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Emily Oghale God'spresence

University of Port Harcourt (Nigeria)

Oil for Pot, Oil Against Pot: Narratives on Oil Spillages and Women's Experiences in the Niger Delta Region, Nigeria

ABSTRACT. The incessant occurrences of oil spills, oil tank and barge explosions in the Niger Delta often result in environmental pollution that adversely affects farmlands, waterways and hamper economic activities in the region. In worse scenarios, these explosions sometimes result in losing human lives. This study examines the implications of oil spills on the environment and the lives of women and their families. It unveils the challenges women encounter from the oil-related activities, which were supposed to be the people's source of income generation and sustenance. To this end, related literature is reviewed, interviews conducted, and references are drawn from the ghastly Jesse experience and premiere of the Nollywood film, *Oloibiri* (Graham, C. 2016) to ascertain the root of agitations in the Niger Delta region. Ecofeminism constitutes the theoretical framework for this study. This study concludes that the people of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria, especially women, are victims of the natural resource (oil), which has gradually become a source of poverty and death. It recommends, amongst others, that the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) collaborates with the federal government in building cottage industries to provide employment for the youths and give grants to women to support their families.

KEYWORDS: oil spills, pollution, women, environment, exploration

Introduction

It is unarguably evident that the Niger Delta region, which constitutes the major source of income and revenue generation for the nation (Nigeria), suffers immensely from environmental hazards and disasters resulting from oil drilling, exploration and uncontrolled oil exploitations by multinational oil corporations operating in the region. Granted that the oil exploration in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has generated immense income and wealth for the nation, unfortunately, the region is ravaged by numerous unsavoury ecological/environmental challenges such as pollution

of farms and waterways, disasters of diverse forms, underdevelopment, unemployment, and by extension, poverty. To begin with, it is pertinent to mention the states that constitute the Niger Delta region. The States that make up the Niger Delta are nine in number, namely: Edo State, Delta State, Rivers State, Bayelsa State, Ondo State, Abia State, Akwa-Ibom State, Imo State, and Cross River State. In his M.A Seminar presented to the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, titled "The Emergence of Niger Delta Films in Nollywood: A Critical Analysis of Selected Works," Fyneface (2017) opined that although a lot has been written about the Niger Delta region due to ongoing oil exploration and exploitation, much attention has been on three States, viz Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa due to their volatile nature for being "one of the most endowed and richest in Nigeria in terms of natural resources, most especially, crude oil" (Fyneface, 2017, p. 2).

Suffice it to state that the oil, which is the natural endowment of the Niger Delta region, is expected to serve as a source of income generation that will eventually put food into the women's pot for the sustenance of the family. Unfortunately, it has become a source of starvation, sorrow and death. Reports on deaths and fire disasters as a direct impact of pipeline vandalism and explosions are common news today in the Niger Delta region, with the government paying lip service to the agitations and activism arising from the desire to ensure that the activities of the multinational oil companies and groups or individuals perpetrating these acts are curtailed.

The Niger Delta Region and Oil Exploration

History shows that oil exploration in the Niger Delta dates back to the 1950s in Oloibiri, a community located in today's Bayelsa State of Nigeria. It is believed that Shell Petroleum Company, owned by the British, started oil exploration in this area in 1956, and "its operations have become more and more detrimental to the progress of the region" resulting in a series of "oil spills, human rights violations, environmental destruction and corruption" (as cited in Fyneface, 2017, p. 3). According to Okaba (2004) "a total of approximately 2,300 m³ of oil is spilled in 300 separate incidents annually in the Niger Delta (2004, p. 126), additionally, "the oil multinationals have, over time, dumped their poisonous effluents directly into the sea, and also flare gas in very close proximity to community habitat" (2004, p. 119).

Government's neglect of the region to handle issues of pollution/oil spills and compensations from oil exploring companies to the communities where the oil is drilled resulted in the agitations for resource control, clean-ups of pollutants and contaminants from the lands and waterways. Thus, the rise in militant activities, youth restiveness and pipeline vandalization, and illegal oil refining by the youths are ways of remonstrating against perennial negligence of the region by successive governments. The plight of the regions is graphically enunciated in Judith Burdin Asuni's argument for the Niger Delta people:

The people of the Niger Delta do not feel that the government of Nigeria has a contract with them. The federal government virtually ignored the Niger Delta in the 1990s, leaving development in the hands of the oil companies. The oil industry exploited and polluted the area, wiping out the traditional livelihoods of fishing and farming and providing few jobs or benefits in return (as cited in Fyneface, 2017, p. 9).

