Utopia of The Past: Barine Ngage's *Song of Dawn and the* Ogoni Environmental Question

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Abstract

The emergent Niger Delta literature is not a mere representation and description of a common experience. It is, in the main, the transmission of a geo-political awareness of a people (The Niger Delta people) into an aesthetic form. The prefatory exploration of Niger Delta literature and the ideology inherent in its representation of social equations is significant for two reasons. First, it helps us to situate Barine Saana Ngaaga's *Song of Dawn* in a particular geo-political space; second, it provokes the need to examine his commitment and how this commitment is discursively presented as signs of his involvement in the Niger Delta story. Utopian Literature exposes man's ontological discontent with his lot in life and his longing for things as they might or ought to be. It therefore serves as a suture on contemporary human life and society in that it exposes the inadequacy of human existence and the social dislocation of the human society. Thus, Utopia provides a door for escape for reconstruction and to look back into the glorious past that is now lost as well as imagining a perfect future devoid of the evils and deprivations of the present.

Key words: Utopia, Ontological, Niger Delta, Geo-political, Ideology

Introduction

Onyemaechi Udumukwu, writing on the commitment of the African novelist on anti-colonial consciousness, states unequivocally thus: "For the novelist, on the other hand, to write the novel as an African is not a mere passive fact. It means becoming sensitive that one belongs to a specific social group with a specific history. In addition, it means a willingness to place one's art in the definition of this relationship and involvement with the world" (37). For the Niger Delta writers, indeed Nigerian writers with a passionate sympathy for the Niger Delta environmental question, a sensibility to the age-long ecological trauma that has bedeviled the region since 1956 when oil was discovered in Oloibiri, remains not a mere passive fact. The emergent Niger Delta literature is thus an expression of a sense of belonging to not just a specific social group with a specific history

but, an expression of the homology between man and his environment. Therefore, Niger Delta literature amounts, to borrow Udumukwu's words, to a willingness to place the Niger Delta story in the definition or the re-telling of the relationship and involvement of the Niger Delta writers with their traumatized and degraded environment and world.
To use Udumukwu's expression, it is an elaboration of basic geographical distraction and a whole series of interest; an expression of a certain intention and a conviction to understand and control a different world. More so, it is a discourse that is shaped by a discursive and peculiar power and identity (Udumukwu, 38). Thus, the ideology that underwrites the Niger Delta literature is the homology between man and nature (the environment to be specific) and how this converse relationship is artistically reproduced, indeed represented.

Barine Saana Ngaage hails from Baranyonwa Dere (B. Dere) in Gokana Local Government Area of Ogoni in Rivers State. As an Ogoni man, the trajectory of Ogoni history and development is one that is present in Ngaage's writings. From *the Earth Listen* (1995), *Song of Dawn* (2010) to *Democracy of Fenced Walls* (2011), etcetera, Ngaage demonstrates unwavering commitment to righting the wrongs of environmental racism, the exclusion of the minority from national consciousness, the slow violence in Ogoni and other Niger Delta communities and the post-colonial politics of exclusion, social and political dislocation and corruption, et cetera. Ngaage's mission, like Ken Saro-Wiwa's, has remained to give voice to a silenced, marginalized minority.

It would seem that, in broad term, Ngaage's belongingness to the Ogoni community in the Niger Delta, a peculiar ethnic group with a specific environmental and political history, inspires his willingness to place his art in the definition of the homology between man and the environment. Thus, Ngaage's arts serve as the site wherein there converge and, are recorded, the cultural construct and concrete and historical configurations of power prevalent in Ogoni and the Niger Delta in a given historical era.

It seems crucial, at this point, to underscore that we have demonstrated how writing the Niger Delta story entails a sensitivity that one belongs to a particular social group and how that sense of belongingness provokes a willingness to place one's art in the definition and involvement with the world of the Niger Delta. Still, it is inadequate to engage in discussing the involvement of a writer with a particular world without showing how this belongingness and involvement are discursively presented. One way Ngaage achieves this is by recreating the past through the medium of what Charles Nnolim has called Utopia of the past (66).

