

Victimised Bodies, Violated Landscapes: Ecofeminism in Jacqueline Uche Agweh's *A Pelican of the Wilderness*

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Abstract

Review Article

This paper examines the representation of women and the environment in Agweh's *A Pelican of the Wilderness* from an ecofeminist perspective. Set against the socio-environmental crisis of Nigeria's Niger Delta, the novel portrays women, children, and the natural environment as victims of oil exploitation, militarisation, militancy, corruption, and patriarchal structures. Through Tonpre's experiences, the narrative exposes polluted rivers, devastated vegetation, gas flaring, declining fishing activities, toxic effluents, and the destruction of wildlife and farmlands. At the same time, women are subjected to domestic violence, rape, poverty, objectification, and gender-based exploitation. Particularly disturbing is the conscription of young girls to serve kidnapped victims in the name of the Niger Delta struggle. This practice strips them of bodily autonomy and reduces them to instruments of a supposedly emancipatory cause. The paper argues that Agweh establishes a symbolic and material relationship between environmental degradation and the oppression of women. The same structures of domination that exploit land, water, and natural resources also marginalise and commodify female bodies. Consequently, *A Pelican of the Wilderness* interrogates the contradictions of a liberation struggle that reproduces violence against vulnerable people and ecosystems. The study concludes that the novel offers a compelling ecofeminist critique of environmental injustice, patriarchal domination, and resource conflict in the Niger Delta, and the urgent need for socially responsible environmental justice practices.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Niger Delta, environmental degradation, women, oil conflict, patriarchy.

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INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta presents one of the most troubling paradoxes of resource extraction in contemporary Nigeria. Although the region supplies the crude oil that contributes significantly to the nation's economy, its communities continue to experience environmental degradation, poverty, social displacement and violent conflict. Literary writers responding to this condition have increasingly represented the region as a violated ecological space in which oil spills, gas flaring and other extractive activities threaten both human and non-human life. Agweh's *A Pelican of the Wilderness* belongs to this tradition. Through Tonpre's movement across the creeks and waterside communities, the novel depicts polluted rivers, damaged vegetation, contaminated aquatic resources and declining livelihoods, thereby transforming the environment from a passive setting into an active victim of the Niger Delta crisis.

This representation corresponds with Okachukwu Onuah Wosu's position on environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. Wosu argues that anthropocentric consciousness encourages human beings to regard themselves as superior to other elements of the ecosphere and consequently reduces natural resources, animals, aquatic life and the environment to objects available for exploitation. He maintains that, particularly in the Niger Delta, crude-oil exploitation translates directly into environmental despoliation and degradation, leaving communities with damaged ecosystems without adequate alternative means of survival. (57-73). Earlier, Wosu and Idio similarly examined the destruction of the Niger Delta ecosystem through oil exploration in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. At the same time, Chikere and Wosu identify industrialisation, extractive activities and other human interventions as significant sources of ecological crisis and stress the need for environmentally sustainable human-nature relationships. (210) Agweh's

representation of poisoned waterways, gas flaring and disappearing sources of livelihood therefore reinforces Wosu's argument that unchecked exploitation converts natural wealth into ecological ruin.

Significantly, Agweh does not restrict responsibility for this destruction to multinational oil corporations. The novel implicates government institutions, corrupt community leaders, military forces and militants whose violent responses to injustice further endanger the environment. Pipeline explosions, indiscriminate shootings, the destruction of vessels and attacks on oil installations reproduce the ecological violence that militant groups claim to resist. The text consequently exposes the contradictions of a liberation struggle that seeks environmental justice while simultaneously contributing to environmental devastation.