The dilemma of this region, which provides the economic base of the nation whose proceeds are utilized by the federal government in the development of various sectors of society, including the provision of social amenities for non-oil producing regions of the nation, can be summarized in the local parlance of "monkey dey work, baboon dey chop¹." These minority groups do not benefit from the lopsided distribution of the resources shared from the dividends of natural resources they are endowed with. The realization that the region has been marginalized has resulted in the recurring decimal of youth restiveness and gangsterism as God'spresence (2010) argued that "incessant cases of robbery, cultism, militancy, kidnapping, pipeline vandalization, oil bunkering, rape, prostitution and other forms of violence perpetrated by members of youth gangs have posed a greater threat to public order and safety than at any time in the past ten years" (God'spresence, 2010, p. 82). This assertion indicates that the deplorable state of the indigenes of the Niger Delta is heightened each year and that everyone in the nation is susceptible to its aftermath.

¹ "Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop." Often spoken in Pidgin English to mean, the monkey labours only for the baboon to eat. A derogatory term used to illustrate slavery (a situation where the masses/citizens or workers labour for the lords/bourgeoisies or a select few who do the eating/embezzlement or enjoy the resources/dividends).

Amaechi (2017) noted that Nwagbara (2008) reviews Tanure Ojaide's 'The Activist' as a political statement on the state of the Niger Delta, which has been "made comatose by the conduct of multinationals and the Nigerian government" (as cited in Amaechi, 2017, p. 28). Unfortunately, the government's nonchalance towards ensuring that these core oil states receive adequate compensation and reward for their resources has gravitated to a state of disharmony and underdevelopment in the region. This is compounded by the government's unwillingness to review the federation account's sharing formula, which is often fraught with bribery and corruption. The government's efforts in instituting a Niger Delta Ministry with a Federal Minister in charge and a Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to take care of the region's enormous and amorphous hydra-headed economic, environmental, socio-political problems seem not to be doing the job. There is an increase in youths' agitations, activism, militancy, and proliferation of arms to demand the dividends of oil exploration in the region. As a result, more killings, pollution, and structural poverty have taken centre stage.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism (Ecological feminism) is a brand of feminism that relates the earth to a woman. It "examines the connections between women and nature." Its focus on the environment accentuates how women and the environment/nature are affected by a patriarchal society. Ecofeminism first emerged in 1974 from French feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne. However, ecofeminism emerged as a movement in the early 1970s and 1980 in the United States from a series of workshops and conferences by women professionals and academics to discuss ways to combine feminism and environmentalism "to promote respect for women and the natural world and were motivated by the notion that a long historical precedent of associating women with nature had led to the oppression of both" (Miles, 2018, p. 1). The metaphor of femininity is usually attributed to nature, the environment and the earth, such as: "earth-mother," "mother nature," and "mother earth."

The female gender is often plagued with inequality and subjugation by her male counterpart just as the earth is subjected to exploitation by man's/male's activities. This aligns with Thorpe's (2016) claim that "the environment is a feminist issue", thus accentuating the veracity of Miles assertions. In a work titled "What Exactly is Ecofeminism," Thorpe states that

the role of gender is important in resolving issues of environmental challenges and the status of natural resources, as well as in determining who the victims are and measures to chart a new path. Referring to The United Nations Environment Programme, Thorpe quotes: "around the world, environmental conditions impact the lives of women and men in different ways due to existing inequalities. Gender roles often create differences in how men and women act with the environment and how men and women are enabled or prevented from acting as agents of environmental change" (Thorpe, 2016, p. 1).

Thorpe however surmises that ecofeminism supports women with gender approach to issues of the environment and climate change, and that "ecofeminism relates environmental damage to women's exploitation and lack of empowerment." Thorpe makes reference to Professor Mary Mellor in the UK who concurs that "Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women... Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both" (Thorpe, 2016, p. 1).

The above arguments are valid and must be given maximum attention due to the similarities in the characteristics of vulnerability and resilience that women share with the environment. Since the male folk are responsible for the major environmental hazards ever experienced by humans, they should work collaboratively with the women folk—the most sufferers—to ensure that the environment, mother earth and all her inhabitants are preserved and sustained. However, it is imperative to understand that the agitations of ecofeminists are for the safety and sustainability of the environment and humanity, and not an antagonistic discourse against man's activities or just another gender discourse. It means taking a feminist stance on the safety of our environment and the earth for human existence. Little wonder that The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has recognized the following objectives as cardinal to issues of women and the environment:

1. Involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels.
2. Integrate gender concerns and perspectives in policies and programmes for sustainable development.
3. Strengthen or establish mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels to assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women.