The term Utopia designates the genre that enacts an ideal, perfect and glorious world; an Arcadian dream world that is non-existent. According to M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, Utopia is "the class of fictional writings that represents an ideal, nonexistent political and social way of life" (378). Utopia is coined from two Greek words *outopia* (no place) and *eutopia* (good place) meaning "the good place in no place". For Nnolim, utopian literature is written as both a revolt against precarious human condition and as a search for a heaven on earth (64). Nnolim enunciates that utopia of escape "presents a dream projection of a perfect and perfected world, no matter how remote from realization" (65). This suggests that beneath this dream projection, man is set in a precarious and harrowing condition which provides such longing. Such projection serves therefore as a relief, however short-lived, from the harsh realities which traumatize man. It is a mental adventure into the unrealistic world of dream; a psychiatry on the burdened heart of man that takes him from the concrete space of pain into a therapeutic world of lovely fantasies. Utopia of reconstruction, on the other hand denotes "attempts to provide a plan and a programme of living for a better society on earth" (Nnolim, 65). For this and the former, utopia in the main, is the manifestation of man's perennial need to transcend his present predicament.

To return to Nnolim again, the Bible, a utopian literature *par excellence*, depicts for mankind the two most powerfully recognized types of utopian literature; utopia of the past and utopia of the future (66). In the Bible, the past designates Eden, the good old place and the future is the envisioned kingdom under God, which awaits the righteous at the end of time. Borrowing from the notion of past and future utopia, Nnolim berates African literature for its inability to create a utopia of the future. He traces the cause of this to the Negritudinal attitude of reveling in the past:

> In [African] traditional religions there is no prophetism and no future paradise. For time… recedes rather than progresses and the Golden Age – that era of the black man's greatness – the era of Timbuctoo and Benin, the era of the Yoruba and the Zulu of Shango and Chaka, lies in the Zamani period. The Sasa is an ever-constant construction of the past and not of the future. Utopia exists in the past (64).

Although African colonial experiences have had a negative toll on our psyche, Nnolim urges African writers to move beyond the purview of cultural nationalism as this fixation only makes us retrogressive rather than progressive.

Demonstrating how African's fixation on the past limits her chances for development and progress, Nnolim writes:

> The basic difference between the Western and African concepts of Utopia as reflected in their literature [is]…that a forward-looking future-oriented people first reflect this orientation in their utopian literature while a backward-looking conception of utopian literature depicts the world-view of a people who either love to revel in a glorious past or are satisfied with the present. Europe and the West, it will be argued, represent the former while Africa and Africans in the diaspora represent the latter (67).

But while Nnolim sees African utopia in the above light, Wilfred Cartey, in contrast, notes that to return symbolically to the source is to create a link between African and the things long lost, to create a remembrance, a rebirth to the beginning of things (217). Thus African utopia and the quest of African in diasporia for a "Black Arcadia" as expressed in the Harlem Renaissance, Afro-Cubanism, Indigenism, Garvey's Return to Africa and the Rastafarian Movement, all follow the same trend, a *retour aux sources*, that is, a return to the source which is Africa, their lost paradise.

With the foregoing in mind, the study intends to examine Ngaages's return to the source and the ideology implicated in it from an ecocritical point of view. It will further highlight how the nostalgic return to unspoiled nature exposes the devastation wrought on the Niger Delta environment by industrial activities in the area and how Ngaage's construction of the homology between man and nature deconstructs the anthropocentric barriers (man/nature) which represent nature (the environment) as the *other* of man

