

Greening the Arts: Arnold Udoka's *Inyene* and the connections between drama and human ecology

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Abstract

The Earth is in peril. Climate change, plagues, conflicts, environmental degradation and drought now stares the human race in the face. Over the years, changes in climatic conditions have intensified a near-desperate quest to salvage the remnant of humanity from the now-existent eco-crisis. This paper investigates the relevance of literary drama to the eco-challenges of sub-Saharan Africa. The objective of this study is to x-ray the thematic importance of Arnold Udoka's *Inyene* in the discourse of ecology and the environmental crisis now confronting Nigeria. The paper finds this dramatic text as one of such literary discourses that interface with a scientific phenomenon such as ecology. It thus recommends that the subject of ecology and the crisis of the environment needs to be re-evaluated to embrace the contributions of the arts, especially drama.

Keywords: Ecopedagogy, Ecocriticism, Drama, Conflict and Ecology

Introduction

Climate change, global warming, ozone depletion – all these have become popular clichés that have characterized various global summits aimed at confronting the environmental challenges of the 21st century. Nations of the earth have risen in one testament – The Earth's Charter to forge a common cause aimed at addressing a reality that stares all in the face – a human race under peril due to the absolute disregard for nature. The first paragraph of that document reads:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must stand together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations (echarter.org).

Natural and man-made disasters of catastrophic magnitude now ravage the entire globe. From flash floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, forest fires, draught, hurricanes, erosions, desert encroachments, air and water pollution, oil spills, every part of the earth shares in one sad story or the other. In Africa, humans have to grapple with the twin-devils of both natural and man-made disasters as well as conflicts and their attendant natural consequences of hunger, destitution, disease and poverty.

Amidst these realities is the question of the role of drama in addressing the ecological concerns of the earth. As stated by Chauduri, ecological victory will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present and the arts and humanities, including drama, must play a role (Chaudhuri). McKibben equally adds his voice to this believing that playwrights, poets and artists need to create works which will place climate change deeply in the imagination (Ashden). Drama holds the

power to help us see “something about ourselves” by touching some parts of our identity construct. Theatre is life – a reflection of who we are and what we do. Humans cannot be disconnected from the environment and hence, theatre needs and ought to reveal the common reality of the earth – the home of all human beings. This is more apt as “our human identity and the identification of what we refer to as nature, are now forever intertwined and dependent upon one another” (McKibben 11).

The Green Theatre Theory

To understand the relationship of theatre and nature one must first refigure the relationships between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ that all humans inevitably inherit. Modernist traditions of European ‘enlightenment’ pitched nature and culture, ‘man’ and the environment against each other in what Kershaw says has turned out to be a potentially disastrous opposition (12). Nature is human and humanity forms the whole ensemble that nature represents. Since theatre is life, then it only amounts to the fact that all human life is theatricalised and dramatised, including, crucially, its interactions with other species and the environment. The performance paradigm was thus a major generative force of an age of ecology that emerged in the final five decades of the second millennium (Kershaw 14).

The concept of the “Green theatre” is such that is shrouded in a lot of complexities owing to the fact that the word “Green” is not easily collocated. The green terminology spans across several disciplines from medicine to politics. We have heard of the word – The British Green Party, Green Capitalism, Green Consumerism, Green Theory, Green Socialists, Green

Ecology, Greenpeace, Green shirts, The German Green Party, The American Green Party, The Green Economy, etc.

However, the concept of 'Green' today has developed into a universally understood notion that non-human nature is given status, and that to protect it, the concept/ideology has come to include socio-political ideology. The traditional Green theory includes a critique of growth, environmental concern, scientific ecology, philosophical holism and the granting of status to non-human nature (Wall 29). Wall in his study reveals that in seeking to solve environmental problems, "Greens" have been forced to consider human affairs and embrace a set of political, economic, and cultural principles. "Any description of Green demands an exploration of approaches to human society. Solving perceived ecological problems undoubtedly demands a transformation of attitudes and institutions" (Wall 29). The world's economy as it stands today is largely driven by forces that put both man and nature under peril. Gaseous emissions from industries and exploitation of forest reserves can only be checked by an absolute change of not only attitudes but also of institutions that perpetuate this trend. Green theorist Schnaiberg supports this crucial element by reminding us that "all environmental problems are social problems regarding both their causes and effects" (17).