Unfortunately, women are not yet fully integrated into the decision-making process regarding environmental matters. However, the achievements from the 5-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action show a very encouraging development indicating women's greater participation and involvement in the decision-making process regarding the environment. This is evident in Nigeria in the appointment of Professor Roseline Konya as the Commissioner for Environment in Rivers State during the former Governor Peter Odili's dispensation (1999–2007), and presently occupying the same office in Governor Nyesom Wike's Government (2015 till 2023).

However, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action's report has observed that women's engagement in the decision-making process regarding environmental issues is still fraught with some challenges, which include:

1. Low participation of women in environmental protection and management, and in the formulation, planning and execution of environmental policies.
2. Insufficient numbers and inadequate influence of women in responsible positions and a male monopoly in the management of environmental resources.
3. Under-representation of women in research and teaching in the natural sciences.
4. Lack of gender-sensitive environmental policies, programmes and research.
5. Absence of deliberate strategies to ensure women's participation in decision-making, including lack of funding and monitoring.
6. Low level of management and technical skills among women.
7. Women's limited access to resources, information, education and training (Womenwatch, 2005, p. 1).

Writings on the Niger Delta Subgenre

Literary and dramatic writings on the Niger Delta have continued to emphasize the environmental degradation and the implications on the dwellers and the nonchalance of government and the expatriate multinational companies involved in oil exploration and exploitation, and the region's pollution. In her novel, *Yellow-Yellow*, Agary (2006) tells the bizarre story of a community in the South-South region of the Niger Delta area.

Their farmlands and water-ways were submerged in crude oil, yet without compensation from the expatriate Company responsible for the spillage. The female character and heroine in the novel, Zilayefa, sees her mother return home with black oil all over her legs, requesting her bathing soap, sponge and towel. Zilayefa walks behind her mother towards the river to ascertain how the oil got to her mother. She heard people shouting, and she got amazed by what she saw. It was a group of helpless villagers whose farms have been submerged in oil. She speaks:

A group of people, painted in the same black as my mother, some covered from head to toe, was marching to see the Amananaowei, the head of the village. I joined them to find out what had happened. It turned out some of them had also lost their farmland that day. They were marching to the Amananaowei's house to report the matter and demand that he take it up with the oil company. Some were crying; others were talking about compensation (Agary, 2006, p. 3-4).

As it is common with such incidents in Nigeria without any concrete intervention from the Nigerian government and oil drilling companies, the community represented in Agary's (2006) *Yellow-Yellow* did not get any compensation despite the loss of their farmlands to oil spillages. The oil company refused to pay any compensation, blaming the spill on youths who have been accused of vandalizing the pipelines. These scenarios are common in the Niger Delta area; government and oil companies put the blame on the community dwellers, and the hapless cycle goes on endlessly. For example, the Ogoni community in Rivers State, whose waterways have been polluted with oil spills, affecting their crops and denying them access to good drinking water, was marked for clean up several years ago. However, up till 2021, not much has been done. Speaking of his concerns over the government's nonchalance towards the clean-up exercise in Ogoni land, Nyesom Wike, the Governor of Rivers State, decries the poor handling of the process as the clean-up has become a political tool for the government to woo the people for support in elections. In an online report by Reed (2021), Nyesom Wike blames the Nigerian government for neglect stating that "when election comes in 2023, they will start another clean up. You people don't even ask question. Why is it a year to election that Ogoni clean-up will always commence? Now that there is no election are they doing clean-up now? Watch from next year they will start clean-up" (p. 1).

Raising their voices on their concerns over a people living in a polluted environment in the wake of Covid-19, some experts have queried

the delay in the Ogoni clean-up exercise. In this online report by Cornelius Essen from the *Guardian Newspaper*, experts who participated in a virtual conference organized by Kebetkache Women Development and Resources Centre in collaboration with Catholic Organization for Relief and Development Aid (CORDAID) regretted the delay in the clean-up exercise, which was said to have started five years ago. They expressed its relatedness to Covid-19 and its dangers to health because “hand washing is now done with contaminated water, which is a serious setback in an attempt to contain the novel corona virus, especially in the oil-polluted Ogoniland and South-South geopolitical zone” (Essen, 2020, p. 1). The virtual conference was organized with the aim of reviewing the implementation process of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report regarding the Ogoni clean-up.