Theoretical Background

The underlining theoretical orientation on which Ngaaga engages issues about the environment is postcolonial. Postcolonialism focuses on the ways in which the social and economic life of a people is tacitly underwritten by colonial exploitation. While the "post" in post colonialism explicitly points to the period after colonialism, it implicitly entails another pre-position to a time past. The prefix, "post," is predicated on "time" and bears significance on the basis of a "past" and a "present", even a "future." In this regard, "post" is not fixated on the "afterness" of a particular period in so far as there a relationship between the "beforeness" of that period and its "afterness." Thus "postcolonialism" re-inscribes a given historical moment within which life and experiences, whether social or political, are constituted as the variables of a specific totality which is categorized on the basis of a colonial past. Within this totality, the relationship between individuals,

bourgeois and peasants, is legitimized on the basis of inherited colonial cultures and ideologies. This relationship is one of power and ideology.

Power and ideology, as used here, are encapsulated in what Edward said, in *Orientalism*, calls "cultural imperialism," (qtd. In Abrams and Harpham, 277). Abrams and Harpham see cultural imperialism as the:

> Mode of imperialism imposed…. not by force, but by the effective means of disseminating in subjugated colonies a Eurocentric discourse that assumed the normality and pre-eminence of everything 'occidental,' correlatively with its representations of the 'oriental' as an exotic and inferior other (277).

One of those "not-by-force" cultural transfers of everything occidental is the legitimization of obnoxious laws which normalizes the criminal and forceful expropriation of lands from the colonized people. The historical colonial approach to land crystallizes in the symbolic demarcation of the imperialist subject from the colonial subject through spatial designs of location. This is aptly captured in Niyi Osumdare's poem, "Ajegunle."

While the urbanization system in Nigeria is geographically Western, the 1973 Land Use Act is a recrudescence of several Western laws which severe the colonized people from their land. Thus, the legitimization of the ownership by the Federal Government of all lands and resources there-on through this Act creates a radical disjuncture between people and land and violates the tenets of true federalism in so for as it vests total power in the centre. James Tsaaior corroborates this line of arguments:

> This vulgarization of federalism through an absolutist and totalizing construction of state structures of power and hegemony is consistent with colonial and imperial arrangements, which Nigeria, as constituted at present, typifies. To accomplish the imposition of hegemony, the hegemons - in this case, Nigerian political Oligarchs - appropriate the dictatorship of the ordinary citizens through the truncation of their fundamental rights to democracy, constitutional freedoms, power of free expression, and so forth, and institute their dictatorship (178).

While we are not focused on the nature and tenets of Nigerian federal structure, the ideology on which it functions legitimizes the concentration of power at the centre and the relegation of the federating units. This form of unilateral power structure is

institutionalized so that it is carried onto areas of spatial relations, which provides spaces such as the GRAs for the bourgeoisie and shanties for the commoners.

What promotes and sustains this discriminatory arrangement is the institutionalization of a capitalist ideology that promotes in-group inclusion and out-group exclusion. Note that Louise Althusser has defined ideology as "A representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). This condition of existence, in postcolonial setting, is reified by class consciousness which is maintained through what Althusser calls ideological state apparatuses (135). Such apparatuses, Tsaaior notes, translate through key structural societal formations and institutions such as the "family, the media, religious organizations, the law enforcement agencies, the military and most importantly, the education system…." (178). Thus, human relation to the environment is ideologically underwritten by the Cartesian notion of anthropocentrism which crystallizes in Rene Descartes' enunciation of the self: *cogito ego sum* (I think therefore, I am). Thus, postcolonial ecocriticism is underscored by the Western philosophy of anthropocentrism which valorizes the nobility and dignity of man.

This humanistic belief in the dignity and nobility of man has resulted in tropical warmth, chronic drought, desertification, deforestation, acidifying of oceans, frequent coastal inundation, tsunami, cyclones; not excluding, increasing food and shelter shortage, accidents at nuclear power stations. The cause of this can be captured in Aldo Leopold's assertion: "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us" (qtd. In David Harvey, 120). It is true that man abuses land because of his materialist quest to define himself on the basis of monetary calculus.