Based on the foregoing, we can safely state that the contemporary Green movement is not only an environmental movement but also a socio-political movement. Heinlein's study of proto-environmental performances in contemporary Western Theatre traced the history of this movement to the summer of 1962 when marine biologist Rachel Carson, previously a noted author of marine life books, stated the following:

As man proceeds toward his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction, directed not only against the earth he inhabits but the life that shares it with him. The history of the recent centuries has its black environment passages. Now to these and others like them, we are adding a new chapter and a new kind of havoc, the question is whether any civilization can wage such relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized (Sale 3).

Today, more than fifty years after, the world is stunned by the truth of Carson's prediction. Humans now turned predators are preying on their own kind as conflicts ravage the entire globe. The quest for life's natural resources has been a major catalyst for war and other genocidal killings especially in Africa not to mention the complete disregard for the environment in the wake of continued plunder of natural resources.

No doubt the state of affairs calls for a social revolution and drama is one tool for such a revolution. The socio-theatrical work of Augusto Boal – *Theatre of the Oppressed* puts him as the philosophical forerunner to contemporary Green theatre. Boal validates performance as a weapon for social revolution, a means by which identity can be initiated (14). Contemporary Green practitioners have always sought for revolutionary change not only in behaviour but also in the structures that give ambivalence to nature and the whole concept of a safe earth. Green theatre therefore presupposes a performance that is socially relevant and

maintains its efficiency as a tool for creating widespread socio-ecological change (Heinlein 25).

For Gare, the world lacks stories or narratives of sufficient power and complexity to orient people for effective action to overcome environmental problems, to relate the multiplicity of social and cultural forms implicated in or affected by environmental destruction. Though, environmental problems are global yet there is need to formulate stories, craft performances and write plays about the lives of people and the history of societies in terms that Gare says will enable them to be understood in context of and as part of nature (45). The environmental challenge in many parts of the Third World especially Africa is not the same with developed nations. Gare's argument that global capitalism dominated by transnational corporations and financial institutions, and controlled by a new international bourgeoisie has exposed some of the most basic cultural structures on which Western European civilization in general and modernity in particular have been based is quite timely (114). If this be the case, then there is a need for a new kind of civilization – a Green civilization that is not only trans-historically and culturally relevant but also challenges this global hegemonic culture of transnationalization. This challenge can only be met when people are oriented in practice and in their daily lives to pursue the pathway of creating an environmentally sustainable civilization and drama as stated earlier is one such weapon that has the potential to meet this challenge.

Already, there are contradictions in the global quest to solve the world's eco-crisis. The concept of sustainable development seems to globalize environmental problems and consequently implies that only global solutions should be sought

for 'local' eco-problems. This partly explains the seeming eco-hesitation by African critics to the global eco-crisis as conceptualized by the West. Africa today stands on the wrong side of the divide in the futile attempt to globalize the eco-crisis. While the continent continues to writhe in pain of the worst kind owing to a degenerating environment orchestrated by decades of exploitation of natural resources to fuel developed economies, increasing poverty has no doubt exacerbated bloody conflicts, genocide and terrorism. This trend no doubt puts the respect for life and nature in utter disregard. Maathai Wangari, a renowned African environmental activist was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in recognition of her efforts to halt deforestation in Kenya. For her, "peace on earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment"

(<http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/contemporary-01.html>). She was arrested and jailed severally by Kenyan authorities for her doggedness in challenging the very institutions that encouraged the continued plundering of Kenya's forest reserves. It is quite ironic that in Africa, those who challenged the forces that perpetuate eco-degradation have been met with stiff opposition. Nigeria also shares a similar story in Ken Saro Wiwa who was summarily executed alongside eight others by the then military authorities for daring to challenge the continued devastation of the Niger Delta ecosystem by oil merchants. Since then, this region which holds the key to Nigeria's survival has not known peace.

