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In Praise of a Cultural Alternative

Environmental Violence and Literary Militancy in Nigeria

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It is not clear when and where the first militant violence began in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. What is clear is that the 1990s, a period marked by intense military oppression in Nigeria, saw the proliferation of militant groups in the region. Militant violence was characterized by the kidnapping of oil executives, the destruction of oil installations, and killings. Remote and immediate causes include the obnoxious Petroleum Act of 1969, the judicial killing of the writer and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, the 1998 Kaiama Declaration, and the militarization of the region.¹ Since the return of democratic rule in 1999, some measures have been taken to curb the violence, but militancy still exists because its real causes have not been addressed.

Militancy is a function of the ecological crisis largely created by the Nigerian government. The poor governance of successive military regimes, marked by the inequitable distribution of wealth, inadequate infrastructure, lack of ecological restoration mechanisms, and a total disregard for the plight of the locals, led to the degeneration of environment and life in the

region. The multinational oil corporations in the region (Shell BP, Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Total, Elf, etc.) took advantage of the government's failings by perpetrating environmental crimes such as oil spill, gas flaring, and water pollution. Genuine activism against the destructive forces of the government and extractive industry was crushed, leading to the formations of violent militant groups.

Interestingly, the literary response to ecological crisis intensified while militant groups proliferated. Indeed, Saro-Wiwa's death in 1995 drove Niger Delta youth to engage in violent activities, reasoning that if the non-violent struggle of the sage had failed, then it was better to resort to violence.² This death also spurred an efflorescence of eco-writing.³ Although militancy and eco-writing did not proliferate at the same time, they shared the same goals. The militant groups claim to seek justice for themselves, for the region; the environmental writers also claim to seek justice for the ecology and people of the region. The aesthetic protocols of the eco-writing are as confrontational as the approach of the militant groups. The anti-establishment message of the eco-writing is perhaps stronger and more enduring than that of the militant groups – after all, as the old saying goes, the pen is mightier than the sword. It is on this basis that I frame the notion of literary militancy to describe this eco-writing, seeing it as the cultural alternative to the senseless, ecology-unfriendly violence of the militant groups.

The notion of literary militancy is anchored in protest literature in Africa, which began as a colonial counter-discourse. It is premised on the impulse and rationale to use literature to protest forms of injustice. Literary militants deploy the aesthetics of literature to protest the environmental injustice they have, in most cases, witnessed. These militant writers are usually natives of the communities that face eco-destruction. Many of them are raised in such communities, observing the processes of environmental degradation as they grow up. They are acutely aware of the inhumanity unleashed on the communities, depicting it in the best way possible, and, more importantly, using what the Gambian poet Tijan M. Sallah calls “the magical potency of language”⁴ to disparage eco-oppressors. Militant writers intentionally and programmatically deploy their craft to hold those responsible for eco-destruction accountable. The language of literary militancy is thus constituted by well-chosen words, often *violent* ones that describe the activities of eco-oppressors and *sympathetic* ones that depict the victimhood of the eco-oppressed. Notable militant writers include Ebi Yeibo, G'Ebinyo Ogbowei, Obari Gomba, Ben Binebai, and Nnimmo Bassey, among many others.

I will briefly read Humphrey Ogu's poem titled “Then Peace is Worse than War” to demonstrate the politics and aesthetics of literary militancy. I present the short, three-stanza poem below:

If peace
means folding our hands
yawning and starving

while foreigners feed fat on fishes
in our creeks
then peace is worse than war

If peace
means dying of thirst
keeping calm
while water from our streams
waters strange soil
irrigates foreign farms
then peace is worse than war

If peace
is a euphemism
for suffering in silence
living like lizards, nodding
running errands on rough roads
on empty tanks
while oil from our soil
oils planes, erects mansions
tars roads, builds bridges in deserts...
then peace is worse than war.⁵

This poem is contained in a collection titled *Echoes of Neglect* – a title that suggests years of disregard for the environment and humanity of the Niger Delta. The poem rationalizes militancy in the context of the plunder and dispossession the people of the region suffer. If the aim of life is to seek peace, the poem contends, then such peace must come as a result of a collective struggle. The condition for peace, therefore, is a decisive war against ecological injustice. The poem not only invokes war-like resistance, but it in fact asserts the necessity of such resistance as perhaps the only condition of existence for a people with a powerful sense of entitlement. The “we” in this poem stands for a people extremely aware of their possession, which is clearly described in terms of wealth as “oil from our soil”, very conscious that they are being dispossessed of this wealth. They understand how they are being reduced to destitution amidst their wealth and would now prefer to be no longer “lizards, nodding / running errands on rough roads”. Such resolve is at the roots of literary militancy in the Niger Delta region and informs the aesthetic frame of the literature that responds to ecological violence.

I conclude by pointing out that literary militancy entails raising consciousness to resist exploitation, dispossession, and degradation. It is an aspect of the cultural struggle against ecological degradation that should not be discounted in efforts to maintain planetary balance. As African governments, non-governmental organizations, and the international community

consider solutions to the climate crises on the continent, they must take into account the cultural alternative that showcases writers' aesthetics and politics of resistance against resource dispossession and environmental degradation.

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