In her reviews of Isidore Okpewho's *Tides*, and Anthony Abagha's 'Children of Oloibiri,' Amaechi (2017) cited corruption of government, oil companies, and chieftains as well as other key players in the communities as cardinal factors in the continued environmental pollution in the Niger Delta. In this her PhD Seminar presented to the Faculty of Humanities, the University of Port Harcourt titled “Land Use and Environmental Justice in Selected Works of Nigerian and Kenyan Authors,” Amaechi (2017), however enriched her arguments with Ugwu's work which focused on the “Ecological Degradation in Selected Niger Delta Novels.” To Amaechi's (2017) observation, Ugwu's work “x-rays greed, negligence and subversive activities by human beings, which have led to a total privation of a natural environment—the Niger Delta environment—a microcosm of the larger global environment” (Amaechi, 2017, pp. 30–31). According to her, Ugwu's appraisal of *Tides* and *Oil on Water* indicates the problems of “despoliation of the environment, poverty, disease, illiteracy, corruption, militancy or violence, attributing it to one problem—fossil energy exploitation” (Amaechi, 2017, p. 31). These observations succinctly paint a picture of a region whose inhabitants suffer abject poverty and deprivation resulting from the exploitation of their natural resources to their own disadvantage. Similarly, a plethora of films (documentaries and feature films) have been produced in Nollywood to project the agitations, activism and plight of the oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta and to accentuate the reasons for youth restiveness and militancy with the hope of getting compensation from the government and the oil companies.

These devastating challenges have birthed the Niger Delta film genre, this sub-genre categorized under the Narrative Film Genre is aimed at

telling the stories, agitations, activism and plight of the Niger Delta people. Fyneface (2017, p. 23) noted that "the filmmaker through his panoramic camera angle often portrays the nauseating but nostalgic creeks through camera movements and their costumes in order to attract the viewer's attention."

Gender and Environmental Hazards

We all know that man's quest for wealth and desire to control and explore nature has brought about diverse unhealthy challenges to mother-earth. This desire has resulted in environmental pollution, green-house effects and depletion of the ozone layer, and other ecological manifestations that are detrimental to human health and safety. To start with, the "environment entails our surroundings, where we live, and the space within which we move and exist on earth. These include the air space, the land and the water ways" (God'spresence, 2014, p. 79).

Ahunanya (2017), in his unpublished M.A. seminar submitted to the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Port Harcourt titled 'Theatre and Environmental Health Advocacy: An Experimental TFD Performance of "TuturuYaTufuo" in Aba City,' observed that the Black's Law Dictionary defines Environment as "the totality of the physical, economic, cultural, aesthetic and social circumstances and factors which surround the desirability and value of property and which also affect the quality of people's life" (p. 3). It is no gainsaying that sustaining the Environment is tantamount to humans' continuous existence upon the earth's surface. The activism and restiveness among the Niger Delta youths, pipeline vandalism and explosions, illegal oil-refining and bunkering in the region are absolutely male-oriented activities. In all, the male haunts the environment that sustains him. God'spresence laments the negative effects of environmental disasters on women who are the victims of male actions which "have adversely affected women and their children" (God'spresence, 2014, p. 82).

In the middle of all these, the woman suffers untold hardship as she strives to sustain her household from the mess of males' activities and weeps for the death of her loved ones from environmental disasters. The monumental and monstrous activities of man upon the environment are fast degrading and depleting mother-earth. Soon, she would have been subjugated and the entire world would have been destroyed thus:

So, if the earth is associated with the attributes of a woman, as mother-earth, or earth-mother, it is logical because man was created from the dust of the earth. This ought to create in man the desire to cater for the earth as he would do for his mother; but unfortunately his activities and practices for economic gains from oil exploration and exploitation with consequent gas flaring and deforestation, etc have adversely affected the health of mother-earth and the entire cosmos... (God'spresence, 2014, p. 81).

God'spresence observed that man was created from the dust of the earth and therefore should cater for his source of origin for sustenance because his negligence has resulted in "earthquakes, water and air pollutions, global warming, environmental degradation, depletion of the Ozone layer, and many more" (God'spresence, 2014, pp. 81–82). Again, in *Yellow-Yellow*, we can perceive the plight of the Niger Delta woman and her community people through Zilayefa, who narrates her ordeal after her mother's farm was submerged in crude oil:

I left them and ran to my mother's farm. It was the first time I saw what crude oil looked like. I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path. It just kept spreading and I wondered if it would stop, when it would stop, how far it would spread. Then there was the smell. I can't describe it but it was strong—so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach (Agary, 2006, p. 4).