African efforts at sustainable development have been targeted at fighting poverty by enriching scarce resources. For Africa, the only way to guarantee peace which is one of the goals of sustainable development is by meeting the needs of the current

generations without jeopardizing the needs of future generations. This was the motivation for Wangari when she founded the Green Belt Movement that succeeded in planting 30 million trees in an effort to halt deforestation in Kenya. For her, “people are fighting over water, over food and over other natural resources. When our resources become scarce, we fight over them. In managing our resources and in sustainable development, we plant the seeds of peace” (<http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/contemporary-01.html>).

Glover’s analysis of Escobar’s work captures the current contraptions of sustainable development which he says are: 1) a ‘saving the world mentality’, which promotes the global at the expense of the local; 2) a belief that the world’s poor create environmental problems, but which ignores how capitalism creates poverty in the first place; 3) a faith that capitalism’s market structures can resolve ecological problems (54). To overturn these structures and engender a pathway for development that is Africa friendly, drama is and should be seen to be in the forefront to secure an environment of peace that guarantees the wellbeing of all peoples of the earth.

A Brief Synopsis of Arnold Udoka’s *Iyene*

Iyene – an Annang word for wealth is used as a metaphor for the abject poverty in the midst of plenty (rich country, poor people) that has become the lot of the Niger Delta. The play which is a dance drama explores the lack of sensitivity to the environment which lays the golden egg, the neglect of corporate social responsibility and the breeding of a culture of vulturism. There is also a depiction of the futility of violence, and other strategies which undermine the search for peace in the region.

The play calls for restraint and understanding on the part of the multinational corporations, and the compassionate intervention of the educated elite amongst Niger Deltans to resolve the knotty issues. *Inyene* is also a token of hope, a prophecy that the people's wealth would be truly theirs someday soon.

The play centres on Inyene, who was born in a riverine environment but left for the city to become a successful businessman who later returns to assist his people. He comes home to Bawkeng only to find that many of his kinsmen and women have either died due to confrontations with oil merchants or diseases arising from the effects of environmental pollution. Preba, one of the women who challenges the guards of the oil expatriates is shot in one of the many protests by the people.

However, Inyene has a different idea. He initiates a dialogue with the oil merchant, Adam Smith and this move pays off as the people are able to reach a mutual agreement on how to end the conflicts and halt further pollution of the environment.

The play ends with Adam's workers emerging with all sorts of cleaning equipment to sanitize the environment. Using the leafy branches in their possession, the women and the men join in cleaning up the environment. Adam walks up to the gas flaring pit and turns it off. With the aid of the workers he connects the gas flaring pit to several cylinders.

Ecological Issues in the Play

From the play, four typical issues are identified as common sights of eco-degradation in the Niger Delta. They are: gas flaring, soiled fishing nets, oil spillage and conflicts between natives and oil industries. The flaring of gas in the Niger Delta has continued

unabatedly for several decades. Apart from the huge economic loss to the Nigerian state, it has impacted heavily on the quality of air in that region. The people's livelihood is tied to the environment and when the waters are soiled with oil, their means of survival and collective well-being is cut off. Oil spillages are now common occurrence in the Niger Delta and on each occasion, the devastation brought to both land and water-dependent animals is quite considerable. One of the characters in the play – the priest encapsulates the importance of the environment to the people thus:

For all these, our gods and ancestors, we are grateful. Let the rain come in its season. And let the sun shine in its season. And our waters; may they continue to bear all manner of water animals. And may the fishes they bear not tear our nets. May these waters continue to run free to our shores and keep our swamps green in peace all year round (2).

The ideal is what the priest prayed for. The Niger Delta is rich in sea food and other water resources. The ideal Niger Delta is environment is ever green and the tranquil nature of the fields makes it a peaceful habitat both for humans and animals. The ambience of its forests, waters, creeks and canals resonates with the sound of eco-wealth but all of these are now threatened due to the exploitation and other oil related activities since pre-colonial times. The priest in the play captures the impact of ecological disasters now plaguing the Niger Delta thus:

We were very happy people until one day, a strange and violent tide swept from the depth of the ocean to our shores. None of us knew what type of dam to build to stem that tide. Its winds were so destructive that even the ramparts of our shores were blown

away. Where then do I as a priest appease our gods?
In the water or the land? It is now a curse to claim
Bawkeng as a homeland. The pain in our souls
degenerated into fear, indignation, poverty and
death. Who invoked this despoliation on our land?
Who? In Bawkeng that strange and violent wind
changed us to the proverbial rich land with poor
people...(23).