We feed on chemical-applied vegetables, industrial pollution and many more lethal activities. The environment affects and even largely determines all things ranging from food, fashion, technology, race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, law, religion, economics, hence the more reason we should strive to keep the earth safe so that we can live and let other non-human members of the ecosystem survive. Eco-imbalance, ecological devastation or ecological trauma is not peculiar to any given place, but a global phenomenon. The whole world, whether partially or fully affected, should launch a global campaign for the survival of non-human nature and the restoration of a healthy ecosystem.

This campaign ought to be reframed and re-contextualized in order to have more than just unilateral man-centered space. This is because it is this anthropocentrism that is animated by colonialist multinationals in Nigeria and, indeed Africa, in their lack of commitment to remediating the despoiled environment. This anthropocentric attitude is inherited and

adopted by the Nigerian state and reified through obnoxious laws in order to maintain the capitalist cupidity for wealth that was characteristic of the colonial imperial system. These laws are the catalyst for the alienation of land and people.

These twin developments, that is, industrial growth and environmental loss, are, in Nixon's view, not only dialectical but symbolize a cultural shift from the unspoiled and harmonious notion of Arcadian culture to the imperialist phase of culture. The Arcadian refers to imaginary places in popular culture where nature is said to be unspoiled and harmonious. It is derived from Greek mythology and used in poetry to refer to a vision of pastoralism and harmony with nature. A shift from this vision of places to an industrial culture creates a threat to the ecology as represented in the writings of nationalists who began to write about the detrimental impact of mass societies. It is this shift from the harmony between nature and culture that Nixon conceptualizes as slow violence. This shift takes the form of a political action in which policies are made across time and space which promtotes "an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011:2). Nixon's typification of violence into slow violence is rooted in his conviction that "violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space and as erupting into instance sensational visibility." Environmental violence therefore results from industrial activities which seek to appropriate natural resources for monetary calculus at the detriment of the environment and those who live on the environment. It is a politically motivated kind of policy with an economic undertone that objectifies the environment basically as a tool for the exploitation of resources for the gains of the industrial nations and those who work with them. The violence associated with this severance of the homology between nature and industrial activities is basically not instantaneous but incremental and accretive.

The basic assumptions of Nixon's eco-critical theory are encoded in such logical questions that ecocritics and theorists have been asking for the past decades: how is nature represented in the sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of a novel, play, or poem? Are the values expressed in the literary text consistent with ecological wisdom? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? The questions are legion. As Glotfelty would argue, "literary theory in general, examines the relations between writers, texts and the world. In most literary theory, 'the world' is synonymous with society "the social sphere" (xix). In ecocritical studies, the focus is not fixated on the writer, the text and the world, not on a world populated by humans alone. This is the reason for which Glotfelty calls it the social sphere. Ecocriticism's fundamental promise is that human culture is not only connected to the physical world

but is implicated in the biotic current of the ecosphere against the social sphere.(xix) This is where Barry Commoner's first law of ecology finds relevance: "Everything is connected to everything else"(quoted in Glotfelty,. xix)

Placed against the above backdrop, we thus come to terms with Glotfelty that "literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic order, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact" (xix). Hence eco-criticism expands the notion of the world beyond the confines of the society, the social sphere, to embrace the totality of the ecosphere, an inter-dependent community of bonded constituent parts. This bond is described by Luther Standing Bear:

> We are of the soil and the soil is of us. We love the birds and the beasts that grew with us on this soil. They drank the same water as we did and breathed the same air. We are all one in nature. Believing so, there was in our hearts a great peace and a welling kindness for all living growing things (cited in Harvey 188).

Another argument advanced by eco-critics is that we come to understand nature through images and words; a process that makes the question of truth in literature inescapable. Therefore, ecocriticism finds in nature and culture what Howarth calls "the ubiquity of signs" (xix) which are pointers of the values that shape form and meaning. Eco-criticism thus leads us to recognize that life speaks. It communicates through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity.