The fatal experience of Zilayefa's mother and other community dwellers who lose their farmlands to oil spillages explicates the traumatic experience of the Niger Delta people today especially women, who have lost their source of income, food and livelihood to similar situations.

The Jesse Narrative

Jesse is situated in Ethiope West Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. It is the main town within the Idjerhe Clan, which comprises 32 communities. A disaster occurred on Saturday, 17th October 1998, when a "16-inch petrol pipeline linking the Warri refinery to Kaduna" exploded, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of villagers "and critically injuring hundreds more in the ensuing inferno" (as cited in God'spresence, 2014, pp. 82–83). Jesse was the most affected community. This report by the Environmental Rights Action team (Friends of the Earth, Nigeria) observed

that “majority of the victims were women and children” and that some were scooping the leaking petroleum product while others were watching, and some others were on their farms or fishing while others were returning from the Ethiopia River from fetching water (as cited in God’spresence, 2014, p. 83).

The Jesse narrative paints a scenario of poverty, struggle for survival, death and resilience on the part of the community dwellers, on the one hand, and neglect with oppression by the government and oil companies, on the other hand. The Jesse narrative is one that should be told with nostalgia to demonstrate the level of victimization of a people whose source of income and resources meant to enrich their cooking pot has become a death portion. In 1998, the Jesse community in Delta State was engulfed in an inferno that burnt down their dreams of being enlisted as beneficiaries of the oil dividends accruing to oil host communities. Women’s and mothers’ cries swam through the waterways, and echoes of mourning hovered over the sky to ascend the flames that dissipated the lives of their children, sisters, husbands and loved ones who were caught in the inferno that was orchestrated by oil leakages in their community. This scenario paints a picture of what could be referred to as oil for pot and oil against pot. This implies that the oil, which is supposed to bring wealth to the people of the Niger Delta, has birthed various degrees of sorrow ranging from spillages to pollution, explosions, and death.

This theatre of the struggle for survival which brought all the actors together on stage at a site where oil flowed down their streams, waterways and farmlands was meant to pass on a message of poverty in the region to the government. Unfortunately, their ‘script’ and ‘acts’ could only be delivered in unison with wailing voices from mothers whose sorrows may never end till they see the grave. These narratives are common in the South-South of the Niger Delta region, as evident in an online report for the *Punch Newspaper* on July 13, 2012, where a fallen petrol tanker resulting from an accident, exploded and killed over 200 persons and burnt down thirty-four motorcycles in Okogbe community in Rivers State. As usual to its stereotype, women and children constituted a greater part of the “crowd that gathered to scoop fuel at the spot of the fallen fuel-laden tanker on the East-West Road” (Akasike & Odiegwu, 2012, p. 1). It is obvious that women and children are the vulnerable ones who suffer from the greed and recklessness of man’s activities. These women and children, whose aim was to make some financial gains out of the situation to have food in the cooking pot and their belly, died a horrifying death of hunger and penury.

Women's Narratives of Oil Exploration in Oloibiri

In a bid to have first-hand information on the impact of oil spills on the environment, women and family, I embarked on a trip to the popular Oloibiri Community in Bayelsa State where the first oil well was discovered in commercial quantity. My interactions with the women on 15th May, 2018 were quite revealing. They cleared the misconception about the actual location of the first oil well in the Niger Delta. According to them, the first oil well was discovered in Otuabagi, one of the six (6) communities under Oloibiri Clan. Otuabagi has 16 oil wells and, according to Sunday Eli, an elderly woman in her 70s fondly referred to as Mama (meaning Mother), her family has 6 oil wells out of the 16. According to her, the first oil well that was discovered in Otuabagi, Oloibiri in 1956 belongs to her family; ironically, theirs is one of the poorest families in Otuabagi. Owing to the level of poverty in the community, majority of the women are farmers. As Idumoma Otolu (in her 40s) noted, they plant cassava, banana and plantain to generate income for the family.

However, the need to earn more money pushes every woman into the bush, searching for *Ogbono*² (*Irvingia Gabonensis*), which falls once every year between May and July. Nabai (in her 30s) reaffirms the imperative of the *Ogbono* season as a quick money-making venture for every woman in the community to earn a living. She noted that the season, (as I rightly observed), is highly competitive whereas, a set goes into the bushes in search of *Ogbono*, some others are at Mbiama market (a neighbouring market) engaging in buying and selling. Nabai's major occupation for the past 11 years has been to buy fresh fish, clean them up, prepare and smoke/dry them for sale. She is a single mother of three (7 years, 5¹/₂ years, and 3 years) who claims her husband deserted the marriage, thereby making her the sole breadwinner of her family. She hopes that the rich people and the elite, especially those in Oloibiri community who benefit from the dividends of oil exploitation, would patronize her business to enable her cater for her young family. She believes her children will someday grow up and help fight for their rights.