In the play we also see the height of impunity and indifference to the plight of the local natives. Oil spills have just been discovered to have littered the entire community and all the oil merchants care about is the profit. The conversation between the foreman, the workers and the engineer reveals the intent of such exploitations and displays the global hegemonic economy which prefers profit above any other humane consideration.

Foreman: Master, master
There is a mistake
The oil is flowing
But on the ground.
On the water
And the farmland

Workers: There's an error
Error error error
There's an error

Engineer: Oh no! Oh no!
But it's no one's fault
Oil spillage
Is no big deal
There are other waters
For the natives to fish

There are other lands
For the natives to till
The oil flows well
That's all I need
To make my money back... (26)

In movement three, there is a depiction of the consequence of resistance. The people's revolt has often been met with fatal response by government agencies and private personnel hired by the oil merchants. Preba, a woman who mobilized others to protest against the ecological disasters caused by the oil industry was brutally shot and killed by the security guards at the gate. This was captured in the priest's lamentations shortly after saying:

For challenging environmental crisis,
Preba was killed.

Demanding for practices to maintain the health and
survival of life, Preba paid with her life.

For seeking the reordering of the relationship between
nature and community,
Preba lost her life.

Her ecological consciousness to regenerate the land of
Bawkeng and reduce the death toll occasioned by the
oil spillage and gas flaring condemned her for
elimination (35).

The scenario above proves that the fight against eco-degradation especially when this affects the free flow of proceeds from exploration and exploitation has come with its consequences. Many lives have been lost and are still being lost due to the crisis in the Niger Delta. However, there is a glimmer of hope as can be seen from the play. The return of Inyene in movement five appears to lift the spirits of the downcast people of Bawkeng. As he enters to hear the tales of woe, the

masquerades enter bearing the following inscriptions on their wide masks: “spirit of death, spirit of famine, spirit of drought, breathe and die, drink and die, on Kyoto protocol we stand” (47). These inscriptions spur Inyene on to confront the reality of eco-degradation that has cut off the livelihood and survival of the people. He bares it all to Adam Smith, the oil merchant saying:

We are dealing with environmental degradation and pollution here. These constitute the dispute. It's not all about money. My people protest the way and manner you throw your master on them. That's all! We must find solutions to these mishaps and poverty (50-51).

This is the central message of the play – the clean-up of the Niger Delta and the amelioration of poverty that has become the lot of the majority of the inhabitants of the creeks. Eco-degradation as indicated by this play breeds poverty and when the people become desperate, they will agitate. In most cases these struggle takes a violent dimension.

Legal Conventions for Eco-Sustainability

In the play – Inyene, one of the inscriptions borne by the masquerades reads: “On Kyoto protocol we stand”. This presupposes that there are legal frameworks that ought to guide the way humans treat the environment. One of such is the Kyoto protocol. Over the years and at several international conferences, meetings have been held to streamline activities that pose a danger to the earth especially by the developed West. These conventions have also inspired individual nations to enact environmental laws to protect their environment as may be applicable to their peculiar circumstances. Environmental law in the opinion of Barau is a framework for achieving ecological

sustainability. These include laws, pacts and penalties to guard, govern and guide individuals and institutions at local and global levels to stick to ways that favour the environment (101).

The Kyoto protocol to the United Nations framework convention on climate change is one such pact that seeks to engender a safe earth that guarantees the future of generations yet unborn. This convention was adopted in New York on the 9th of May 1992 by 39 western industrialized nations with a fully grown market economy or transiting to same. The objectives of this protocol are: to achieve enhancement of energy efficiency in relevant sectors of the national economy; protection and enhancement of sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases; promotion of sustainable forest management practices, afforestation and reforestation. Others include the promotion of sustainable forms of agriculture in light of climate change considerations and the encouragement of appropriate reforms in relevant sectors aimed at promoting policies and measures which limit or reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. Under this protocol, each party is expected to minimize adverse social, environmental and economic impacts on developing countries. (United Nations Framework Convention on climate change).

