



## ECOCRITICAL EXAMINATION OF MAY IFEOMA NWOYE'S OIL CEMETERY

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### Abstract

This paper titled "Ecocritical Examination of May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*" explores the ecocritical perspective as envisaged in May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*. Ecocriticism is a worldwide emergent movement which came into existence as a reaction to man's (anthropocentric) attitude of dominating nature. The paper adopts the ecocritical theory in order to interpret the hazards brought upon the natural environment as a result of oil exploration activities and the resultant effects on human lives. The paper therefore looks at the environmental problems of oil spillage, pipeline vandalization, gas flaring, land degradation, destruction of marine life, diseases and untimely deaths resulting from the process of oil drilling by the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta area, as captured in *Oil Cemetery*. The author creates a protagonist, Rita, who remains resolute and determined to seek redress and liberate her people from the oppression and exploitation brought upon her community by the oil companies. Through a series of persistent protests, dialogues and intervention of the Freedom Bench, sanity is restored. This leads to peace and development in the area, as social amenities hitherto denied the communities by the oil companies are provided. With peace comes economic development at the wider; communal and national levels.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism; May Ifeoma Nwoye; *Oil-Cemetery*; Ecocritical theory; oil exploration

### Introduction

The singular task of making their societies conducive for human habitation has always been the preoccupation of writers. This is because the writer is not just an entertainer but also a visionary agent of social change who uses his/her writing to challenge interested readers' consciousness and in turn contributes to societal transformation. This Consciousness raising could be for the masses to liberate themselves from the shackles of enslaving traditions, religious dogmatism, political dictatorship and the hazards caused by environmental pollution. Although the transformation may not be immediately seen in the actions of the readers of a literary work, it is worthy of note that as Nigel Smith asserts, "through literature, people revise their understanding of themselves and attempted to transform their predicaments" (web). It can thus be inferred, from Smith's comments that literature poses an insidious challenge to the consciousness of the readers, which implies that the writer has the ability to educate or impart knowledge on how they can protect their environment, not only against social ills but also against environmental pollution. In the light of this, virtually all notable African writers such as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Buchi Emecheta, Helon Habila, Tanure Ojaide, and Ken Saro Wiwa have addressed these environmental problems in their various works. In most cases, issues are presented through satire, parody, allegory, metaphor and other literary devices.

A very significant problem that has attracted the attention of creative writers and critics in Nigeria is the issue of environmental pollution and land degradation in the Niger Delta region where multinational oil companies have done massive environmental damage through oil spills, blowouts, gas flares, and other forms of ecological despoliation (Ecocritical Literature vii). Though environmental degradation is not restricted to the Niger Delta, the

popularity of the region may be due to its being the meeting place between international, politics and economics. Little wonder that May Ifeoma Nwoye has joined the group of writers writing on the issues of the Niger Delta with her novel, *Oil Cemetery*. Previous novels on environmental discourse includes *Tides* by Isidore Okpewho, Adamu Usman's *Death of Eternity*, and *The Lone Piper and the Bird's Case*, *Yellow Yellow* by Kaine Agary, *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila, *The Fall of Silence* by Inyang Ekwo, *The Activist* by Tanure Ojaide, *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* by Chimeka Garrick, *Tiny Sunbirds Faraway* by Christie Watson, *The Poacher's Daughter* by J. C. Agunwamba. Despite the many works on similar themes of the Niger Delta, this paper looks at the ecocritical issues in May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*.

### Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism is one of the more recent literary discourses which has swept the humanities over the past four decades. The present world is facing eco-disasters and the environment is now at stake. Science and technology alone are not enough to combat the global ecological crisis. There is therefore the need for an orientation that would redirect the human attitudes to nature. Literature does not float above life, so it has its role to play. Prior to the twenty first century, literary critics did not give due attention to issues regarding the natural environment. As a result, ecocriticism has developed as a worldwide emergent movement during the last four decades, and scholars are still engaged in developing its nature and scope.