More importantly, *A Pelican of the Wilderness* places the exploitation of nature alongside the subjugation of women. Women suffer domestic violence, sexual assault, poverty and objectification within the same socio-political environment in which land, rivers and other natural resources are treated as disposable commodities. The experience of Princess and other young girls, who are "donated" by their families to serve the militant struggle, particularly demonstrates how female bodies become instruments within structures controlled largely by men. This representation also corresponds with Wosu's feminist position. Uka and Wosu contend that women's subordination in many African societies is sustained by culture and patriarchy, which restrict women's freedom, reasoning and opportunities for development. They advocate a womanist consciousness that recognises women's dignity, agency and contribution to society rather than representing them as insignificant or subordinate figures. (34885) In another study, Wosu identifies hegemony and ideological structures as mechanisms through which discrimination, female objectification and social inequality are legitimised, while emphasising the need for dominated groups to develop critical consciousness and challenge oppressive systems. (929)

Viewed from an ecofeminist perspective, therefore, the experiences of women and the environment in Agweh's novel are mutually illuminating. Both are subjected to systems that privilege domination, exploitation and control. While the Niger Delta environment is valued primarily for the resources that can be extracted from it, women are similarly objectified according to their usefulness within patriarchal and conflict-driven structures. This article consequently examines women and nature as "twin victims" in *A Pelican of the Wilderness* and argues that Agweh's parallel representation of violated landscapes and violated female bodies offers a compelling critique of environmental injustice, patriarchal domination and the

contradictions surrounding the struggle for liberation in the Niger Delta.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jacqueline Uche Agweh's *A Pelican of the Wilderness* has yet to receive the critical attention it deserves. There is a paucity of critical materials on her text in traditional and online libraries. However, a few scholars have explored the novel using different theoretical perspectives, and their contributions will be discussed here. Okey Amadi emphasised the problem of elite aloofness in his reading of Agweh's *A Pelican of the Wilderness*. Alluding to Soyinka's novel *The Man Died* to explain the protagonist's thoughts, Amadi highlighted the spate of dehumanisation, environmental despoliation, and the suppression of all forms of resistance as portrayed by the major characters in the novel. The validity of Amadi's observation is reinforced by the resolution of the plot, in which Justice Tonpre Isaac-Kogbara sheds his aloofness to the struggle and gives enormous moral and financial support to his freedom-fighter son, Tonpre Isaac-Kogbara, leading to the success of the reconciliation between the government and various militant forces.

Thus, Amadi saw the novel as a wake-up call for everyone concerned, urging them to throw off the yoke of subjugation. In this regard, Amadi perceived Agweh's *A Pelican of the Wilderness* as an activist novel that belongs to a group of literary works whose powerful words have broken the guns of dictators and grounded the tanks of occupying armies (para. 1). Further pursuing the idea of the novel as a wake-up call, Amadi interprets Tonpre's anger against the people as "bringing to the fore the argument over whether an oppressed people should fight back or remain docile and complacent in renunciation of violence" (para. 4). This wake-up call to actively participate in the struggle for the emancipation of the Niger Delta is especially directed at the elite class. As we shall note shortly, Agweh is not alone in this call; Ojaide, in his novel *The Activist*, and Chimeka Garricks, in *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, demonstrate the role of elites in the success of activism. In Agweh's novel, the relevance of elitist support to the success of the struggle is underscored by the Zebra when he encouraged Tonpre to remain resolute: "We need enlightened people like you if we are to succeed" (Agweh 96).

In eliciting elitist support for the Niger Delta struggle, Agweh skillfully crafted her art to achieve an emotional impact on the reading audience, drawing their sympathy to the cause. She did this by appealing to the judgment of the readership, painting vivid pictures of environmental pollution and scenes of the massacre of poor folks, including women and children, as well as depictions of the wreckage brought by the loss of dear ones. Amadi noted that the reader is appalled by the environmental pollution and the massacre of defenceless villagers at Oinadi waterside by the joint military force

and security operations of oil companies (para. 3). Amadi paid attention to Agweh's criticism of violence against both human and non-human denizens of the environment. He underscored the unfortunate flow of "the polluted waters of the Niger Delta" (para. 1) and the equally unfortunate flow of blood. In his words, "Besides water, blood also flowed freely in the Niger Delta - mostly, blood of natives, the blood of villagers to whom oil wealth has brought curses" (para. 8).