Nixon's theory seems to embrace all of the notions briefly referenced above. His vision of ecocritical studies sees the ecospheres as fragi1e and that it needs to be cared for. Hence eco-creative writers and critics should, as posited in MLA' s guide entitled: *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of Literary Studies* (1992), propose a sweeping act of land reform in all literary fields, medieval to postcolonial, by using bold spatial imagery. (26) In the light of this, eco-literary texts bristle with revisionist ferocity as to sustain what Leah S. Marcus astutely calls "a set of geographical metaphors" (cited in Greenblatt and Gunn 61) in which are embedded the spatial, perceptual, and textual conventions of maps and kind.

In doing the above, Nixon's eco-criticism seeks to redirect humanistic ideology, not spurn the natural sciences, but to use its notion of ethics and socialist humanism to sustain viable readings about biodiversity. Literature then, for the Nixon, develops a utopic or dystopic imagery of nature for purposes of ushering in corrective measures which are in themselves

rhetorical proxies for the ethics of ecology. Such utopic or dystopic imagery is sustained by the use of deixis – the ability of a literary text to point. Deixis locates entities in space, time, and social context. Through deixis, meaning develops from what is said or signed, relative to a physical space: I-you, here-there, this- that, to what is implied or signified. According to Howarth, "Deixis expresses relative direction and orientation, the cognitive basis for description" (80). Howarth goes further to explain:

> In learning to read land, one can't just name objects but point to what they do: pines live in sandy soil, oaks in clay, and thus their rates of water absorption differ. As one scholar of place notes, the landscape contains many names and stories so that learning and writing them becomes a way of mapping cultural terrain (80).

It is in line with the above thinking that Howarth posits that "The earth sciences are 'descriptive' because they explain natural forms through verbal composition" (80). It is within this orientation that Nixon's slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor becomes most relevant to this study.

***Song of Dawn* and Utopia of the Past**

The whole poems in *Song of Dawn* are a reminiscence of the experiences of the persona in time past. It enacts the bucolic life of the Niger Delta people in pre-oil exploration time when floral beauty bristles with the green glory of the farm. Ngaage captures its brilliantly thus:

> The owner plants garden eggs
> Green eyes of crops and yam peep at passers-by
> Crippling vegetable run in rows.
>
> A planter directs the yam stems to their staircases
> They climb the steps that back the wind and
> Sway gracefully to the rhythm of the wind (48).

What is graphically representing in the lines above is the pristine agrarian culture of the Ogoni people, indeed the Niger Delta people before the arrival of oil explorers who tend the Ogoni landscape into a harrowing spectre of death and sterility.

What is at issue here is a wish for the reclamation of the past that is now alien to a people trapped in the luminal space of ecological devastation and economic and political dislocation. This wish for a return to the past is hinged on the breakoff which oil

exploration in Ogoni has set with the Ogoni environment resulting in the development of an anthropocentric culture which valorizes man over nature. This anthropocentrism has not only severed the homology between man and nature but has exemplified the Heideggerian conception of *presencing.* In *Poetry Language and Thought*, Heidegger conceptualizes the notion of "dwelling" from the perspective of the converse relationship between man and nature in which case, Heidegger stresses that nature ought to be seen as "the serving bearer blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising-up into plant and animal" (124). For Heidegger, mortals "dwell in that they save the earth". However, "saving does not only snatch something from danger. To save really means to set something free into its own presencing" (124). At the core of Heidegger's argument is what he calls presencing. Presencing, according to Harvey "translates into internalizing within the self the 'authentic' qualities of the eternal world" (169). What this means is that for a proper land ethic to be given which places moral values on land as "the serving bearer" and its use by man, man must first internalize the authentic features of land which assure its presencing. It is in doing this that we begin to appreciate the values of nature and devise a proper way to dwell in it. Harvey puts it succinctly: "If we are to recover the art of dwelling with nature, we must learn, however, to build, dwell and liberate place" (169).