According to Sandip Kumar Mishra, The term "Ecocriticism" was first coined by William Rueckert in his critical writing "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. The word "eco" comes from the Greek root word "Oiko" which etymologically means house hold or earth and "logy" from "logos" means logical discourse. Together they mean criticism of the house – the environment as represented in Literature. According to Rueckert, ecocriticism applies ecology or ecological principles to the study of Literature. On his part, Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as "a study of the relationship between literature and environmentalist's praxis" (430). Ecocriticism does not simply mean nature study. Indeed, it has distinguished itself from conventional nature writing, first by its ethical stand and commitment to the natural world. Furthermore, it has made the connection between the human and non-human worlds.

There are two waves of ecocriticism as identified by Lawrence Buell. The first wave ecocritics focused on nature, writing nature poetry and wilderness fiction (Buell 138). They upheld the philosophy of organism. Here, environment effectively means the natural environment (21). According to Buell, the aim of this wave was to preserve biotic community. The critics of this wave appraised "the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action" (Howarth, 69). From these concerns, it is clear that ecocriticism initially aimed at earth care.

The second wave of ecocriticism on the other hand inclined towards issues of environmental justice and "social ecocriticism" that takes urban landscape as seriously as "natural landscape" (Buell 22). This wave of ecocriticism is also known as revisionist ecocriticism. It seeks to locate the vestiges of nature in cities and expose crimes of eco-injustice against society's marginal section. The ecocritics interpret nature writing texts. At the same time, they use them as context for analysing the principles and customs of the society in relation to nature. Often, the result is a critique of how the human culture devalues and degrades the natural world.

In general, ecocritics use the term "nature" in a broader sense. Ecocriticism is not merely the study of nature as represented in literature. "Nature here does not mean a mere fancy of its beautiful aspects like plants and animals. Nature here means the whole of the physical environment, human and the non-human. The inter-connection between the two creates a bond which is the basis of Ecocriticism" (Howarth 71). As long as there is harmony between the living and the non-living, there prevails a healthy eco-system for the benevolence of mankind as well as the earth. It is in this view that Suresh Frederick asserts that, "The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling that the balance between the human and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one in

which plants, animals, birds, and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other” (147). The above view may not be totally possible because man has always depended on the natural environment for his survival. The land, water air, flora and fauna are exploited in order to provide food, shelter, as well as other necessities of life for man. Hence, man cannot survive without the support of the natural environment.

However, there is need for man to recognise the fact that, his well being depends on the well being of the natural environment. This will enable him to develop a positive attitude towards nature, by devising ways of maximizing the benefits of the natural environment without endangering the resources of nature. This view can be supported with Frederick's statement in another place that “The most common measure to tackle environmental crisis is a sustainable development. This categorically means the required use of natural resources without endangering the whole environment and the well-being of all human beings” (128). According to Frederick, there is need for environmental consciousness, such that would discourage an extravagant exploitation of the natural resources, but a limited use for sustainable development. With this, there will be a peaceful coexistence between the man and his natural environment. Having examined the ecocritical theory, a brief exploration of the text is most appropriate at this juncture.

### **Synopsis of *Oil Cemetery***

The people of Ubolu live a peaceful and communal existence for many generations, they are great farmers and fishermen who have retained their conservative life despite the modernity around them. Oil has been discovered on their lands and their once conservative and peaceful existence will soon be shaken to its roots, as the greed for oil creeps closer and closer to them. Like it gulped up other places before it, crisis becomes the lot of Ubolu people. Suddenly, the villagers discover that farmlands are refusing to yield produce, fishes are becoming scarce in the river, and their bumper harvest festival formerly celebrated with jubilation is now celebrated with sadness as a result of poor harvest. Things are no longer what they used to be. Sacrifices are prepared to appease the gods, yet, there is no change until Izundu, the father of the protagonist (Rita) and the retrenched oil worker who retires to farming in the village, explains that there is a connection between the oil exploration in the community and the poor harvest as well as dearth of fishes. Izundu also explains that he knows that the oil companies usually compensates those affected by their activities and wonders who could have been collecting their own share of the benefits.