It is noteworthy that this hypothesis regarding the phenomenon of wealth-spinning crude oil as an ironic source of doom rather than boom has engaged the interest of several critics in the Niger Delta literary discourse. Such literary engagements have yielded volumes of articles and collections. Notable among the collections is Chinyere Nwahunanya's edited volume, *From Boom to Doom: Protest and Conflict Resolution in the Literature of the Niger Delta*, in which the preoccupation of various articles is how art is deployed by creative writers of different genres to lament and expose "the ironic contradictions of the consequences of capitalist exploitation by multi-national economic interests teaming up with the local comprador bourgeoisie class" (Nwahunanya, xiii). Amadi concluded his review of Agweh's *A Pelican* by pointing out that the novel pays attention to this "teaming up" of the cabals who manipulate the power of the federal government and the military to rob people of the rich endowments of their environment.

In her adulatory examination of Agweh's *A Pelican*, Antonia Nnadi remarked that the novel is a realistic representation of the events in the Niger Delta. Just like Amadi cited above, Nnadi underscored the impact of the novel on readers who may expect the intrigues of Niger Delta insurgency but instead find the story of a man who makes a failed attempt to liberate his people from the plague of social and environmental injustice (11). Thus, the high point of Nnadi's critical engagement with Agweh's *A Pelican* is the pressure that the protagonist, Tonpre, faces as he disconnects from his family and takes extreme decisions to pursue his passion for liberating his people. Nnadi presents gangsterism, oil bunkering, kidnapping, and other shades of social impropriety as consequences of the oil crisis in the Niger Delta region. But Nnadi's review does not identify the author's artistic visions aimed at solutions to the Niger Delta imbroglio. The present study fills this gap.

Theoretical Framework

As feminist thought expanded, scholars increasingly began to examine the relationship between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment in patriarchal societies. These concerns eventually developed into what became known as ecofeminism. The term *ecofeminism*, coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne, draws attention to the connections between the domination of women

and the degradation of nature under patriarchal systems. Ecofeminism is rooted in the hierarchical dualisms created and sustained by patriarchy, particularly oppositions such as human/nature and man/woman. These binaries often privilege one category over the other and consequently justify unequal relations of power. From this perspective, ecofeminism investigates how the same structures that subordinate women also encourage the exploitation and abuse of the natural environment.

Closely related to ecological criticism, ecofeminism is founded on the idea that the exploitation of women and the degradation of nature are interconnected. It also examines the argument that women may demonstrate stronger tendencies toward environmentally sustainable practices because of their socially constructed nurturing roles and perceived closeness to nature. Scholars such as Alison Archambault (19), Richard Twine (35), and Lawrence Buell (25) identify the logic of domination as a major concern within ecofeminist thought. Ecofeminism can therefore be understood as a critical response to patriarchal systems that transform both women and the environment into objects of control, exploitation, and violence. Chun Ling describes ecofeminism as "a feminism with inclinations to ecology" (67). Within literary studies, ecofeminism examines how women and nature are represented in texts, especially where both are subjected to marginalisation, exploitation, and violence within male-dominated social structures. Prominent scholars and activists associated with ecofeminist thought include Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ivone Gebara, Alice Walker, Sallie McFague, Luisah Teish, Sun Ai Lee Park, Monica Sjöö, Greta Gaard, Andy Smith, Carol J. Adams, Susan Griffin, Mary Daly, Shamara Shantu-Riley, and Vandana Shiva.