Nabai clarifies the facts by stating that the Otuabagi community is in conflict with Oloibiri, which has usurped the credit as being the first and

² *Ogbono* (*Irvingia Gabonensis*) is luscious edible mango-like fruit, which also has flat-shaped seeds which are used in preparing glutinous soup; *Ogbono* is also called 'African bush mango' or 'wild mango.'

historic site of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region. She argued that Otuabagi where the first oil well was discovered in commercial quantity was not captured in the sharing of resources and dividends accruing to such communities; rather, all dividends and benefits were channelled to Oloibiri, since Otuabagi is just one of the six communities under Oloibiri Clan. This 'misappropriation' of rights has resulted in the misunderstanding and contention which exist between Otuabagi and Oloibiri communities. As a woman and indigene of an oil-producing community whose expectations and prospects are sacrificed at the whims of corrupt and selfish community leadership, Nabai saw no reason to waste her time in participating in the December 2017 celebration to commemorate the historic site of oil exploration at Oloibiri. Having established that the women of the community have no derivations from resource control, Nabai decried the inability of the women to access loans from the government and other organizations or agencies. According to her, they are tired of filling out different forms with promises of financial assistance from Government, Co-operatives and other organizations. However, the impact of oil spills on their farmlands and water ways was huge as it affected the aquatic lives and farm produces. In reaction to the devastation caused by oil spills on the environment (farmlands and aquatic lives), Nabai expresses some relief as oil spills have been put under control and now aquatic life is getting restored, their farm produces are improving, and now she could continue with her fish business as she hopes for her children to grow up someday to be rich because if they have money, she will enjoy.

Idumoma, on her part, laments over the negative impact of oil spills on the soil, resulting in the poor harvest of cocoyam and other crops and the impact of oil spills on waterways, especially on their fishing occupation. According to her, they now purchase sachet water, commonly referred to as "pure water," to drink and make use of rainwater, which is often not clean.

On the subject of education, Paulina Adias (59), Nkechi Ibosri (34), and 'Mama' in the company of Idumoma decry their inability to afford a good education for their children and employment for their sons who are graduates despite their membership of an oil-rich community. They accentuated their lack of access to resources shared by the government to oil-producing communities, in contrast with other communities that are beneficiaries. So, they resort to farming as their major source of livelihood and income. The financial challenges of the women of the Niger Delta deprive them of the opportunity to make a positive impact in their various

communities, just as Nutsukpo (2018) observed poverty to be the bane of women's contribution to development and wonders if these women are empowered in any way:

The question is, are women, who constitute a large percentage of the population of the region, key actors in the developmental process and, if so, what impact are they making? Poverty, evidently, has a stronger impact on women and places several difficult obstacles in the path of their progress and their impact on society. How, then, are women being empowered to make a change in the Niger Delta? (Nutsukpo, 2018, p. 2).

Nutsukpo's concern for the impact women of this region could make on its development draws on the fact that the oil which was supposed to yield for them the dividends of oil exploration and exploitation has become a threat to their lives. This becomes more worrisome when their husbands are out of work or dead. These women inadvertently become breadwinners just as the women noted that the majority of them are breadwinners for their families. Idumoma regrettably bemoaned the plight of Otuabagi women noting that if a woman from Otuabagi community is killed as a result of the ongoing communal clash between them and Nembe—a neighbouring community perceived to be 'cannibalistic,' it will be a tough task for them (the killers). She says: "if they killed these community women, the killers would not eat their backs because their backs will be bitter due to bending down under the scorching sun to do farm work. The crude oil is there on their backs instead of blood. The sun has beaten and toughened their backs because of farming." She emphasized that their women go to the farm and work all day only to chew raw *garri*³ and drink pure water (sachet water) as a meal.

These women have laboured from childhood, which, as 'Mama' noted, her mother left for her a legacy of farming represented by a cutlass which she bequeathed to her for farm work. She queries in pidgin English, "if I no go school, I no go anywhere, no be bush I go go?"⁴ She emphasized:

³ *Garri* is dry granulated cassava flour. It is obtained by processing the harvested cassava tuber. It is a common food in Nigeria, especially in the Southern part of the country.