With an unyielding soil and almost fishless river come jobless and restive youths who soon begin trying their hands at vandalising pipelines and stealing oil to sell. These illegal acts soon lead to an explosion with many casualties. In response to this, the oil company sends police patrol team to safeguard the pipelines but this does not go down well with the Ubolu people who are the conservative kind and are weary of foreign intrusion. A clash soon ensues between the youths and the police team over harassment and the police retaliates by coming under the cover of darkness to commit arson and release tear gas which kills all the children sleeping on the bed when the attack happened. It is this situation that provokes Rita when she visits her village and sees the numerous graves close to the pipeline installation running through the village, a place which has now been designated “Oil Cemetery”. The scene provokes Rita who feels something needs to be done. Inspired by her mentor Steve Dada, she picks interest in her people's plight and leads them to a human rights activist who connects her to the Freedom Bench – a group of lawyers and human rights activist who take up the people's cause and drag Zabulon Oil Company to court.

### **Ecocritical Issues in *Oil Cemetery***

May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery* highlights the importance of environment and natural resources such as river, air, land, rain, and so on. It tells the story of oil exploration leading to environmental pollution which brings misery and hardship upon the local people of the fictional Ubolu community. In this book, Nwoye raises some disturbing questions about environmental explorations of the Niger Delta region and explores the need for the protection of the natural environment in order to preserve and save it from extinction. The text emphasizes the

fact that a clean and pristine environment is the people's right and with such an enabling environment, people can realise their potentials and maximize their opportunities. But when the environment is destroyed and the natural resources are devastated, the people cannot live their lives to the fullest because their well being and happiness will be affected.

Prior to the discovery of oil in Ubolu land, the people are very happy farmers, fishers and traders. They are content with their conservative ways of life, and are self-sufficient. "It used to be a traditional community and the people in all the surrounding communities where quite happy (223). The excerpt describes the life condition of Ubolu villagers prior to the era of oil exploration. They are complacent with their traditional ways of life, and resist any forms of intrusion as much as possible. Their traditions and cultural practices are highly esteemed, and civilisation and modern ways of life are considered strange. But with the discovery of oil and intrusion of the city life, things are not the same again. Jonathan D. Mbachaga explains that:

...since the discovery of oil in Nigeria, precisely in 1956, the oil states and their environs have suffered and continue to suffer the consequences of environmental degradation due to oil exploration...oil spillages across the land mass has serious adverse effects on the populace as the quality of water, vegetation and farm lands are rendered useless thereby affecting the lively hood and health of the local communities (4).

The tragedy of oil exploration in Nigeria dates back to 1956, as Mbachaga states, and the problem has continued to ravage the Nigerian communities today, especially the Niger Delta region. Maria Ajima is even more precise when she states that "Petroleum oil drilling activities commenced in Nigeria at Oloibiri in the Niger Delta area in 1956 by the Shell Petroleum Development company" (15). Ajima's statement is provided to trace the genesis of the problems of environmental pollution that Mbachaga has enumerated above, particularly as they affect the Niger Delta area. It is this situation that has led to hardship, deaths, joblessness and hunger that devastate the Ubolu land, a fictional name for the numerous Niger Delta communities. This paper therefore, analyses the problems of oil spillage, pipeline vandalisation and oil explosion, gas flares, destruction of farm land and aquatic life, health problems and untimely deaths resulting from oil exploration in Ubolu land, as captured by Nwoye in her *Oil Cemetery*.