Victimised Bodies, Violated Landscapes: Ecofeminism in Jacqueline Uche Agweh's *A Pelican of the Wilderness*

Agweh's novel presented the environment and women as twin victims in the conflict spectrum, specifically, in the Niger Delta context. The novel opened with a vivid description of the tragedy of environmental degradation in the region. As Tombra and Tonpre navigated the creeks that led to the Nest - the hideout for their Signet Brotherhood meetings - Tonpre observed the state of the vegetation, which smelt of decay and rot (1). As they went deeper into the forest, he further revealed that environmental despoliation affects the flora and the fauna as much as the humans; the water they passed was poisoned and the vegetation so fruitless that night creatures could not find their usual food from the nature surrounding them (3-4). Just before he was admitted into the Nest, Tonpre looked around and noticed the lifelessness all around him - the skinny tree trunks, clumps of still bush and the dead logs of wood lying like corpses in the water (7). Consequently, his

resolve to join the Signet Brotherhood was strengthened since the group was set up to redeem the environment from destruction (15). Tonpre was integrated into the group and christened "The Pelican". He became the chief strategist of the group and used his expertise to facilitate the success of the group's clandestine clean-up activities in the Niger Delta waters.

Just before his first clean-up mission with his Signet Brothers, Tonpre had a conversation with a surveyor he met in a restaurant, and they made references to the environmental rape in the Niger Delta region. Tonpre wondered where the fish on his plate came from since oil spills and related activities had polluted the water bodies. As if he read Tonpre's mind, Surveyor Funsho Daniels intoned: "I don't eat fish these days... too expensive when they are brought in from neighbouring states and most of them are laden with mercury, lead, chemicals and what have you" (21). Tonpre agreed with the Surveyor and further highlighted other dimensions of the environmental abuse in the region such as economic displacement and impoverishment, irreversible damage to the ecosystem, poisoning of humans and other animals and other illustrations to buttress his view that oil was a burden rather than a blessing to the people of the region (22). When he got to the clean-up site with his Signet Brothers, he noticed the acrid smell emanating from the polluted area where crude oil had decimated life forms, leading to a conglomeration of odours from rot and decay (39). It was easy to trace the cause; they noticed that "tonnes of oil were spilled" during the violent reaction of Niger Delta militants the previous day (40). Agweh's imagery here highlights the scope of environmental hazards related to militant activities and the consequent military reaction.

During his expedition to Obiri waterside village, Tonpre made further discoveries about the treatment and state of the environment. He pretended to be sleeping and listened to his co-passengers as they recounted the shades of environmental injustice in their rural community. The narrator captured this scenario as follows:

The conversation around him flowed from tales of kidnapping, poor fishing caused by oil spillage, to the emergence of new militants whom they hoped would deliver them from the white men destroying their land and water. Someone, a man further down the canoe with a really loud voice, began talking about the corrupt community leaders who were enriching themselves with the monies meant to compensate the impoverished waterside people. (63-64)

Agweh's depiction here has shown that the environment is thoroughly abused by human activities related to oil in the region, and afterwards, the damage to the environment is equated to paltry monetary compensations that would end up in the pockets of

corrupt community executive officials; no provision was made for land reclamation or environmental clean-up. When Tonpre settled at Obiri Waterside village, he won the admiration of the women. He received fish and periwinkles as gifts from them but could not bring himself to eat those gifts of nature because he feared that they were contaminated with substances from oil exploratory activities that had polluted the aquatic space (69).

Tonpre's experience in Obiri Waterside village would prove to be his most revealing encounter about the state of the Niger Delta environment. He made several discoveries that further strengthened his resolve to uphold the clamour for environmental justice even if it would take his life. First, he observed the alarming rate of gas flaring in communities like Obiri Waterside that hosted oil drilling companies and their facilities. He noticed that the night weather was always too hot because of the heat generated from the flaring of natural gas in nearby drilling centres. He endured the inconveniences, and during one of his moments of self-reflection, the narrative voice remarked as follows:

Nobody really needed indoor lighting devices in the waterside villages. It was bright enough outside. Tonpre never ceased to be appalled by the monumental waste of billions as gas was flared into the air to pollute the atmosphere. At the same time, the people of the region starved and fought real and imagined enemies. (71).

