a haemorrhage that will drain life out of it.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this essay is essentially to explore the totality of literature as a tool for social and political development and nationhood as explicated in the poetic oeuvres of Ebi Yeibo and Nnimmo Bassey and to contribute to the scholarship of eco-critical literature especially in the area of proffering solutions to the socio-political distortion in contemporary Nigeria. The essay has highlighted the notion of nationhood as well as attempts an evaluation of the motif of environmental despoliation as inherent in the poetry of Yeibo and Bassey. The poets achieve this essential mandate through the use of dissent motif which enables their poetic

personas to react against various hegemonic and capitalist structures that have held them down overtime. The selected poets thus have clear ideological pathway like their contemporaries whom Bernth Lindfors described as writers who not only act as the "chroniclers of contemporary political history, but also as advocates of radical social change through their works (which) reflect and project the course of Africa's cultural revolution" (22). The central concern of this paper therefore is not only to prove the claim that the selected poets' use nationhood vignettes and environmental motifs in their poetry to foreground the place of the oppressed masses of the Nigerian state, but also attempt to evolve workable strategies, howbeit radical, to interrogate the demeaning myths that relegate the poor masses to the background.

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