As a demonstration of her eco-sensibilities, the author has exposed the effects of oil spillage across land mass. As the oil company expands its activities, more oil is spilled on the environment. When the oil spill extends to farm lands and the river, the soil is destroyed and becomes unproductive, and the fish in the water as well as other marine life forms dies. This is the situation that results in hardship for Ubolu people, making it very difficult for them to survive because their sources of livelihood have been utterly ruined. Many explosions have also been traced to oil spills in the story. In an attempt to siphon oil out of the burst pipeline, some youths from nearby villages attempt to drill holes in the leaking pipes leading to an explosion, this is explained below:

An eyewitness reported that some youths from nearby villages besieged the site of an oil spillage with different types of containers, attempting to drill holes in the leaking pipes when an explosion occurred, followed by fire...the explosion ripped open part of the main pipeline running from the oil fields at Isioye and Ubolu to the oil refinery (79-80).

The quotation above is an account of an explosion resulting from oil spillage, as the youths try to collect oil from the leaking pipeline. The explosion caused further damage on the main pipeline by ripping a part of the pipe open. This automatically means that more oil will be spilled and more harm will be done to the environment.

With the destruction of farm land and fish dearth resulting from oil spills comes massive joblessness because their livelihood has been destroyed. The villagers, especially the restive youths therefore take to the crime of vandalizing pipelines and selling the products they get from there. They realize a lot of money from the practice and this can be seen in their changed lifestyles:

The boys went to a predetermined spot early in the morning and destroyed a pipe to collect the fuel. By late afternoon, they had finished the business and gone home. Each morning, more people joined the team, expanding the scope of the business. As the business progressed, the pioneers had to engage the younger ones in the collection of the fuel while they did the negotiation for the disposal (116).

From the above excerpt, it can be inferred that few youths started the illegal business initially. When it becomes obvious that the business is lucrative, more people join in the vandalisation of pipelines to collect more fuel for sale. However, their actions are not without costs as there are fire outbreaks leading to a lot of deaths in the communities. Below is a quotation reporting an instance of explosion, causing numerous deaths as a result of the acts of pipeline vandalisation:

Tragedy occurred yesterday as an explosion damaged an oil pipeline in a remote part of the Delta, over thirty people lost their lives. Firefighters and policemen could not easily get across to the Ubolu site where the tragedy occurred, as the only major road leading to the village was totally blocked by the community. Some of the burnt bodies were seen floating in the nearby river (79).

The above incident is the case of literature mimicking life. Just as the report of explosions in Ubolu, there have been many real life fire incidents in the Niger Delta due to youths siphoning oil from burst or broken pipelines, sometimes by accident and at other times wilfully.

One of the goals of ecocriticism is to restore the lost peaceful and harmonious relationship between man and his environment. This is because the well being of man depends on the well being of the natural environment around him. What readily comes to mind here is Adamu Usman's statement in his *Lone Piper and the Bird's Case*, that: "Because they sow misery for other creatures, human beings will always be miserable (51). In the above statement, "other creatures" represent the natural environment. This means that if human activities devastate and destroy the natural environment, the lives of the people living in such environment will as well be miserable. Ubolu's natural heritage have been wrecked by oil exploration activities, therefore, hopelessness, hunger, disease, misery and deaths have become their constant plight. The author, because of her concern with issues affecting her environment, has, as a matter of commitment, responded to these problems by highlighting the importance of the natural environment to man and exposing the consequences of misusing the natural resources. With this, it is hoped that man will put his environment in a proper perspective, and devise a more peaceful and constructive ways of exploring the natural environment without destroying it.

The problem of land degradation and poor harvest is aptly captured by the writer. The reader is told that the local people are very happy farmers prior to the discovery of oil in Ubolu land. Right from the beginning of the story, the author establishes a feeling of intimacy between the villagers and their natural environment, particularly their much valued farm land:

Some thirty kilometres away, a fair distance from the heart of Ubolu...lie some acres of land by the river. People who can trek from the village to these empty areas are free to farm as much as their energy will let them. Villagers say that anything put in the ground usually comes out tenfold during the harvest...Onwuzulike and his three wives were some of the lucky ones who harvested this rich soil. He farmed his acreage in peace right on the side of Ubolu river" (2).