He equally observed a similar situation two weeks later as he got ready to take off with Obiri Waterside youths to Ido Waterside en route Kuma junction for the infamous rally that led to the death of many people. At 4 am when they gathered at the riverside, the entire area was properly lit with red lights from gas flaring points (78). Then he observed the deep-seated poverty in the area - the ferocious mosquitoes, the lack of potable water in the creeks, the fact that people in the area slept on rough raffia mats on the floor and the fact that the predominantly fishing men and women would lose sleep in their pre-dawn struggles to get fish from distant, yet-to-be polluted, waters (70- 71). And there is no indication in the novel that those unpolluted waters would not eventually get polluted. This type of conjecture interrogates what an unethical oil extraction practice holds for the future of host communities.

There were other representations of injustice to the environment. When Tonpre returned to Port Harcourt, he continued with his commitments to the Signet Brotherhood and attended meetings regularly. During one of those meetings, they noticed that the military had penetrated the Niger Delta creeks and was determined to apply full force without considering the well-being of the physical environment. The military helicopter hovered around the Nest, and the Signet

Brothers took position and feared for their lives. According to Tonpre:

The helicopter hovered overhead, moved away, returned, and finally flew off into the distance. Fifteen minutes later, the staccato sound of heavy shooting rang out. The men remained in their positions. After roughly ten minutes, the shooting ceased, and silence returned. (112)

He left the Nest and, on his way home, discovered that the shooting he heard earlier was targeted at unarmed civilians in suburbs around the Niger Delta creeks. He noticed a crying lone child standing on the shore and swam across to rescue her, but to his greatest chagrin, the military officers shot at him without considering the fate of the baby in his arms. As the bullets missed Tonpre, they decimated other life forms as he heard bullets rip into tree trunks around him (115). In an earlier episode of such an unprovoked shooting against innocent fishing folk, Edirin's wife, pregnant with child, was shot dead (118). Thus, this narration emphasised the common treatment which women and the environment shared in the Niger Delta oil-induced crisis. Tonpre almost choked with vexation when he noticed that some expatriate staff of ANC Oil and Energy Corporation engaged in the sadistic sport of shooting at canoes within the aquatic space and surrounding vegetation without considering the implications of their actions. He recounted the scenario as follows:

Suddenly the white men burst into roars of laughter. The wind carried the unruly sound clearly. The men on board one of the vessels began shaking hands with each other, delighted by whatever it was that was so funny. One of the white men raised the middle finger of his right hand and gestured towards the bushes. The other men laughed harder, some clapping the white man on his shoulder. Then they began taking turns to shoot at the beached canoes, yelping with laughter when any one of them missed their target. (117)

Agweh, here, presented the white man who suggested the sport of shooting at the fishermen's canoes as a depiction of the neo-colonialist disposition of some stakeholders in the Nigerian oil and gas industry who pursue profitability and self-gratification at the expense of human well-being and environmental sustainability.

The militants, on the other hand, ironically devastated the environment as they carried out their activities in response to perceived social and environmental injustices. During the kidnapping of some expatriates from Captain Akpan's vessel, the militants ensured that "bullets flew in all directions" as they responded to the defensive shots from the escorts on board the expatriates' vessels (137). The militants eventually blew up the vessel - MV Beauty - 103, causing great harm to the aquatic environment (147). When

reporters got to Omadi village - the scene of the kidnap - they observed that there were floating bits of debris, thick black fluid and other objects from the blown-up vessel (149). Ironically, the militants who claimed to be environmental activists turned out to be the agents of environmental devastation. Later, the Grenade Boys' Force took responsibility for blowing up pipelines at Obiri community (181). Furthermore, after the botched meeting with Governor Abby Marshall at Kaia Town Hall and the consequent violence, the militants reinforced their formations and launched a reprisal. The narrator recounted thus:

On the eighth day, at the crack of dawn, the drums ceased. At exactly the same time, an exploration site in Goka was overrun by unknown men. Every installation on the site was blown up, wrecked or looted. Arson took on a new meaning as rampaging young men devised techniques to burn both steel and human beings. The viciousness of the onslaught would leave the entire nation gasping in shock. (215).