Another convention on climate change is the Montreal protocol of 1999. This convention also aims at taking precautionary measures to control equitably total global emissions of substances that deplete the ozone layer, with the ultimate objective of their elimination on the basis of developments in scientific knowledge. The convention further acknowledges that special provision is required to meet the needs of developing countries, including the provision of additional financial resources and access to relevant technologies. (United Nations Environment Programme). These

conventions stipulate that the reality of global warming needs a concerted and practical approach especially by the industrialized West to arrest the threat. Countries such as USA, Japan, China, Britain and a great deal of Western Europe emit more greenhouse gases than the rest of the world put together. This is a consequence of their massive industrial activity and hence, there is need to sign a pact that will ensure that there is a process of eliminating these carbon emissions. However, more than fifteen years down the line since these agreements were made; gas is still being flared all across the Niger Delta. The entire region is a cauldron of burning fuels by mostly western oil companies with no practical steps to end such emissions.

In Nigeria, there are laws and policies that have been enacted to somehow give impetus to the drive to arrest the threat of environmental degradation and ecological drift that the country has been going through in the last half a century. Nigeria presently has twenty eight legislations that serve as an instrument for environmental protection, planning, pollution, prevention and control. Section 20 of the 1999 constitution for example makes it an objective of the Nigerian state to improve and protect the air, land, water, forest and wildlife of Nigeria. Section 12 establishes, though implied that international treaties (including environmental treaties) ratified by the National Assembly should be implemented as law in Nigeria (Environmental Law Research Institute).

There is also the national policy on the environment drafted in 1998 by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA). The goal of this policy is to achieve sustainable development in Nigeria through: securing a quality of environment adequate for good health and well-being; conserving and using

the environment and natural resources for the benefit of present and future and generations; and restoring, maintaining and enhancing the ecosystems and ecological processes essential for the functioning of the biosphere to preserve biological diversity and the principle of optimum sustainable yield in the use of living natural resources and ecosystems. Other ways through which this policy intends to achieve sustainable development include: raising public awareness and promoting understanding of the essential linkages between the environment, resources and development, and encourage individual and community participation in environmental improvement efforts; and co-operating in good faith with other countries, international organizations and agencies to achieve optimal use of transboundary natural resources and effective prevention or abatement of transboundary environmental degradation (Federal Environmental Protection Agency).

A return to the full implementation of these international treaties, laws and policies is what the play – *Inyene* calls for. This is significant especially now that the world is moving to the era of sustainable development with a focus on cleaner and renewable energy. With the fall in oil prices, a major catalyst for the crisis in the Niger Delta, Nigeria remains on the wrong side of history if practical steps are not taken to diversify the economy and ease the tension that oil politics generated over the years. At the moment, there appears to be no end in sight to stop gas flaring in the Niger Delta. Oil spills continue to become the daily experience of the people in this region. *Inyene* calls for a stop to gas flaring as indicated at the end of play.

Conclusion

This paper x-rays the intricate connections between dramatic arts and the subject of human ecology. As the world grapples with the realities of its helplessness in the hands of a warming planet, arts has begun to question its stake and relevance in the field of science. The issue of agitations and crisis within the Niger region of Nigeria has continued unabatedly and playwrights in the last decade have found the parameter of ecodrama as a subject of enquiry and engagement. Udoka's *Inyene* is one of such literary discourses that stake its relevance in this area.

Recommendations

- Nigeria and indeed the entire globe hangs on a precipice due to the exploitation of the earth's resources and its attendant consequences. Therefore, she must continue to seek and domesticate its strategies to deal with her ecological problems.
- Government at all levels, groups and individuals must continue to seek avenues of dialogue and engagement to resolve all areas of conflict within the Niger Delta.
- The subject of human ecology and the crisis of the environment is no longer the exclusive preserve of the sciences as the arts and drama in particular has continued to interrogate and interface with this area of study in recent times. Hence, there is need to further re-evaluate the curricula within the field of literary drama to embrace this growing and engaging subject area.

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