The above quote explains vividly, the symbiotic or intimate relationship between Ubolu people and their farm land, and by extension, their natural environment. As long as the people do not relent in tilling their farm land, they will not stop getting positive feedback from the rich soil. Therefore, they continue to experience bountiful harvest every year because whatever the farmer plants always comes out tenfold. This is the lot of Pa Onwuzulike and his wives, and it is through this type of effort that he sees his son, Izundu through secondary school (2).

It is however sad, that, a once happy, self-sustaining and vibrant community suddenly becomes hopeless because

of the discovery of oil and its exploration in their land. To worsen it all, the people's opinion were never sought concerning their land. The oil companies bribe the government to push the locals away from their farm land with compensation. It does not matter if anyone refuses compensation. Whoever refuses to be compensated would all the same, have his land collected from him by force. The following line states:

He gave a little history of how the expatriates came to reside among them. He told about (sic) the seizure of lands by the government officials, and the implication that if the owners of the lands refused to relinquish them with compensation, the land would be seized by the government and they would lose everything (61).

The above quote reveals the role of the government in conniving with the expatriates to deprive the local people of their farm lands under the influence of bribe. An important role of the government of any nation is to fight for the land and defend the interest of its people. It is however a disappointment that the government has neither respect for the rights, opinions, feelings, occupation, nor cares for the survival of its people in Ubolu community. Through this medium, the writer exposes the issues that transpired between the foreign owners of oil companies, the Nigerian government and the land owners of the oil producing region of the Niger Delta. The people therefore laments thus: "Our land has been given out without our consent for oil exploration. No one cared how we felt; no one sought our opinion. That alone constitutes a great injustice to our people. And as a result, our environment is totally polluted" (143). This again reiterate the fact that the people's heritage has suddenly been taken away without their permission and given out for oil exploration, the outcome of this great injustice done to the people is the pollution of their entire environment and the devastation of their farm land. A widow has her farm land taken away from her because some pipes pass through the portion where she farms. She cries continuously, day and night for six weeks cursing the oil companies and their collaborators.

Famine has become the order of the day because the farm land is degraded and the soil has lost its fertility. With all the fatiguing labour that would be invested in yam, cassava and other agricultural produce, only a pittance of financial reward will be yielded, and it is never sufficient to meet the basic needs of the people. This situation holds the villagers perpetually in a state of misery. To further emphasize the situation of land degradation and poor harvest, the writer states that: "The land was no longer fertile and the harvest goes dry...In some cases, what came out was smaller than what was planted" (113). The result of the poor harvest is that the joy of the annual festival is destroyed. The usual excitement with which the annual festival is celebrated is no more because there is no bountiful harvest, everyone talks about the imminent hunger.

The day of annual harvest festival is slated for village meeting with the freedom bench to enable the villagers discuss their plight with the lawyers. In addressing the community members, Rita's speech is quite touching as she recounts some of the lost heritage in rhetorical questions: "This is the usual day of our community's annual harvest celebration – a period usually set aside for this community to thank God for the bountiful harvest with which our people have always been endowed...But where is the harvest? Where are our once – fertile farmlands and livestock?" (142). The situation that Rita explains above shows clearly that the annual harvest has lost its sparkle, owing to the fact of farm land depletion in the wake of oil exploration. The festival has become an avenue for the villagers to console one another over the poor harvest. With a wasted effort and nothing to harvest, hunger and hardship infest the entire community and many farmers are plunged into deep poverty.

The author has similarly dealt with the challenge of water pollution which destroys aquatic life. Oil spillage devastates the farm lands and also pollutes the river and the stream. Not only does the polluted water kill the fish, it also poisons the people's drinking water. The situation is described thus: "The fishermen complained about dead fish in the river...Our water is contaminated...the rivers look like rivers of death. The fish are disappearing for lack of oxygen" (85,143). It is apparent from the above excerpt that the water source for the whole community has been destroyed. Insistence on drinking such water from the stream could be suicidal. Oil spills on water generate heat because the spills prevent oxygen from penetrating the water. The heat, coupled with the carbon