After reviewing the encounters he had in Port Harcourt, Omadi waterside, Kuma junction, other Niger Delta creeks (including Spotless' kidnap den), Tonpre pondered on the scope of environmental devastation he had witnessed and summed them up, experientially, as follows:

Their rivers, streams, lagoons and seas were filled with toxic effluents. Their forests, farmlands and wildlife were almost irrevocably damaged by the pollution caused by oil spills and gas flaring from oil corporations who were represented by the men who had taken up shooting for sport. They could not breathe fresh air, could not live like people should because they were under siege. (119-120)

Tonpre's revelations summed up the victimisation of the environment by noting the roles played by perpetrators like the military, the militants, and the oil companies operating in the region, the community leaders and the government.

Agweli also portrayed women and children as twin victims of injustice with the environment. The poverty in the region affected women and children adversely. Children whose parents got up in the night to discuss the impact of effluent poisoning on their livelihood had no prospects for a bright future. Tonpre lamented the plight of his friends - Appiah, Fineboy and Becks - whose prospects for the future appeared indistinct (72), a strong trans-generational fear that saw Garrick adopting it as the title of his highly successful novel, *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*. This fear was mentioned in each of the novels selected for this study, showing that it is a real one. Beyond the effect of poverty on women and children, the novel portrayed the objectification and consequent ill-treatment of women in

graphic terms. In one instance, Tamuno-Omona's father could not be dissuaded by his wife's pleading when he attempted to punish his son. Instead, he brandished a whip and lashed at both mother and son; they both ran for their safety (73). The implication of denigrating his wife in the presence of their son is far-reaching. It stems from lopsided conceptualisations of females entrenched in patriarchal social systems in Niger Delta societies. The military officers were also complicit. During the reprisal after the violence at Kuma junction, CMT officers dispatched to Obiri waterside raped older women and young girls even though this category of natives may not have joined in the protest that preceded the crisis (91).

The most brazen of all depictions was the conscription of young girls to serve kidnap victims in what appeared to be modern-day slavery. Tonpre was shocked to discover that Princess and many other young and beautiful girls on the cosy Island had mortgaged their future to attend to the needs of kidnapped victims in the name of the Niger Delta struggle. According to Princess, "My father donated me to serve. Every girl you have seen here was donated by her family for the struggle for the emancipation of our Niger Delta. It has earned us respect in our villages" (164). Tonpre was taken aback when Princess explained that her services were limitless and she could gratify any desire he could imagine. The narrator captured Tonpre's thoughts as follows:

Tonpre weighed her emphasis on the word 'anything' and refused to let its true meaning sink in. Princess was so fresh, so innocent. What kind of struggle for freedom would enslave this young girl? He wondered. It had taken away her will, her future, and her control over her own body. Had the quest to free the Niger Delta derailed so completely? For the first time he was consumed with shame at the thought of being a freedom fighter. (165)

The first glaring factor in the presentation above is the fact that young females were objectified - seen as commodities owned by their families - and could be donated for a cause. The girls, thoroughly conditioned by their societies, accepted their ascribed status and deadened their will, their wants and their desires to fulfil the responsibility vested on them. The families of these girls, on the one hand, acted on the strength of lopsided notions about the female child as possessions that could be used to achieve certain goals. In contrast, the girls, on the other hand, yielded because they had accepted lopsided notions about their personalities, their values and the Niger Delta struggle for justice in its entirety. The presentation has thus revealed the desperation that has slipped into the Niger Delta's clamour for social and environmental justice such that individuals and groups could sell lies to and victimise the unwary to achieve selfish goals.

Generally, Agweh's *A Pelican of the Wilderness* has made graphic representations of women and children as twin victims of the environment in the Niger Delta context. The illustrations and depictions in the novel show that women are as vulnerable and abused as the other members of the biotic community in line with some of the basic tenets of ecofeminism.

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