⁴ "If I no go school, I no go anywhere, no be bush I go go?" A rhetorical question posed by Mama (Sunday Eli) asking if she didn't go to school or anywhere, the only place left would be the bush (implying to go farming).

"As my Mama born me, Mama go give me knife, na knife I dey hold."⁵ They have engaged in this occupation from their youth, and now they are tired of working and weeding on the farm, so they resort to applying chemicals to their farmlands to clear the grass and weeds. This, of course, may cause some harm to the crops, which may eventually die; also, it could pose some health problems or be harmful to these women and their family members when they consume produce from the farms. Though they are aware of the implications on health, they are nonetheless helpless.

Applying chemicals to their farmlands as a result of conserving little energy for themselves from working laboriously on the farm is another way of compounding the problems already caused by oil spills. Ecofeminism focuses on this concern for mother-earth to be preserved for humanity therefore it is imperative for the government to understand the impact of environmental degradation and pollution on the water ways and soil (farmlands) as cardinal to human existence since these will eventually affect the lives of the dwellers in an oil polluted and devastated environment.

This pitiable condition of oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta who have suffered immensely from oil spillages resulting from oil drillings, pipeline vandalism and loss of lives from tanker explosions informs my coinage of the phrase "oil for pot, oil against pot." This coinage graphically explicates the plight of the peoples, most especially women, who often interact with the environment: farmland to plant their crops, the rivers and water ways where they fetch water and engage in their fishing occupation and other businesses.

The phrase "oil for pot" implies that this oil-producing community is supposed to be buoyant with abundance to eat, but "oil against pot" typifies abject poverty where the soil and water ways are polluted as a result of oil exploration, which has brought the oil that was supposed to be hidden beneath the soil and protected by the earth to the earth surface, and the women are struggling to keep up their families in an unfavourable environment, where the natural resources (land, water, air) that should have empowered them economically are degraded with oil spills. In sum, Idumoma's experience summarizes the Otuabagi women's narratives that they feed their husbands, and their husband's retirement benefits

⁵ "As my Mama born me, mama go give me knife, na knife I dey hold" said by Mama (Sunday Eli). This means that she was born into farming as her inheritance from her mother. So, she holds onto the knife (cutlass), a major farming implement to symbolize farming as an occupation.

are used for their children's school fees and the rest goes to the hiring of labour for their farms, and at the end they are left with nothing.

Premiere of *Oloibiri* (Graham, C. 2016)

This 1 hour 50 minutes action thriller film on revenge and regret tells the story of the suffering of the Niger Delta people. It shows the exploitation of oil companies and government agencies on the Oloibiri community at the discovery of oil in Nigeria since 1956. The film tells the tragic story of Oloibiri people through four characters: Boma, alias Gunpowder (Richard Mofe Damijo), Elder Timipre (Olu Jacobs), Chisom (Ivie Okujaye), and Powell (William R. Moses). Gunpowder is a Geology graduate who refuses an offer to work with an oil company with the notion that they were responsible for the oil exploration that has crippled his community, Oloibiri. He resorts to militancy instead. Elder Timipre lost his wife as a young village man to water pollution and travels abroad under a scholarship, who now returns to execute his agenda.

Chisom is a medical doctor who treats her patient, Elder Timipre, at his home. On one of such occasions, she runs into Powell on her way back from attending to Timipre. Powell has just escaped from a bloody kidnap attempt upon his working visit to Oloibiri after his company, Foreshore, receives a license to drill oil from the community. The bid to secure Oloibiri brings about bloodbath and death in Oloibiri.

The film tells us that over 2,100 oil spills have occurred. The option of militancy and taking up of arms for self-defence and as a gesture of protest against the federal government of Nigeria and the multinational oil companies succinctly demonstrates the resilience of the community dwellers in the face of death. The blood bath, the oil spills as seen at the end where a character gradually falls down to his death in a slow motion while black petroleum pours down his face, typifies the wastage of lives; as well as natural resource (oil) whose revenue was supposed to bring food into their pot, not death. The film is an embodiment of the sufferings, killings, agitations, and militancy for the control of the natural resources of Oloibiri. Mama's (Taiwo Ajayi-Lycett) displeasure over her son's (Gunpowder) militant activities and self-indulgence demonstrates the fears of mothers for their sons who take up the fight against the insensitive government. This is revealed in Mama's speech as she queries her son about his sudden change in behaviour and lifestyle. She tearfully asks him:

My son, who made first class in Geology and secured a good job, what happened to him?

Gunpowder (in tears, replies): He died, Mama.