substances in the oil is what chokes the water's life, resulting in the disappearance of fish from the water – a situation that deprives the fishermen of their living. Water is an indispensable necessity of life. In the absence of good water, people will find it difficult to survive because life is sustained by water. For a comfortable life, portable water is needed for drinking, cooking, bathing and washing, the absence of which can result in chaos, the kind of chaos in which Ubolu people find themselves because their life sources have been destroyed. When the polluted water overflows its bank, the land is also polluted. Sometimes, this pollution extends to places beyond one's imagination and causes terrible havoc in such places, in addition to the serious health problems already caused by environmental pollution.

Apart from the numerous deaths resulting from environmental pollution in the form of toxic wastes, oil spills and heat radiation from oil wells, pipeline explosions have claimed many lives of the local people in Ubolu, especially the youths. According to the writer, it is difficult to ascertain the number of the locals who have been killed due to oil exploration activities. In the words of the writer, "The death toll of the inhabitants of those places has not been accurately reported, whether they(sic) be deaths through environmental disease or pipeline explosion. And the amount of contamination has been hidden from the public" (133). The excerpt implies that much deaths have occurred from both the pipeline explosions and diseases caused by the pollution if environment, so much that the actual number of deaths cannot be disclosed to the public. The extent of the contamination or damage done through the pollution has as well not been disclosed to the public.

Oil or pipeline explosion has really put the lives of the local people of Ubolu in danger. Among the dangers created by oil exploration activities, pipeline explosion has claimed more lives. While there are some accidental explosions, others have been wilfully caused through pipeline vandalisation by the villagers in an attempt to scoop fuel into their containers, resulting in more deaths of the people. The following lines describe an instance where not less than sixty people again lose their lives due to oil explosion:

It was then only a matter of time before the metal buckets rubbing and scraping each other ignited, and the explosion that followed was like a thunderstorm. Fire broke out instantly and spread around the environment like lightning. Shouts, cries and coughing filled the atmosphere but soon were heard no more...Not less than sixty bodies of human beings were scattered all over the scene. Some were burnt beyond recognition (117).

The above quote clearly portray the terrible destruction of the people's lives by pipeline explosion. Having their sources of livelihood taken away, the obvious available means of survival remains the bunkering of oil for business purposes. Therefore, as the people struggle to collect the oil through the leaking pipelines, their metal containers scrap each other and ignite the fire which consumed not less than sixty lives of the villagers. From the foregoing, the reader would notice, that, this is not the only time that pipeline explosion is killing the people of Ubolu village, it is a recurrent issue.

Again, the actions of the police men assigned to watch over the pipelines have resulted in the killing of many villagers in Ubolu community. The police raid Ubolu community arresting the traditional ruler and some of the chiefs over the breaking and vandalisation of oil pipes. A special police vigilante unit keeps a twenty-four hour patrol at the village farms where the pipes pass through. The villagers also mount their own road blocks to check infiltration of foreigners into their community. Inevitably, there is a clash of interest resulting in attacks and counter attacks between the Ubolu community and the police. These lead to a series of tragedies for the communities following police invasion of the village at night. While the adults run to evade arrest, the police shoot indiscriminately, burn houses and shoot teargas. The incident again lead to the death of many people, especially children. It is this situation that necessitates the mass burial of numerous graves close to the pipeline installation running through the village, a place which has now been designated "oil cemetery" from which the title of the book is derived.

Nwoye's story of oil exploration in Ubolu land and by extension, oil exploration in the Niger Delta is an irony which can be likened to the parable of the fish which swims in the river, but is always thirsty of drinking water. The oil boom which is supposed to be a source of blessing and fortune for the people is however the cause of their woes. Similarly, the natural resources are meant to provide comfort and well being for man. For instance, man should be shaded from the heat of the sun and saved from global warming if the trees are not cut down. Land and water should provide man with food and wealth if they are not polluted. The reverse has however become the case because man has failed to recognise the benefits of the natural resources around him. This work therefore, is the writer's demand on humanity or what may be referred to as her call on humanity to environmental consciousness. This consciousness would enable man to always devise a more friendly and peaceful ways of exploring the natural resources around him, in a way that harm will not be done to the environment, and the human life will not be endangered.