In *Song of Dawn*, Ngaage re-enacts the needs for a *retour aux source* for the purpose of reclaiming the proper action of dwelling. In doing this he reminisces about the beauty of the ocean captured in such poem as "Picking Periwinkles" in which he celebrates how "Our feet drum the path to the creek/Hazy dust files around us" (12) and "Green groves of yam cluster and match hand-in-hand/Words fence against words as one boy shouts/"I slay you with the light green spices of yam"/Another counter "I slay you with the other" (12). Not only is this captured in "Picking Periwinkle," t runs through the entire poems under the heading *Canoe Song*. We can see this in "Search":

See says farewell to mangrove, falls
Back into its course;
We throw the bread-fruit tree behind us
As we walk hand-in-hand with the tide;
We are toattooed to mine and milk the sea

Only our heads float like calabashes
Only our fin-legs play the fish, steers forward
Till we taxi to a halt in shallow water;
We alright and comb the mangrove (14).

Similarly we see the hunting quest of man in traditional Ogoni/Niger Delta communities when the environment was actually the serving bearer of man's need in the poem entitled "Hunt":

We fly our canoes hunting for treasures of the sea
The sky descends as a thick blanket
We pass in-between the tunnel of the
Blue sky and the blue sea; the volume of
Water war against our canoes and run
Into the mouth of the Bonny Sea;
We turn from the talking sea into a silent creek.

Our net-houses are landlords ready to rent
Tiny rooms to creatures in the creek (17).

Note the use of search phrases as "blue sea" and "talking sea" which are emblematic of lively current against the present dead waves in the seas in Ogoni as well as the Niger Delta. These lexical items are not only metaphorical designating the livelihood of the river, it entails quite ironically the changing course of the water in the Niger Delta perennial polluting activities orchestrated by oil multi-national companies.

It is this changing course of events in the Niger Delta seascape and landscape that provokes the desire for a *retour aux source*, a desire that is rooted in what Nnolim calls Utopia of the Past. A Utopia of the past therefore, especially in the case if the Niger Delta is engendered by environmental racism which provokes the need for a change. And while post-colonial politics creates a sustainability of European imperialist attitudes and ideologies, they equally show how retrogressive development has become within the African enclave such that everything post-colonial seems a negation of independence in so far as the dream of the people has remained stagnated, socio-economically defiled and politically strangulated.

Song of Dawn is not a celebration of the beauty of the flora and fauna of the Ogoni sea- and land- scapes; it is an ironic interrogation of the anthropocentric Eurocentric attitude which valorizes man over nature and promotes the discrimination of nature as the other of man. This kind of solipsism results in environmental despoliation, ecological genocides, ozone depletion and all forms of severance of the homology between man and nature. *Song of Dawn* therefore is a reminder that the severance of the marriage between nature and culture amounts to the displacement of man through such forms of violent conceptualized by Rob Nixon as slow violence. Thus by returning to the source through the motif of Utopia

of the past, Ngaage makes a clarion call on the leadership of the Nigerian nation to reconsider environmental policies and politics in Ogoni as well as the Niger Delta in order to promote an all inclusive bioregionalism where the human community and the non-human community are seen and appreciated as belonging one biosphere.

Conclusion

From the foregoing it is clear that Ngaage adopts a distinctively remarkable unique approach in interrogating the Niger Delta question through the medium of literature. He does this by adopting the motif of Utopia, Especially Utopia of the past in foregrounding the environmental trauma in the Niger Delta. He does not only jolt audience with the debilitating effects of environmental devastation but takes his audience on the road of a *retour aux source* in order for them to appreciate the unwholesome slow violence on the environment and human lives in the Niger Delta that provokes a yearning of the past. Even though Nnolim denunciates a return to the past as unprogressive, Ngaage's Utopia of the past is a regenerative in so far as it serves as a historicist interrogation of the presence through the lens of the past.

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