His spiritual death (death of his conscience) is predicated upon a resolve to lay down his life and sacrifice his academic certificate and job to reclaim his people's human rights. Standing as the agent of social change, and the liberator of his community, Gunpowder and his gang wage war against the Government and the Oil Company.

The plight of mothers and their families is grave as they observe the dramatic turn around and attitude of their children who do not see a prosperous future coming for them. The fear of mothers losing their children to government armed forces is daily present in their hearts; this is evident in Mama's soliloquy on Gunpowder's change of attitude and militant behaviour: "where did I pick that child from, hmm? He says he fights because the elders failed Oloibiri." The enormity of the impact on mothers, which is beyond imagination, is highlighted by Taiwo Ajayi-Lycette in an interview at the screening of the film when she said: "we are not talking about what happens to women whose sons are lost in all this carnage." She continues:

You can imagine how terrible it is here in our culture where women, especially older women depend on their children to look after them. Which woman, which parent looks to bury their own children? Never! It is a major tragedy. And maybe when we do make *Oloibiriii*, they will major on the devastation happening to women who are mothers of these people that they are killing, as we are having right now with the Avengers and everything. Some boys are dying, they have mothers. What happens to them? And most of these mothers, they are not professionals; they are not people who are rich and can look after themselves. When their sons are killed, are slaughtered, what happens to these women? So, we are creating a situation where many women's hearts are being broken (YouTube).

It should be understood that women are at the receiving end of all these fights between government forces and the agitators in the Niger Delta. The fight for resource control has gradually turned out to be a fight against women.

Conclusion

This work so far focused on crude oil which was supposed to bring economic and domestic gains to enhance the general well-being of the Nigerian people living in the Niger Delta region now turning out to become

a curse. Women and their children especially are implicated as the ones holding the burning end of the stick. The oil that was meant to lubricate the pot is the same oil that has caused seemingly perennial dryness to the pot. This study makes reference to the Jesse crisis, pinpointing oil spillages and explosions as having far reaching negative impact on the Niger Delta populace, especially women. It emphasized that the natural resource (oil) which ought to yield dividends to the people from its proceeds, has gradually become a source of poverty and death.

This study depicted the multinational expatriate oil corporations responsible for the numerous oil introspection, oil exploration and oil exploitations with massive environmental degradation going on in the entire region's ecosystem as doing nothing to help the impoverished Niger Delta dwellers. Reference was made to kinds of literature, and the premiere of *Oloibiri* film on the Niger Delta, which tells the bizarre stories of the agonizing experiences of a people who have a great natural endowment but are, nonetheless, poor.

This study also brought the bizarre Jesse experience to juxtapose with Otuabagi women's narratives on oil exploration and spillages in Oloibiri Clan to paint a vivid image on the plight of women in oil-producing communities; and to relate their plight, especially mothers who lose their family members, loved ones, and are sometimes victims themselves.

Ecofeminism was used as a theoretical guide for this study to pinpoint the feminist stance on man's unhealthy and unchecked exploitation of the ecosystem.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this research, the following have been recommended:

- The federal government of Nigeria, through the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) should build cottage industries and provide jobs for the teeming population of youths in the Niger Delta region.
- Grants from the federal government should be provided to households especially those women whose waterways, farmlands and businesses have been polluted through oil spillages.
- Committees should be set up at the community level to ensure that dividends given by the oil drilling companies to the various commu-

nities are shared to members rather than being hijacked by community leaders.

- The contract to clean up polluted waterways should be monitored by private organizations with expertise to avert any form of corrupt practices or embezzlement.

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Appendix

Date of interview: May 15, 2018

Names and ages of women interviewed at Oloibiri Community, Bayelsa State, Nigeria:

1. Mama (Sunday Eli): in her 70s
2. Idumoma Otolo: in her 40s
3. Nkechi Ibosri: 34 years
4. Paulina Adias: 59 years

Below are pictures taken from the interviews at Otuabagi



Nabai drying her fishes



Otuabagi women in plantain business



One of the Otuabagi women using local method to break open *Ogbono*



Mama (Sunday Eli) drying her *Ogbono* in the sun



In the picture is the Researcher in wine/white stripe skirt and blouse seated next to Ms Emem Okon, the Founder and Executive Director at Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre, with some of her staff, and some Otuabagi women interviewed for this study



Otuabagi women and staff of Kebetkache Women Development and Resources Centre at the first oil well in Otuabagi, Oloibiri



Signpost of the first oil well drilled in commercial quantity in Nigeria (June, 1956); the oil well is at Otuabagi, Oloibiri in the present Bayelsa State of Nigeria