The people of Ubolu are doomed because oil exploration has endangered their natural environment, and consequently, their normal happy life is destroyed. As Rita rightly remarks, "we have moved from oil boom to oil doom". Their life is doomed because families suddenly become hopeless and are forced to wander out of the community daily in search of food. With a depleted soil and almost fishless river, the community become restive. While the youths try their hands on oil bunkering, others wander in the bushes searching for snails, fruits, nuts and even nutritious maggots for food. Those who get more than enough for their families take the surplus to the highways to sell, running after moving vehicles from morning till night. After the toil of the day, they retire home to bathe in the contaminated water (115).

The oil companies carry out their business with arrogance and impunity. They occupy people's land with little or no regard for the welfare of the environment where these businesses are done, let alone the people's health. To worsen the situation, the expatriates deny the local people of employment opportunities in the oil companies. Majority of the few local workers in the oil companies do not have reasonable appointment but are on contract with poor wages. They are used like slaves and laid off at any time without any entitlements. This is the situation that Izundu, Rita's father finds himself. The idea of contract appointment enables the white employers to manipulate, use and dump the locals, whose resources are being tapped. The writer further shows the predicament of the local workers by portraying a situation where only the menial jobs and those involving hard labour are reserved for the local workers. For instance, positions such as the cleaners, gardeners, aids, securities, as well as the domestic staff of the directors of Zebulon Oil Company, are reserved for the locals (23). Chimeka Garricks paints a similar scenario in his *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* when he speaks through the character of Doye thus: "My people have the oil, yet it is your people who have all the jobs in the oil companies. Your people refuse to employ my people. They say we are not qualified...are we not qualified? (7). The above statements by Doye show how the expatriates disregard the people of the land and underrate their functional ability. The foregoing sum up the grievances of the people of the Niger Delta. The people on whose land the oil wealth has been discovered are allowed to wallow in abject poverty and joblessness. In spite of the many decades of oil drilling in the area, there has been negligible economic benefits to show in terms of development.

In *Oil Cemetery*, the author also brings to the fore, the theme of greed and selfishness arising from the corrupt tendencies of the leaders representing the local people of Ubolu. The "Men of the Alphabet" are the representatives of the villagers and they serve as middlemen between the management of Zebulon Oil Company and the local people. They quite understand the plight of the local community and are expected to fight for the people's right, by seeking compensation for the damage done to their land. However, these leaders allow themselves to be bribed by the oil companies, so that, they can continue their exploitation of the village. In a round table discussion by the directors of the Zebulon Oil Company, Mr Smith remarks that "all you need do is to get a smart guy, one of their types, and give him money to share with their local chiefs. Then you are on" (26). From the comments, the men of the alphabet represent the "smart guy" through which the oil company bribes its way in order to continue destroying the values of the local people.

The oil company displays a total disregard for the local communities, they see them as “strange creatures” (75), so the company does not border about whatever hazards the people of the land are exposed to, because they are considered less humans. Even when they release the huge sum of five hundred million naira and four-wheel drive vehicles to take care of local officials and traditional rulers as appeasement, they use middlemen. Mr Jefferson says “This organization has no business with the local people. It is not our concern who gets what. A deal is a deal. We give the middlemen the agreed sum. We do our business quietly. That’s the deal” (74). The result is that nothing gets to the actual people, whereas the middlemen end up cornering the money sent through them. Even when they do give, it is only a negligible sum to some restive members of the communities such as the youths. This in turn generates its own crisis as the youths fight among themselves. Such fights often lead to deaths, like the death of Jude who is killed by Nkere. Nkere later dies after confessing his action to his mother at the point of death. It is at the height of these crises between the Ubolu community and the oil companies that Rita Izundu makes her mark on the situation at hand.

Rita is a young girl who has demonstrated tremendous foresight, courage and determination to fight for the rights of her people. She fills the role of the environmental activist and deep ecologist who demonstrates an awareness of the damage that activities of the oil companies wreak on the natural environment and how it affects the lives and livelihoods of the people when she declares:

...I pose a question today. What is the oil industry’s contribution to the development of our communities? The oil spillage causes frequent farmland depletion and forest fires as well as serious air pollution. It also poisons the earth, kills crops and thus plunges many farmers into deeper poverty. More serious is the contamination of rivers, which not only deprives fishermen of their living but causes a shortage of drinking water. ..The crazy exploitation of oil has disrupted the normal life of our people with nothing to show for it. Instead, we have moved from oil boom to oil doom. It is time we demand our rights! (63)

The remarkable and insightful speech by Rita at the union meeting can be said to be the most important index that provides the foundational platform on which Rita is to base her environmental activism and human rights struggle for the emancipation of her people from the grips of the powerful oil companies operating on their lands. Enajite Ojaruega views oil exploration in Nigeria as “a case of the strong taking by force the natural resources that rightfully belong to the weak” (39). The multinational oil companies represent the strong, while the local communities represent the weak party. The activities of the oil companies on Ubolu and the surrounding environs devastate the land, pollute the air and contaminate the water, leading to the people’s impoverishment. Poverty and diseases have dealt a big blow on the people due to unavailability of potable drinking water, air pollution and destruction of their sources of livelihood. No good roads and electricity, their farmlands are affected by gas flaring and oil spillage and their river is polluted. Hence, their major occupations which are fishing and farming are destroyed because the fishes have been killed in their thousands due to polluted water and the land is degraded. Therefore, majority of the people live on or below the poverty line.

The Freedom Bench on behalf of the Ubolu community sues the Zebulon Oil Company for murder, man slaughter, arson, exploitation of the natural resources of the people without any benefits to the host community and so on (177-178). With the combined efforts of Rita, the Freedom Bench, the community women who go naked as a strategy to fight the cause, they are able to trigger the beginning of developments in the area. Their struggle is so successful that the oil companies in the area are made to build a large central community hospital, a school, a water pumping station, construction of roads linking the communities, bridges, bore holes, transformers and a guarantee of employment for all able bodied adult men and women (243).

On their part, the community members, rather than engaging in vandalising oil pipelines running through their lands, turn over a new leaf by reporting malfunctioning pipelines to the companies. This can be seen when an incident of an oil leaking pipeline is reported to Zebulon Oil Company by a woman and her son returning from

the farm. The family is handsomely rewarded. This incident, coupled with successful dialogue between the representatives of Zebulon Oil Company and the members of the community mark another significant turning point in the relationship between the oil companies and their host communities. Through this strategy, it can be seen that the author achieves a non-violent solution to environmental crisis. This is very clear from Rita's remark: "We have all seen today that dialogue is the best approach to conflict resolution" (242).

### Conclusion

May Ifeoma Nwoye in her novel titled, *Oil Cemetery* showcases the exploitation of the oil resources in the Niger Delta by the foreign oil companies, leaving the people of oil-producing communities in hunger and poverty as the environment is totally devastated. This study therefore, is an attempt to analyse man's activities and relationship with the natural environment and how his actions on the environments have affected him. The oil exploration phenomenon in Nigeria is indeed a paradox. The oil which is supposed to be a blessing for the nation has become a curse because in the process of oil exploration, the host communities have been destroyed. However, with the concerted efforts of the protagonist and the Freedom Bench, justice prevails at the end and the problems are ameliorated.

By doing so, Nwoye has produced a work that advocates dialogue between oil companies and their host communities in finding solutions to the challenges of oil exploration. It is the same dialogue and peaceful protest that Inyang Ekwo in his *Fall of Silence* advocates in seeking solutions to the problems of oil exploration between the host communities and the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta area.

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